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Chair

Mr. Rodney Weston

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rodney Weston (Saint John, CPC)): I'll call this meeting to order. I'd like to thank the officials from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans for joining us again this morning. You probably are aware that we'll be interrupted by some bells very soon. We'll proceed right into questions at this point.

We'll start off with Mr. Weston for a seven-minute round.

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Merci, monsieur le président, and thank you to our guests for joining us this morning.

I'm especially pleased to have a chance to ask questions because in the province I come from and the riding I represent a high degree of importance is placed on fisheries and the environment. We have a group of community-minded volunteers in my riding who call themselves the Sea to Sky Fisheries Roundtable, who are very well acquainted with fisheries issues. There are about a dozen people, including former fisheries minister John Fraser, as well as Dave Brown, and John Barker who heads up the West Vancouver Streamkeeper Society.

They have participated with me in various fisheries-related things in the four years since I was first elected, among other things, calling for some sort of inquiry into the missing sockeye salmon, encouraging our committee to investigate aquaculture issues, and working with officials in the department to build a wonderful salmon spawning viewing platform in the Squamish area. They are very engaged. They have raised the following three issues. I'm going to ask three questions and hope you have time to deal with them.

First, they have supported measures to increase the portion of salmon stamp revenues that are sold on tidal fishing licences, so those revenues come back into the Pacific region and go toward funding salmon initiatives. It would be good to hear the department's response to that.

Second, changes to Bill C-38 and the effects on fish habitat were raised previously. We've heard there is an active consultation process. This was asked by the parliamentary secretary in the previous meeting. I would like to hear how meetings like the ones our round table had are being incorporated into the process of defining those regulations. How is this process working? How can people track how their participation makes a difference?

Third, the consolidation of DFO offices is being depicted as something that will enhance effectiveness, but there are concerns that

it really results in a loss of DFO officers, including in the riding I represent.

I'd love to hear your responses.

Mr. David Balfour (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Ecosystems and Fisheries Management Sector, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you very much for the questions.

I'm going to respond to the question concerning the Pacific salmon stamp, and others will speak to the rest of your questions.

For a number of years we've had an arrangement in place through which a portion of the proceeds of the salmon conservation stamp support a contribution that the department provides to the Pacific Salmon Foundation. Proposals have come forward to our minister to consider the possibility of increasing the percentage of the proceeds of the stamp that could contribute to that contribution. That is under consideration, but it's obviously a matter of budget. The revenue that comes from the stamp is contributed to the consolidated revenue fund. That means there would have to be a decision taken at the government level as to whether or not they could reach that arrangement.

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager (Assistant Deputy Minister, Transformation and Program Policy Sector, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): With respect to the other two questions, one on fish habitat and the other regarding our DFO offices, there's an awful lot of information to convey there and I won't speak until 11:19 in responding.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager: In response to the question with respect to fish habitat, in terms of how consultations, both the ones that you referred to and others, are finding their way into the process, I would describe it as a somewhat organic process. It's very difficult to say that we heard this, this and this in meetings X, Y, and Z and you can directly translate that into legislative text or a policy outcome, and so on. I'm sure you can appreciate that the process is a little more circuitous, so to speak, than that.

The advice and input that we received, both from the round table to which you refer, and a number of others which I believe Mr. Kamp held over the course of the summer last year and early fall, if memory serves, as well as dialogues that we've had, as we described in a list and a chart tabled with this committee in November, have allowed us to think through our policy inputs and our policy development activities fairly carefully. We've had quite a variety of input from around the country, most of which I would say is verbal, so we don't have something that's an extensive document record so that we could say, "Here's what we've heard from all of these people." We don't have a means of cataloguing and playing that back to individuals. We have had quite a variety of inputs, not only from the round table process to which you refer, but also from conservation organizations, and from industry groups. We've had a lot from universities. As I say, most of the dialogue has been fairly informal in nature, in the sense that it hasn't taken place in large formalized workshops, but much more in a bilateral conversation sense.

We are taking all of that, distilling it, and using it to bring forward over the course of the next four or five months a series of policy documents, which we will ask people for their views on. We have a set of questions that we're planning to use in that regard.

As I mentioned here on Tuesday, or across the hall I should say, work is under way to develop a regulation that will set out the information requirements we will have of project proponents and to set timelines by which the department will have to make decisions with respect to those proposals. That regulatory process will follow the "normal" one, insofar as consultations are concerned. In terms of when the regulation actually gets released, that's a determination of the government. Most of the preparatory work on that is now complete and it will be a matter of the government's regulatory agenda and timing.

I'd suggest that summarizes where we are with respect to the consultation element.

