

'Namgis First Nation opens land-based salmon farm

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'Namgis Chief Bill Cranmer watches as the first Atlantic salmon smolts pour into closed tanks at the First Nation's contained fish-farming operation. Photograph By JR RARDON

Thousands of squirming salmon smolts slid this week into closed pens at a land-based fish farm, and members of the 'Namgis First Nation hope the fish are swimming into history.

The \$8.5-million 'Namgis Closed Containment Salmon Farm, on reserve land south of Port McNeill, is the first commercial-scale closed-containment farm in Canada — and one of the first in the world.

"We would like to see this day as the day we started to transition from open-net fish farms into land-based fish farms," 'Namgis Chief Bill Cranmer said in an interview.

The 'Namgis, known as the People of the Salmon, have 4,000 years of tradition tying them to Pacific salmon and it is with the hope of saving wild salmon that they are getting into the business of farming Atlantic salmon.

The aim is to prove it is economically viable to raise commercial numbers of Atlantic salmon in tanks on land, instead of in open-net pens in the ocean, where the fish have contact with wild salmon.

"That is why we are doing it to start with," Cranmer said. "And we also hope it will eventually be good business for 'Namgis First Nation."

The 23,000 smolts, provided by Marine Harvest Canada, weigh about 100 grams each. They will spend the first four months of their lives in quarantine.

The aim is to grow them to a harvestable size within a year — about half the time it takes in open-net pens, without pesticides or antibiotics and using 30 per cent less feed.

Solid waste will be filtered and turned into compost and overflow water will be disinfected before going into a filtration basin.

The initial phase will produce about 470 tonnes of fish, but, when four more 500-cubic-metre tanks are brought into use, the aim is to produce about 2,000 tonnes a year.

“It is going to be a prime product demanding premium prices,” Cranmer said.

A marketing agreement has already been struck with Albion Fisheries.

The project is wholly owned by 'Namgis First Nation, but a partnership is possible, Cranmer said.

“We may enter into a partnership with a firm with deeper pockets than us,” he said.

Funding for the project has come from the federal government, Tides Canada and conservation and philanthropic organizations.

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