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NW Fishletter #320, July 18, 2013

[3] Canadian Virus Lab Loses Its Reference Status, Reputation

A Canadian lab, used by anti-farmed-salmon advocates to support their claims that wild salmon from British Columbia tested positive for the infectious salmon anemia virus, has been stripped of its certification by the International Organization of Animal Health, the 178-member international body governing such testing.

The lab, associated with the Atlantic Veterinary College in New Brunswick, is operated by Dr. Fred Kibenge. It had been one of two labs in the world with "reference" status to test for the ISA virus, which has decimated farmed salmon in several parts of the world, including Canada's east coast.

Audits of Kibenge's lab last summer by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and the OIE found problems with possible cross-contamination and acceptable standards of quality. OIE members voted in May to strip Dr. Kibenge's lab of its reference status.

The college was notified by Dr. Martine Dubuc, OIE delegate for Canada that the OIE had withdrawn Kibenge's lab from its list of OIE reference centers, Anna McDonald, a spokeswoman for the college, said via email. The decision will not be contested. "The Atlantic Veterinary College respects and accepts this decision," said Dr. Don Reynolds, Dean of Atlantic Veterinary College.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency had been unable to find any positive signs of the virus in those same samples, and a surveillance program under way on both sides of the border has not found a single trace of the ISA virus in thousands of samples of wild fish. This year, the monitoring in B.C. will include farmed salmon. Salmon farmers already test for ISA, and say that no signs of the virus have ever been found in British Columbia.

But anti-farmed-salmon advocates were quick to claim that the decision was just another attempt to muzzle their findings, said activist Alexandra Morton, who had helped collect the

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original samples that tested positive in Kibenge's lab.

On July 5, the CFIA released a statement that it said was needed to counter certain allegations about its role in the OIE's move to delist Dr. Kibenge's lab. The agency said it had evaluated Kibenge's lab at the Atlantic Veterinary College, where the fish samples were found positive for ISA, and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans lab, which could not corroborate those findings.

"The evaluation conducted at the AVC identified concerns," said the CFIA statement, "which may have led to the questionable ISA test results. This information was shared with the OIE.

"The OIE designates reference laboratory status based on a laboratory's ability to maintain the highest technical and operational standards. The OIE undertook an independent audit of the AVC after another OIE member country also reported issues related to ISA test results from this laboratory. The OIE audit, performed by an international panel of scientific experts, found a series of weaknesses affecting the quality of diagnoses performed at the AVC laboratory. The decision to delist this laboratory as an OIE reference laboratory was approved unanimously by the General Assembly of the OIE in May 2013."

Last November, after the audits of his lab, Kibenge told *The Globe and Mail* that he was being punished **for testifying** at a hearing in B.C. that was investigating the 2009 Fraser sockeye debacle. "What they are doing here is essentially punishing me for having testified at the Cohen Commission and trying to suppress the findings that we've been finding," he told the Canadian newspaper.

"It's an attack on my credibility," he said. "I just feel compelled to continue with my research work because there is nothing here that I can see that I've done wrong."

At the hearing on Dec. 16, 2011, Kibenge testified about some samples of wild salmon his lab tested in 2002 that backed up positive ISA signs his wife Molly had originally found in post-doctoral research at the Pacific Biological Station in Nanaimo, B.C. He told the commission that some of his positive tests could not be false positives, and argued that his testing technique at the time was adequate.

But Nellie Gagne--the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans expert for Kibenge's lab who works at the agency's lab in Monckton, New Brunswick, where Molly Kibenge's samples were also tested--told the commission that the sequence that matched the then post-doc's

samples "has nothing to do with fish. The match is random mouse, human, and I have seen that with FA3/RA3 primers we were using at the time. We dropped using them."

It seems unlikely that Kibenge will seek to re-credential for reference status, and stick with academic research instead. The "designated expert" at another OIE Reference Laboratory, told *NW Fishletter* "this is an unfortunate blow to the reputation of the laboratory." **-B. R.**

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