With respect to the consolidation of DFO offices, I'd say two things first. Most importantly, although we talk about the consolidation of offices, what we probably should be more focused on using is consolidation of the program previously referred to as the habitat program, the fisheries protection program now. We are moving people from 68 offices down to approximately 15. That doesn't mean the offices in which they're located necessarily close. Most of our offices have staff from the small craft harbours program, the habitat program, fish management, etc., fisheries officers and so on. Many of the physical offices, if you will, that we're speaking about will remain open. The people who previously worked in the habitat program will be consolidated from approximately 68 locations to 15.

We're quite confident that in so doing the program will become far more efficient. Decision-making, controls, and procedures will become tighter and more focused. Our ability to consolidate experts alongside each other rather than in a highly distributed network will substantially increase. Our ability to make sure that the department's resources are focused on key priorities, key issues, key habitat concerns, will substantially go up.

We will have a smaller physical footprint from the point view of the habitat program, but in this day and age the requirement to be physically on site is dramatically less than what it once was, and we do think we'll be at a point where we'll consolidate the focus.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chisholm.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to the officials from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans who are here.

I want to begin by making the point that I made on Tuesday when the minister was here. We have a great deal of concern with the fact that the main estimates and the supplementary estimates are before us before we've seen the plans and priorities report from the department. We think that's putting the cart before the horse. We would certainly expect that once those plans are tabled we would then have an opportunity to further complete our analysis of these documents and hopefully invite you back in order to finish that up before we're asked to vote on the main estimates. I wanted to make that point again.

In terms of the habitat program, let me ask you this. The Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, in his fall report, raised concerns over the department's understanding of some of the changes to the Fisheries Act that we've talked about on many occasions. I quote from the report:

Department officials told us that DFO has not yet fully determined the impact of these amendments coming into force or the impact of the policy changes.

In particular the question of HADDs was raised, and whether this policy would remain in place after the changes to the Fisheries Act. That kind of gets to what you were just referring to.

Could you respond, please, to what the commissioner had to say, given your understanding of the impact of the changes resulting from these amendments?

• (1115)

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager: There are a couple of things, I guess.

Regarding the specific reference you made to HADDs, I would emphasize that the act will still require authorizations. Authorizations is another way to put it. They will no longer be called HADDs. We will for sure come up with another acronym, because we're very good at that. It will be something that will constitute a serious harm authorization of some kind, because that's the term in the new prohibition. At some point authorizations will come forward to say that we've determined that project X, Y, Z may proceed with the following conditions and so on. That would be the nature of the authorization.

Insofar as whether or not authorizations of the nature people are familiar with in the HADD context will continue, the answer is yes. The terminology will vary a little bit. The manner in which they're put forward will vary a little bit. Importantly, a significant difference with respect specifically again to the authorizations is that the conditions attached to those authorizations will now be much more enforceable. Whereas before a fisheries officer would have been required to identify a violation, and if the violation or a charge proceeded through the court process, would have been required to demonstrate that the activity in question caused harm to habitat, we will no longer be required to do that. Essentially we will now be required to demonstrate that the condition on the authorization was violated, and that will be the end of the discussion. They're enforceable conditions which will substantially, in our view at least, improve our ability to enforce the terms of the act and specifically the authorizations.

Now to go back to your broader question about whether we have fully interpreted the impact of every section of the act and so on, of course the process has only recently been completed in terms of the legislative history. I think that no bureaucrat would sit before a committee of this nature and say, "Don't worry. We've figured out every single element of it". I don't think we have that level of hubris. I think we're certainly at a point where we've worked through to the best of our understanding the implications of the change. We are proceeding to organize ourselves in such a way to deliver upon the new program. We have an awful lot of work to do in terms of policy design, and it ranges from the picayune, very detailed questions about how you define certain things—we have to put new forms in place for applications and that kind of stuff—through to broader questions about how we'll action some of the new provisions with respect to partnerships, with respect to offsets, and a whole variety of things.

I wouldn't want you to draw the conclusion that we have no idea where we're going. I think we have our act together reasonably well in terms of our next few steps, but I think the community collectively is still going to have a lot of work to do.

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Thank you. I appreciate your candour, your frankness. Nobody would expect, I don't think, with these kinds of significant changes, that you would be able to make that kind of commitment.

In terms of hubris, we see all kinds of that already coming from government members, not necessarily on this committee, but there have been times, in terms of what these changes will and won't do, so I think you're okay in saying that you don't need to bring any with you.

The whole question of the precautionary principle is something that was raised quite a bit in Commissioner Cohen's report, particularly the responsibility of the department to be able to protect fish habitat. I know that now it's not about protecting habitat, that it's about protecting fish.

