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Algal Bloom, Island Uproar Put Chile's Salmon Industry on the Hot Seat

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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A "red tide" of unprecedented proportions has taken a heavy toll on parts of southern Chile, poisoning coastal waters and prompting a surge of popular frustration that resulted, last month, in a nearly three-week blockade of Chiloé, a large island off the Región de Los Lagos, approximately 1,000 kilometers south of Santiago.

Much of the anger is directed at the area's multi-billion-dollar farmed salmon industry, the world's second largest after Norway. Salmon companies are a key source of employment in the Los Lagos and adjacent Los Ríos and Aysén regions. But they also place tremendous stress on the environment and may have exacerbated the current crisis, some critics say, by dumping boatloads of rotting fish off the coast of Chiloé.

Red tide, so-named because of the discoloration it causes in water, is a colloquial term for a naturally occurring algal bloom that can have harmful, even deadly effects on fish, mollusks and other marine life. People who consume contaminated seafood can be sickened as well, which is why, starting in March, the government ordered a seafood moratorium in Chiloé that eventually included the entire island.

The measure had an immediate impact on residents there, many of whom depend one way or the other on seafood, not only as a source of income, but also as a cornerstone of their diet. "People don't dare eat our fish because they're afraid it is contaminated, so we are all affected on the island," Marcos Salas, leader of a fisher's union in Quellón, where the moratorium first went into effect, told freelance journalist Evelyn Pfeiffer last month. "We lost our labor source and now we have no way to bring sustenance to our families."

Residents in Quellón and elsewhere in southern Chile have dealt with algal blooms before, but never one that extended over such a large area, or produced the kinds of bizarre beachings of dead shellfish, anchovies, squid and even mammals that have taken place at different spots along the coast in recent months. "Chile has never seen such a peak in blooms, in terms of geographical extent, level of growth, and duration," the country's Colegio de Biólogos Marinos, a marine scientists' guild, reported in early May.

Demanding a better deal

President Michelle Bachelet addressed the problem in late April, officially declaring the coast of the Región de Los Lagos a "catastrophe zone" and promising aid money for small-scale fishers and others directly impacted by the algal bloom. "I want to offer a message of calm," the president said on April 29. "We're going to work tirelessly to overcome this emergency."

The offer, in concrete terms, amounted to aid checks of 100,000 pesos (US\$150) for 500 families. It was not well received. Fisher groups in Chiloé responded by erecting roadblocks along various key access points, effectively cutting off the island and its approximately 160,000 residents from the

Chilean mainland. To really mitigate the crisis, they said, the government would need to provide more money and make it available to far more than 500 families.

Adding to the anger and uncertainty were reports that farmed salmon companies had recently dumped huge loads of half-decayed fish—earlier victims of red tide—off the western coast of Chiloé. The dumping has since been confirmed, and was authorized, it turns out, by the Chilean Navy. What's not clear is whether the boatloads of rotten salmon, as some sources claim, were treated first with acid to accelerate the decomposition process.

"There were rumors that they'd thrown 39 tons of dead salmon 75 miles from the coast," Teresa Calfunao, head of an association of seaweed collectors in Duhatao, Chiloé, told Radio Villa Francia in early May, just as the protest was taking off and beginning to attract national attention. "We started to get worried. About 25 days after that, there started to be problems in Cucao, then Mar Brava, Puñihuil, Pumillahue, Duhatao, and Chepu, all on the Pacific Ocean side, where there hadn't been red tide before."

Calfunao's testimony was republished by a number of other news outlets. It quickly made the rounds on social media, helping draw national and even international attention to the problems in Chiloé. "As soon as we learned about it, a number of us women from the union went to the beach in Mar Brava and saw that there was a green foam all along the waterline. It was something we'd never seen before," she added. "When the tide went out, dead razor clams appeared, giant barnacles, piures, crabs, everything dead... That's when the psychosis started."

Scientists are divided on whether the disposal of the rotting salmon, given that it took place in the open sea, could have been as harmful as Calunao and others suggest. Also unclear is whether the copious amounts of organic material (fish feces and uneaten food pellets) that collect on the sea floor below salmon farm pens make areas like Chiloé more susceptible to algal blooms in the first place. No one is making the case, however, that such practices are good for the environment.

"The dumping occurred at the same time there were ideal conditions for the bloom, namely high amounts of nutrients in the area, optimal temperature, and other variables," Víctor Marín, an oceanographer with the Universidad de Chile, told Evelyn Pfeiffer. "It would be difficult to argue that the salmon industry has not increased the amount of nutrients in the water, but our society also throws a lot of other stuff into the ocean, so there may be a synergistic effect."

Tip of the iceberg?

The barricades and protests dragged on for more than two weeks, further complicating lives for the island's already isolated residents, who began to face serious food and fuel shortages. A team of government negotiators, led by Economy Minister Luis Felipe Céspedes, made a series of alternative offers, but continued to face resistance from disgruntled fishers until May 20, when the two sides finally came to an agreement. In the end, the demonstrators lifted the blockade in exchange for an aid package of 750,000 pesos (US\$1,100)—to be paid in four installments—for qualifying households.

The accord came as a huge relief for the government, which was desperate to resolve the impasse before President Bachelet's state-of-the-union address, an annual event that takes place in the Congress building in Valparaíso, and always on May 21, a national holiday in Chile. The demonstrators had reason to celebrate as well, as their blockade brought national attention to the situation in Chiloé and allowed them to walk away, in the end, with an aid package that was far more generous than the government's initial offer.

Many observers suspect, nevertheless, that the conflict in Chiloé will eventually flare up again. The problem, they say, is that while the deal addressed the immediate problem of lost income due to this particular red tide, it failed to amend the island's overall problem of economic marginalization, improve its love-hate relationship with the farmed salmon industry, which employs thousands but at relatively low wages and with few guarantees, or force the salmon industry to make its practices more environmentally sustainable.

The precarious nature of salmon industry jobs was painfully apparent during Bachelet's first term in office (2006-2010), when an outbreak of Infectious Salmon Anemia (ISA), a water-borne virus, infected huge numbers of fish and resulted in major industry layoffs ([NotiSur, Jan. 30, 2009](#)). Losses from this year's red tide threaten to trigger a new round of job cuts, which would no doubt add to Chiloé's economic woes, fuel community resentment toward the salmon companies, and perhaps send a new group into the streets clamoring for government assistance.

"This is just getting started," Patricio Cabello, a researcher at the Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, recently told Radio Universidad de Chile. "There's a wave of massive layoffs on the way in the farmed salmon and aquaculture sector, a sector that's not very unionized. Most people have temporary contracts."

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