

Aqua Springs

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A WRITTEN STATEMENT ON VIRAL HEMORRHAGIC SEPTICEMIA (VHSv) Public meeting on VHSv hosted by USDA-APHIS - Romulus, Michigan

Presented this day - January 10, 2007

Thank you for the opportunity to present my views of the current situation concerning VHSv entry into the Great Lakes System and it's potential effects on the United States Aquaculture Industry.

I have been a long time advocate for the development of the U.S. Aquaculture and have lead many charges in moving our industry along. In Michigan, I have help to form our Aquaculture Association (1987), was the President of the Association for thirteen years, joined forces in establishing the North Central Regional Aquaculture Center, help author and create the Michigan Aquaculture Development Act of 1996, and work as an advocate at-large in terms of Great Lakes Fish Health and the Aquaculture Industry over the last fifteen years.

How do I see the problem?

VHSv is one of those pathogens you really wish to keep out of your backyard if you can, but once it arrives it is extremely difficult to remove. As with most viral agents, a large water body is not where one would like to fight an outbreak. Land or air is a much easier arena to work with, but a water environment offers the greatest challenge in working through an eradication program - if even possible. The sheer size of the Great Lakes Basin will be the most frustrating feature that we (Private, State and Federal) are about to tackle.

Typically, aquaculture and bait operations have been under "State" Natural Resource Agencies and until recently this past decade, more Departments of Agriculture have started to become the lead regulatory agency. In Michigan, Aquaculture is a registered agriculture operation under Dept of Ag., but the Baitfish industry is licensed under the Department of Natural Resources. If and when an aquaculturist needs to plant fish to public waters, then again the Department of Natural Resources is the controlling agency over the planting requirements. We have the two State departments overlooking our operations most of the time and it is crucial that they get along with each in matters of aquatic health issues. The problem becomes apparent when you may want to export to another State or outside the United States.

U.S. Aquaculture health regulations have been more of a fractured system, for a long time between the States, and this failure of uniformity between them shows up whenever there is a disease outbreak. The States often don't or won't work from the same protocol page. This tends to lead some tenuous moments between private enterprise and governmental authorities, much like you (APHIS) are facing today about the VHSv outbreak in the Great Lakes watershed versus the other aquaculture watershed within the United States.

What about the VHSV outbreak?

Unfortunately the VHSV outbreak has a good foothold within the Great Lakes basin now and a good head start on us in establishing itself within the Lakes' environment. Our odds are poor for stopping the outbreak from running its course. The expansion of the contaminated zone will increase in size during the next few years, but our only ability might be that we can slow but probably won't be able to stop it spreading. We are most likely going to have to learn how to live with it more than being able to eradicate it. We need to learn from this outbreak and review our past history so that we may stop and contain any future outbreaks of disease pathogens that may come our way. A hard lesson is about to be taught to us all over the next few years - I predict. ***If a vaccination program could be made available, this is the time we surely could use one.***

What can be done?

Our options may be few, but it is time to change our system. We need to establish uniform standards across the nation that are reasonable, equitable and economical to all and yet increase our biological security between the elements of our operations. Somehow keep the Bait and Aquaculture industries up and running the next few years. Establish a transition period to implement an uniform health code and rebuild some bridges between industry organizations. VHSV has shown us all one thing in the Great Lakes, that there are others within the aquaculture community not willing to repeat the spreading of fish diseases across the watersheds and other members that see an opportunity for business expansion because of the lack of effective regulatory guidelines.

It is time to do a National Review of the Aquatic Health Programs between the States and set about adopting a uniform code for all. Encourage more rapid testing methods to be developed. Establish a national indemnification program. Increase research of potential vaccines that could be made available. Create a national database and research archive in aquaculture health issues.

AND, in the mean time, attempt to control and contain VHSV as best as we can, but remember Mother Nature wins all battles and VHSV appears unfortunately to be here to stay!

Respectfully,

Bob Baldwin

Website of Interest: www.michiganaquaculture.com and www.greatlakesfishhealth.com