I'm going to ask you two things.

The first thing is that the funding for the sustainable aquaculture program is down \$17 million. I want to ask you why.

The second thing is on the ability of the department, in the case for example of finfish aquaculture, to protect wild stocks, whether they be salmon, crustaceans, mackerel, herring or whatever.

Would you comment, please, on the ability of the department, as a result of the changes, both in terms of resources and in terms of legislation, to ensure that our wild stocks of salmon, crustaceans, herring, mackerel, and so on are in fact going to be protected by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans officials?

• (1120)

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager: Before I respond, may I just make sure I understood the first part of your question? I had a little problem hearing you.

You asked a question about the sustainable aquaculture program and the \$17 million, and then I didn't catch the specific question on that.

Mr. Robert Chisholm: I just noted that the funding for that program is down \$17 million, and I wanted to know why. I wanted to link it with your ability to protect the traditional stocks, and whether or not they're tied, or maybe you could....

That's why I presented them together.

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager: Okay.

With respect to the question specifically on that component of it, as my colleague, our chief financial officer, explained here on Tuesday, we have a number of sunset programs. The sustainable aquaculture program is one of them.

If the government chooses not to renew it, it will drop by the amount that you've suggested, and that will have an impact on our programs. We will be in a position where we will have to figure out alternate ways of delivering some of what we do under that program, and obviously some of it will cease. The government will choose shortly what programs it will fund and those it won't.

With respect to the resources available to us now and what we reasonably foresee to continue, I'd echo some of the comments I made just a minute ago. I'd be very surprised if any government official came before you and said, "Don't worry. We've got enough money. Please don't send us any more"—

The Chair: I have to interrupt you.

As per the Standing Orders, when the bells start to ring, it is our obligation to suspend our hearing.

I believe there's unanimous consent to continue for 15 more minutes. Is that correct?

Some hon. members: Yes.

The Chair: With that unanimous consent, we'll continue for 15 more minutes. Then members will have to return to the House.

Mr. Chisholm, you're well over your time on this question. I have you at eight and a half minutes.

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Really? I have six and a half minutes.

The Chair: You'd better check your clock.

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: We'll move on to Mr. Kamp.

Mr. Randy Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for being here.

I have three areas that I want to cover briefly.

Let me begin with what is, I think, the easiest one first. Can you give us an update on the progress we're making on our polar icebreaker?

Mr. Michel Vermette (Deputy Commissioner, Vessel Procurement, Canadian Coast Guard, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thanks for the question, Mr. Kamp.

We're making significant progress on the polar icebreaker. As you know, Vancouver Shipyards has been awarded the non-combat package of the national shipbuilding procurement strategy. We recently signed a contract with Vancouver Shipyards to move ahead the design of the polar icebreaker.

Last year we awarded a contract to STX Canada Marine from Vancouver to do the design of our polar icebreaker. Last fall we tested a hull form in the tank at the National Research Council in St. John's, Newfoundland. We spent three months working in the ice tank there testing various hull forms and propulsion configurations.

We're getting some very exciting results. Having the input of some world-class design firms and of the shipyard in Vancouver into the design and constructability of the polar icebreaker, we're very much on track with the project to deliver that ship.

It's a fantastic opportunity for us, and a huge asset for Canada as our flagship.

Mr. Randy Kamp: Good. Thank you very much for that.

When the commissioner was here, we heard some of the background for the realignment of the search and rescue resources in the port of Vancouver; specifically that the coast guard has reviewed all of its programs, particularly how you have delivered search and rescue resources across Canada, and has decided there would be a more efficient but as effective network in Vancouver without Kitsilano but with the addition of some other resources.

I've always felt that the right question is whether we are confident that the new network is going to work. Are the assumptions on which the decision was based right? Now that we've had a few weeks with the new network in place, although we don't have the inshore rescue boat yet, can you tell us your view on it?

There have been some incidents, we understand. Can you tell us how they were handled and whether you feel that the new network is working?

• (1125)

Ms. Jody Thomas (Deputy Commissioner, Operations, Canadian Coast Guard, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you, Mr. Kamp.

When discussing search and rescue, it is critical to understand that there is no one asset, no one element of the program that ensures a safe rescue. We are very confident in the decision that has been

made, and that the system, and SAR is a system of systems, that is in place is effective.

There have been a few incidents over the last few days, the largest one occurring yesterday with the rescue of two people out of the water. The system worked exactly as it should. A mayday call was relayed to our marine communications centre in Victoria. It took the information that it should, in the way it always does—professionally, calmly—and assured the two individuals in the fishing vessel that we would have assets on the scene shortly. They called the JRCC, and they did exactly what they should do. They analyzed the situation, looked at the assets that were available, tasked two vessels of opportunity, tasked RCMSAR, the auxiliary, and tasked the hovercraft in Sea Island.

