



MEDIA RELEASE

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OPEN CAGE AQUACULTURE OPERATION AT LAKE WOLSEY IN THE GREAT LAKES SHOULD BE CLOSED

The Georgian Bay Association (GBA) is urging the Ontario Government to close the open cage fish farm in Lake Wolsey, part of the North Channel of Lake Huron, because it poses a public health hazard and pollutes the waters in this significant natural environment. The North Channel has been called “a magical connection to the best of Ontario’s natural geographical beauty”.

Every year since 2015 the open cage fish farm in this Manitoulin Island embayment has caused potentially toxic blooms of blue-green algae (cyanobacteria). This poses a public health hazard to local residents and visitors, as it can attack the liver, the nervous system and has been known to kill pets. It also adversely affects the habitat for all aquatic creatures in this important ecosystem.

The Ontario Ministries of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) and Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR) released two MECP water quality study reports to GBA, in response to Freedom of Information requests. These reports concluded that 45% of the phosphorous input into Lake Wolsey comes from the Lake Wolsey fish farm operation, and the fish farm was therefore primarily responsible for past blue-green algae outbreaks in Lake Wolsey in 1999, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2015 and 2016. These outbreaks continued in both 2017 and 2018.

The information released consists of a staggering ~21,000 pages of studies, analyses, reports, minutes of meetings, and correspondence about the Lake Wolsey fish farm, yet it covers a mere two of the 30+ years that this facility has been in operation! The information reveals that both Ministries are fully aware that the Lake Wolsey fish farm has been, and still is, polluting the waters every year, but has been allowed to continue operations.

For more than 20 years the GBA has been urging government to cease any expansion of open cage aquaculture in Georgian Bay and the North Channel and support a move to closed-contained systems. The Ontario Government had to shut down two other operations at LaCloche Channel, and Grassy Narrows, because excessive nutrient enrichment from the farm led to algae growth and oxygen depletion, threatening native fish species. Now we have another such occurrence at the Lake Wolsey site. The GBA urges that it be closed without delay, given the clear evidence that it is causing a similar problem.

On April 24th the Ontario government announced that future licenses for open cage fish farms in Lake Huron will be extended for 20 years, up from the former 5-year license period. These changes were made without allowing any public comments or submissions on their impact. The next day the government announced changes to the Environmental Assessment (EA) Act that will exclude the existing fish farms from any assessment process, because they are inaccurately classified as Category A - low impact projects, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Public comments and submissions are being accepted until May 25 on this proposal to remove all low impact projects from EA requirements.

Although the industry has made certain improvements over the years, and instituted best practices guidelines, there is still clear evidence that open cage fish farms cause significant water quality concerns, and should be classified in a higher risk category that requires a more complete EA for license approvals. Without such a “bump-up”, if the government’s proposed changes to the EA Act are approved, there will be no EAs whatsoever for open cage fish farms in future.

This free use of public waters for open cage aquaculture is not permitted by our Great Lakes neighbours. In 2015-16 the State of Michigan conducted a detailed economic and environmental review after fish farmers applied for licenses in Lake Michigan. They concluded that this industry posed too great a risk to water quality, and that the cost of regulating and monitoring it made no sense when set against the nominal tax revenues and employment that this low-margin industry would generate. As a result, no US Great Lakes state allows open cage fish farms.

Only in Ontario are open cage fish farms permitted free access to use Great Lakes waters to dispose of fish manure, which either settles on the lake bed under the cages, or is dispersed into the surrounding water. Dumping those nutrients into nearshore waters, where the nutrient balance is sensitive to nutrient overload and can cause blue green algae or other problems, is a high-risk activity. The growing accumulation over time of nutrient rich farm waste, risks future water quality degradation, and there is no requirement for operators to clean up these sites upon closure – that cost would fall upon government, i.e. taxpayers.

Lake Wolsey is only one of ten open cage aquaculture operations in Georgian Bay and the North Channel, which all require extensive and costly monitoring and oversight, due to their potential impact on water quality. Many are low-margin small operations that do not generate significant economic value or employment. The negative economics of this industry for government are inconsistent with a core strategy of the Ford government to reduce the waste of government resources, and improve efficiency. A better option would be to promote safer, more advanced and effective technologies for growing fish in sustainable closed or land-based systems that have no impact on natural aquatic environments, require minimal government oversight, and would produce both short and long-term employment growth. Consumers prefer to purchase food grown in a sustainable fashion. Further, such investment would be a boon for small and medium sized companies in local communities throughout Ontario.

Ontario citizens should be outraged that government allows this wasteful and polluting use of our public waters. The Lake Wolsey fish farm must be closed down now before it causes more damage and public health risks.

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The Georgian Bay Association is an umbrella organization for 19 community associations along the east and north shores of Georgian Bay representing ~3,000 families. We have been advocating on behalf of our land-owning members for over 100 years. Our mandate is to work with our water-based communities and other stakeholders to ensure the careful stewardship of the greater Georgian Bay environment.