

## Besieged salmon farm up for sale

PORTLAND - A salmon-farming operation crippled by a lawsuit, natural disasters and regulations prompted by the Endangered Species Act has been put up for sale, officials said Thursday.

Rumors that Atlantic Salmon of Maine was for sale were confirmed in documents filed in U.S. District Court in Portland.

"There are potential buyers, and there are negotiations," Jeffrey Thaler, an attorney for Atlantic Salmon of Maine, said Thursday. An employee buyout is among the possibilities, Thaler said.

Steve Page, general manager for Atlantic Salmon of Maine in Belfast, declined to comment on any potential sale other than to say he hoped the matter would be resolved in at most a few weeks.

It's unclear when the company was put up for sale. Page indicated in court documents as far back as Dec. 29 that the Norwegian parent company, Fjord Seafood, was considering selling Atlantic Salmon of Maine.

Atlantic Salmon of Maine, one of the state's three largest salmon companies, has struggled under a judge's rulings in a federal lawsuit accusing the company of violating environmental regulations.

U.S. District Judge Gene Carter ordered the company to abandon its broodstock program, forcing it to look to its competitors for salmon eggs. It also ordered the company to leave its salmon pens fallow for two years.

But the problems began long before then.

There is a worldwide glut of salmon, and Atlantic Salmon of Maine was further hurt by a 2001 storm that allowed 100,000 salmon to escape and by the slaughter of thousands of fish required because of a fish disease in 2002.

But the judge's rulings may have hurt the most.

Carter's decision to require the immediate elimination of broodstock created with European fish strains forced the destruction of more fish and left Atlantic Salmon of Maine looking to Canadian competitors for fish to stock in its pens.

"Maybe the parent company didn't see any light at the end of the tunnel," said Andy Goode of the [Atlantic Salmon Federation](#) .

Atlantic Salmon of Maine already has closed one of its freshwater hatcheries and it will close another this spring. The company will continue to harvest 950,000 fish growing to maturity in pens off the coast, but won't be stocking any additional fish this year, Page said.

The company owns 14 leases for prime sites off the Down East coast for raising salmon to maturity.