The hovercraft was under way in five minutes. This was at 5:15 in the morning. They got up, got dressed and were gone, exactly as we expect them to do. They were on scene before the tug that was in the area was able to deploy its life raft. They rescued the two individuals, got them on board, and transported them directly from the hovercraft ashore to the ambulance.

The system works exactly as we expect it to. We are very proud of the rescue that was effected yesterday in Vancouver, and we're proud of the work that the coast guard crews are doing in the Vancouver area.

Mr. Randy Kamp: Thank you for that. I appreciate the confidence that we can look forward to that system's effective delivery of those services.

Let me ask a question on a different topic as the final question. This question was raised in the House a few days ago, and I'm not sure that in 35 seconds we got an answer.

My understanding is that this is the year in which we need to make our submission, under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, on the continental shelf. I know that we have been doing a lot of work on this, and I think we will see resources in the main estimates that have been used for it.

Are we still on track to deliver? Can you share any more about that process?

Once we do submit it, how long will it be before it is dealt with?

Mr. Kevin Stringer (Assistant Deputy Minister, Ecosystems and Oceans Science Sector, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you for the question.

Indeed this is the year that we'll be making our submission. The matter is indeed in the main estimates; there are some resources in this fiscal year and some resources for the next few years. I'll explain that as well.

It has taken 10 years' work to prepare Canada's submission. Basically it's about identifying the footprint of our continental shelf. The work that is under way is for the Atlantic and the Arctic. It has been a joint effort between our department's hydrography group, the Geological Survey of Canada, GSC, group within Natural Resources Canada, NRCan, and Foreign Affairs.

It has been a 10-year effort. Our 10 years are up, in that we have to make our submission in December of this year. Plans are in place, and we are confident that we will get our submission and be able to move this forward.

You've seen media reports suggesting that we're looking at an area to add to Canada's continental shelf that is approximately the size of the prairie provinces. It is a very substantial piece of territory. It speaks to specific rights to the bottom and to resources on the bottom.

You also asked when it will be heard.

We have until December to do the submission. We know that the commission is a number of years behind in looking at submissions, so there is a bunch of submissions piled up. We anticipate it will probably be five or six years before we have to defend our submission.

Thank you.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. MacAulay.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Cardigan, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome.

The main estimates involve a decrease of \$16.7 million related to the implementation of the new aquaculture initiative. Could you give us an idea of what this is all about?

Also, as has been indicated, the sustainable aquaculture program has been cut by \$17 million. Why has it been cut nearly in half? What programs would be affected if that funding is not put back in place?

I would also like to ask you whether there is a plan to expand the salmon farming open-net industry on the west coast of this country. Is there a plan to expand the salmon open-net concept across the country?

Thank you.

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager: With respect to the program, as I mentioned, the budget allocation was provided to the department in a five-year timeframe. The five-year timeframe comes to an end at the end of this fiscal year; it sunsets.

If the government chooses to not renew the program or extend it as part of its budgetary process, there are four program areas that would be affected. The first is those activities we undertake now to build and expand and improve the regulatory framework, environment, and management for the aquaculture sector.

The second major program that would be affected is our science work with respect to aquaculture, which has approximately half the program's current financial allocation.

The third part of the program that would be affected is what we call innovation and market access, which funds technology development and sustainability with respect to the sector.

The fourth element of the program that would be affected is our sustainability reporting initiative, which seeks to report on the sustainability of the sector overall.

All of those entail people, activities, a whole variety of things. It is approximately half of the department's resources that are currently allocated to aquaculture, which would be lost if that program were to disappear.

The department would obviously have some significant challenges to address in terms of how we would move forward with aquaculture in the environment, in that context. We would have to work our way through that. We would be in a position to make some decisions as to how we would do so once we receive whatever is in the budget. At this point we're planning on a roughly status quo track. If things were to change, obviously we would adjust.

The second part of your question has to do with the use of open-net pen activities in British Columbia.

The department is a regulator and a manager of aquaculture. We don't have an expansion plan. It's not our role. We're not the industry. The industry will come forward with whatever proposals it has. The department will treat those as it does any other regulatory activity. If people choose to submit proposals for expansion in activities in British Columbia, those will be treated through our normal regulatory process. We don't have something in place that says we're proposing that the industry expand in a particular way, time, or place. It's not our role to do that.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: What about across the country?

