

Heiltsuk First Nation claims victory over disputed herring fishery

Posted by Joan Russow
Friday, 03 April 2015 07:14 -



□

BY MARK HUME

VANCOUVER — The Globe and Mail

Published

Wednesday, Apr. 01 2015, 9:19 PM EDT

Last updated

Wednesday, Apr. 01 2015, 9:23 PM EDT

A confrontation between the Heiltsuk First Nation and the federal government that threatened to erupt into a “war on the water” appears to have ended with the commercial fleet leaving the central coast, where the industry had been waiting for a disputed fishery to open.

“We’re pretty ecstatic here,” Carrie Humchitt, legal services co-ordinator for the Heiltsuk said Wednesday. “We’re just waiting for official confirmation, but we’ve received word through channels that all of the industry boats will be pulling out.”

She said the First Nation, which is based in Bella Bella, had given the federal department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) until noon to close the waters of the central coast to the commercial gill net fleet, which had been waiting for nearly a week to fish for an allocated harvest of 600 tonnes of herring.

Heiltsuk First Nation claims victory over disputed herring fishery

Posted by Joan Russow
Friday, 03 April 2015 07:14 -

DFO spokesman Dan Bate said in an e-mail that the central coast herring fishery is now closed and the government is working with First Nations on herring management.

Ian McAllister of Pacific Wild, an environmental group that has been monitoring the fishery, said commercial boats began leaving the area Wednesday afternoon.

“It looks like the fleet has packed up and is going south empty,” he said.

Ms. Humchitt said Heiltsuk members were preparing to go out on the water to blockade the herring fleet when the band made “an 11th hour attempt at resolution,” asking DFO to shut down the central-coast fishery and agree to hold talks to avoid another confrontation next year.

“We’ve let industry know that there’s going to be a war on the water should they try to come in to Heiltsuk territory,” she said.

Chief Marilyn Slett, who for the past four days occupied the DFO regional office near Bella Bella, said it has been a stressful week of protests and tense negotiations.

Heiltsuk members took to their boats last week in an unsuccessful attempt to stop the seine fleet from harvesting herring during a limited opening that was called with little notice. By the time the native protesters arrived on the fishing grounds, the seine fleet had harvested about 700 tonnes of herring. The gill-net fleet, which uses different methods, was standing by for its chance.

“It’s been an emotional few days,” said Chief Slett.

She said she and a colleague occupied the DFO offices while up to 150 people camped outside. Some aboriginal protesters also showed up outside DFO’s main office in Vancouver on

Heiltsuk First Nation claims victory over disputed herring fishery

Posted by Joan Russow
Friday, 03 April 2015 07:14 -

Tuesday.

“It’s unfortunate it had to get to this point,” Chief Slett said of the protests. At the heart of the issue is a dispute between First Nations and DFO over the accuracy of stock assessments.

The Heiltsuk on the central coast, the Haida in Haida Gwaii, and the Nuu-chah-nulth on the West Coast of Vancouver Island have all expressed opposition to herring fisheries in their areas, saying the stocks are much smaller than DFO claims. The Nuu-chah-nulth failed in an attempt to get a court order to stop the fishery in their area, while the Haida worked out an agreement to keep Haida Gwaii closed.

Gregory Thomas, chair of the Herring Industry Advisory Board, said commercial fishermen believe DFO’s stock assessments are valid.

“The First Nations ... say there isn’t enough fish and that any commercial roe herring fishery will negatively impact their [native] fishery,” said Mr. Thomas. “The industry view is there’s a lot of science behind the current stock assessment and that that science has indicated there is a reasonable return of herring on the central coast – and certainly a fishable abundance.”

Mr. Thomas said it is difficult to calculate the economic impact of losing a fishing opportunity on the central coast, but it’s considerable.

“The gill net target is 600 tonnes and as of this morning there has been no catch. That’s a significant amount of herring,” he said.

Herring are fished on the B.C. coast in February and March, when they gather to spawn. The roe, or eggs, of the small fish are largely sold on the Asian market.

MORE RELATED TO THIS STORY

-

Heiltsuk First Nation claims victory over disputed herring fishery

Posted by Joan Russow
Friday, 03 April 2015 07:14 -

[First Nation occupies fisheries office in B.C. as herring fight escalates](#)

-

[Heiltsuk Nation ready to protect herring against commercial fishery](#)

-

[First Nations fight for herring to become less of a catch](#)