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager: On the third part of the question, in terms of across the country, as you may know, our regulatory role in British Columbia is rather different from in other parts of the country as a result of some jurisprudence in B.C. The federal government has a substantially different role in British Columbia. We have a whole regulatory regime in place that reports up to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans. In the rest of the country, the jurisdiction over aquaculture is shared between the federal and provincial governments, and so on. If we had expansion proposals elsewhere in the country, they'd be treated through that system as well.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

Does DFO have plans to put money aside to implement any of the recommendations of the Cohen commission? If so, how many, and if not, why not?

On your response, it would indicate to me that there is a possibility of the expansion of the open-net industry on the west coast of this country. If I understand correctly, I know it's just one area, but the Cohen commission indicated quite clearly that this should stop. I'd like your comment on that, because you've indicated that if the proposals come forward, you have a process to deal with that. There's nothing to say the expansion will not take place. Is that correct?

• (1135)

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager: I'll answer that in two parts.

First, on the resources question, which we got into a little bit, the program for aquaculture in British Columbia is funded through A-base resources. The implementation of the Pacific aquaculture regulation will continue regardless of any changes made with respect to the sustainable aquaculture program.

When the government moved into that regulatory role, resources were provided to implement the regulation, to put in place new enforcement officers, to put in place regulatory liaison officers—I guess, is the best way to put it—and so on. The ability the department has to manage the sector effectively and discharge its responsibilities in British Columbia will not be affected by any resource changes around the sustainable aquaculture program, with the possible exception that some of our science resources are tied into that. In terms of the regulatory agenda, it will proceed.

More specifically, with respect to the reference to the Cohen commission, as the minister mentioned the other day, the government is continuing to analyze the recommendations of that report. It has not formed its conclusions as to how it will go forward on all of the recommendations, including those related to aquaculture.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

In fact, what you're telling me is that there's no funding allocated to implement the Cohen commission report. I know it's the sustainable aquaculture program that's being cut, but it's up to the department to decide and the government to decide whether there will be an expansion of the open-net industry on the west coast of this country. There's absolutely nothing to stop that.

If you look at what the Cohen commission has recommended, I know it's just in one specific area, but if you look at it, it could play right across the coast of British Columbia. Basically, what you're telling us is that if there's a proper application in place for more open net in the salmon industry, it could well be approved. Is that correct?

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager: Again, I would emphasize that the government hasn't reached its conclusions with respect to the Cohen commission recommendations, including those related to aquaculture. So I want to make clear, when you indicate what I'm telling you, what I'm trying to make sure I tell you is that the government still hasn't reached its conclusions with respect to Cohen, so I wouldn't want to convey any suggestion the government will accept, reject, or endorse those recommendations. That will come forward.

Insofar as the question about the future of aquaculture is concerned, again, from our point of view, essentially what will happen is the industry will determine whether it wishes to submit applications for expansion or not. That'll be a business decision they make and we'll analyze those when they come.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

At this time we will suspend our sitting. We will resume immediately following the votes, in approximately the 12:10 or 12:15 range. We'll see all members back here shortly.

Thank you.

•(1135)

_____ (Pause) _____

•(1210)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order. I thank the officials for their patience.

Our next round will be a five-minute round. We'll start off with Mr. Donnelly—sorry, Mr. Toone.

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. You're as surprised as I am.

Thank you for coming. My first question's going to be on the Experimental Lakes Area, ELA. It was announced that the government wants to shut it down. There was some talk about third party management, that third parties would perhaps take possession of the ELA, that the government would actually cede them. What are the discussions regarding that possibility? Is the government prepared to keep responsibility for liability if there were to be a ceding of the ELA?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: Thank you for the question.

Indeed the government did announce that we would not be operating the Experimental Lakes Area going forward. We did express a hope that we would be able to identify another operator from universities or non-government organizations that would wish to be the operator.

What I can tell you is we are in discussions with potential operators now. We're in discussions with Ontario as well, which is the fee-simple owner of the area. I am not at liberty to say what's happening in terms of those discussions.

The issue of liability is something we are talking about. The government's been clear, however. We've given our notice that we will no longer be involved in operating it as of September 1 this coming year.

Mr. Philip Toone: If the government were to retain liability, what kinds of costs are we looking at? What would be the projections there?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: The issue of liability is complex. There are a number of issues. One is the actual lakes themselves and ensuring they come back, are remediated to a natural state. There are a number of facilities also that we've built in the areas. Then there are boats, docks, and slips, and all those types of things. There are different types of issues.

We are talking to Ontario right now about remediation and what will be required for remediation if there's not an operator. We're starting to take some action in terms of ensuring it's brought back, if there is an appropriate operator, to a proper state for a new operator.

Mr. Philip Toone: Thank you.

I have another question on another subject.

Concerns have been raised about DFO. They'll no longer be conducting environmental assessments of proposed aquaculture sites once the changes to the Fisheries Act and the Navigable Waters Protection Act are implemented. At the same time, the department has a mandate to protect wild fish. How do you expect to be able to carry out your mandate if you're no longer conducting environmental assessments?

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager: I guess there are a couple of things to point out.

First, the regulatory regime that's in place for aquaculture today will continue into the future. Environmental assessments of aquaculture sites will be conducted in two different ways.

Again, we always have to distinguish British Columbia versus—I don't want to be pejorative—the rest of the country. It's a verbal shorthand; take it for that. Essentially, in British Columbia, the assessment of the environmental implications of all aquaculture sites will be considered as part of the regulatory process, and so the provisions that historically have been addressed by the provincial and federal environmental assessment processes in British Columbia will be addressed through the Pacific aquaculture regulatory process that's in place there now. Those will not be changed. Those have not been changed, rather, by the Fisheries Act.

On the east coast, where we are getting into environmental assessments of aquaculture sites, essentially what will happen in the future going forward is the provincial process remains in place. To the extent there are federal interests in some of the projects, insofar as where they're located, the act would be triggered. "Triggered" is not really the right term now; it would be applied. The manner in which the assessments are undertaken in the future will be somewhat different.

As you probably are aware, under the Environmental Assessment Act, aquaculture is not listed as one of the projects on the schedule, so it's our expectation that the majority of environmental assessment work will be done via the province in question, depending on where it is. We will work through the existing permitting mechanisms that are in place to address the federal obligations.

•(1215)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll move on now to Mrs. Davidson.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the witnesses for being back with us again.

On Tuesday I asked a question about the supplementary estimates. It related to the \$1.5 million that was spent on implementing the Asian carp initiative. We also know that we have had a fairly robust lamprey eel program for several years. Can anybody tell me where it's funded from, and if in fact there are any changes to it? Is it contemplated to continue at the same level?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: Thanks for the question.

The sea lamprey control program is one that Canada's been involved in jointly with the United States for many years. The primary objective of the program is to minimize sea lamprey

populations in support of fish community objectives in the Great Lakes, like the rehabilitation of trout populations.

We use an integrated pest management approach that includes stock assessment to determine abundance and distribution of the lampreys. We use a lampricide program to control and eliminate larval populations. We do the construction of spawning barriers and traps in the Great Lakes tributaries to reduce or eliminate the reproduction of sea lampreys.

Since 2006, DFO has spent \$8 million. This is expected to continue. There's no plan for any change in that regard. That \$8 million a year, I should be clear, is in partnership with the U.S.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: Okay, thanks very much.

Going back again to the supplementaries, in number 13 it says:

Transfer to Environment – To provide accommodation for Fisheries and Oceans employees housed in Environment's facilities to support the implementation of the Species at Risk Act

I understand that the departments do work together; they collaborate. They hopefully are trying to find savings through joint efforts. I think we've seen it in other departments as well. We've seen it in Shared Services Canada. I'm hoping that this is something along the same lines.

I'm wondering if anybody could talk about the issue and how DFO and Environment Canada, or any other department that you might work with, work together on programs and projects and provide examples perhaps of how that saves taxpayer dollars.

Mr. Roch Huppé (Chief Financial Officer, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): I'll talk about the first portion of your question.

The actual transfer's really in relation to the renewed funding that we received for species at risk. Last year there was funding that was sunsetted and through budget 2012 we actually received \$24.6 million over three years.

This is obviously, as you mentioned, something we deliver in partnership with other departments, Environment being one of them.

When we receive new funding, in such cases, we divide the funding in the envelope to the best of our capacities of where it should go, which department is assuming which costs. In this particular case, the transfer is done because we basically owe \$46,000 to Environment Canada because we are using their facilities.

The initial stage when we divided the envelope was not taken into account, so we are just re-balancing the books as to who's covering which cost.

•(1220)

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: Does the department actively look for ways to increase efficiencies in this manner in collaborating with the other departments?

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager: I'll give you a short answer so I don't get beeped again, because it's actually a very large topic.

Specifically with respect to the species at risk program, the hub of your question, essentially we work very closely with Environment Canada in its role both as Environment Canada, so to speak, and the ministry responsible for parks. So it's really a three departmental thing, even though it's two ministers. Essentially the species at risk program is jointly managed by the three agencies. We are working at a series of levels to make sure that our programs align so that we don't have conflicting regulations, policies, programs, that sort of thing. We've got three programs that we actually administer jointly to transfer funds to project proponents doing work on the ground and on the landscape. Again, it's a single administration for almost three programs, but it's a central administrative hub.

We've got a whole series of things that we do in collaboration with respect to enforcement of the act so that our enforcement officers don't trip over each other. It's a nice urban myth to say I had an enforcement officer from Fisheries one day and Environment another day and CFIA another day and so on. We work very hard to make sure that actually doesn't happen.

I would conclude by saying that kind of experience is actually replicated in quite a number of other domains. Species at risk is arguably the best example of it, but by no means is it the only area where we work closely with other fellow departments to achieve financial savings and program efficiencies.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Monsieur Tremblay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jonathan Tremblay (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, NDP): Thank you.

I wanted to expand on the discussion we had at the last meeting. I would like to know whether you can tell us today if you will follow the recommendations of the Commissioner of Official Languages regarding the reported closing of the Search and Rescue Centre, especially the recommendation not to close the centre until recommendations 1 to 4 have been implemented.

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: As the commissioner said on Tuesday, we are taking the recommendations of the Commissioner of Official Languages very seriously as we plan the consolidation of the MRSC Quebec into JRCCs in Halifax and Trenton.

We will not proceed until we are certain that the level of safety provided to mariners now will be unchanged and that we can meet the official language requirements as laid out by both our clients but also as defined by the Commissioner of Official Languages. We haven't closed the MRSC Quebec yet because we're not going to do it precipitously. We are waiting until we are certain that the level of bilingual staff is available. It is now in Halifax, and we continue to staff for Trenton. Trenton is a bit delayed because we also have to build a new joint rescue centre and we're doing that currently.

Plans are under way, but we will not do it until we are confident the level of service will continue.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jonathan Tremblay: In other words, you will follow the recommendations of the Commissioner of Official Languages.

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: Yes, we did.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jonathan Tremblay: Thank you.

Will you ask that the current language requirements be strengthened?

[*English*]

Ms. Jody Thomas: The linguistic requirements in Halifax have already been increased to a bilingual level of CBC. They were BBB. So yes, we have raised the levels already in Halifax, and we will do so in Trenton.

The Chair: Mr. Chisholm.

Mr. Robert Chisholm: I notice that ocean forecasting is down \$5 million, and oceans management is also down from previous expenditures and estimates. I wonder if you could explain the rationale for this decrease.

Mr. Roch Huppé: The ocean forecasting is down by \$4.7 million. The larger part of that decrease is actually due to reallocation within the program activities. Over \$3.3 million has been transferred to a new program activity that you would find under the climate change adaptation program. Basically, during the year, we move money around, and this was a new program activity. We received money through budget 2011 for that purpose. Based on what a program activity is, as we follow the guidelines from Treasury Board Secretariat, we created that new program activity because it's really a stand-alone. It was money moved. It's not a money decrease; it is really moved to a different program activity.

● (1225)

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Okay. The Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development in his fall 2012 report raised significant concerns regarding Canada's ability to meet its UN obligation to protect 10% of our coastlines by 2020. I wondered if you would indicate the government's commitment to provide sufficient funding to protect marine and coastal areas.

Mr. David Balfour: The department is continuing with its work with respect to the establishment of marine protected areas. As you may know, there are eight marine protected areas that are currently in place. There are areas of interest that are under development for seven additional areas.

In addition to that, there is work that is under way with other federal partners and the provinces to establish a network of marine protected areas to look at how, in all the various efforts we're doing, whether they are marine parks or marine protected areas or undertakings by provinces, they contribute towards Canada achieving the goal of 10%. It's not a commitment as much as it's a target to work towards. The environment commissioner noted that the department was on track with its capacity to continue to move forward towards that target with the resources the department has to develop marine protected areas.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chisholm.

Mr. Sopuck.

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'd like to follow up on the idea of the salmon stamp fee increase that is being requested by anglers in B.C. I gather that's the case.

A comment I'd like to make, however, before I begin my question is that the anglers are about the only user group that actually asks to be taxed to conserve fish. I think it's a tribute to the angling community, and the hunting community as well, that they are constantly asking that their licence fees be increased and that the money be earmarked for the conservation of the fish or wildlife they so cherish.

I hope the department pays that community the respect they deserve, given their track record in conservation. Too many other groups just talk about the environment, but the anglers and hunters of Canada actually deliver real on-the-ground environmental programming.

What would the fee increase the anglers are requesting generate by way of funds?

Mr. David Balfour: Concerning the Pacific salmon conservation stamp, there is a similar program in place involving commercial harvesters in British Columbia who contribute, I believe, something on the order of \$10 per harvester towards either the Pacific Salmon Foundation or, if they so elect, the T. Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation in British Columbia for the same purposes of conservation and restoration.

The proposals that have come to our minister have involved taking an additional part of the fee currently being paid for the salmon stamp and using it to contribute to the moneys provided to the Pacific Salmon Foundation. It's really a fiscal question of whether the government decides to forgo that revenue and convert it into a contribution to the foundation.

As you noted, there is also the possibility of increasing the price of the stamp, with the proceeds of that increase being provided to the foundation. Right now, the salmon stamp is generating on the order of \$350,000 annually. That amount is provided, through a contribution, to the Pacific Salmon Foundation.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Yes, the analogous one is Wildlife Habitat Canada, which receives all of the funds generated by migratory bird stamps. It seems to me that's something we should be looking at.

When I think of the angling groups and the volunteerism they undertake in these projects, their dedication to the resource is truly remarkable.

I'd like to follow up on one of Mr. Swerdfager's comments regarding enforceable conditions of the habitat provisions. I'd like a short answer here.

I assume that the department is able to issue standards and guidelines for certain types of "smaller developments", such as stream crossings.

• (1230)

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager: Under the terms of the new provisions of the Fisheries Act, it will be able to do that, yes.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Okay.

Let's say that a road is being built in a municipality and there's a stream. Let's say, where I live, it's a stream that happens to be used by pike, which are the weakest swimming fish, as you know. The guideline could say to design the crossing so that pike will be able to go through a culvert, and of course, the design could be done in a certain way to let that happen.

If that design were not followed, would you then be able to enforce those conditions?

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager: The key will be that the prohibition remains in place holus-bolus across the country, in section 35.

The guidelines you're talking about will say, "Buddy, if you're planning to build a stream crossing in this case, and you follow these standards, it's extremely likely that you will not violate the prohibition, because you will not cause serious harm, and so on."

However, if we got to a scenario in which Buddy says he's planning to do that, and it happens, and his neighbours rat him out or something, saying that's not what he actually did, the department will be able to go in. In that case, he will not have an authorization that we would be enforcing; instead, what we'd be doing is saying, "You told the community you were going to behave in such a way that you would not violate the standards and guidelines, but in fact we have...".

In a scenario such as that, the department would still have the authority to go in and lay a charge with respect to violation of section 35, rather than of the authorization terms, because he wouldn't have them.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Sopuck.

Mr. MacAulay.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Stringer, it's my understanding that the Experimental Lakes Area costs the Government of Canada approximately \$2 million a year. Is that correct?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: It's approximately correct.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: If you do not get somebody to take it over, what would it cost to completely shut it down?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: As I said before, we're talking to Ontario about this. It will vary. If we have a new operator, the sense is that we'd need to do some remediation, which we believe would cost about \$1 million. If we were to take down all the facilities, return the site to nature, etc., it would be a few more million dollars than that. It would be nowhere near what has been reported in the media, but it would be a few million dollars.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

Mr. Swerdfager, in response to my question on the sustainable aquaculture program, you talked about market access as one of the programs that would be cut back.

First of all, do you spend money on promoting and marketing salmon?

Do you spend money on promoting and marketing lobster? I'm looking at the Lobster Council of Canada that was put in place a few years ago, and it's my understanding that some funding was put in place. I think you're fully aware that the lobster market is very depressed at the moment. It's a specialty product that is not receiving the return to the fishermen that it should. I'd like you to elaborate on that.

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager: I'll talk about the first part of your question, and with respect to lobster, I may call on my colleagues.

To the question whether we promote and market farm salmon, the answer is no. The market access program component under the sustainable aquaculture initiative is used to explore third party certification and contribute to the discussion around third party certification standards. You're probably familiar with the Marine Stewardship Council. The flip side of it, so to speak, is the Aquaculture Stewardship Council.

I forget the exact number, but there are now approximately 25 aquaculture certification-type initiatives. Within the \$17 million of the program, \$200,000 is set aside to support efforts to develop the standards, procedures, protocols, and so on, associated with the development of those standards.

Concerning our investments in the Lobster Council of Canada, I confess that I don't have those numbers at hand, but my colleagues may.

Mr. David Balfour: First, as I think you know, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans does not have a mandate for the promotion of fish or seafood products or aquaculture products. That responsibility is with the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

In the case of lobster, the department has been active, as have been the Atlantic provinces and Quebec, in supporting the formation of the Lobster Council of Canada, which came together in 2009. We have provided financial contributions as seed money to that council since that time. In the current fiscal year, it is \$20,000, for a total of \$90,000 since 2009 for the council. It is, as you know, working with all segments of the lobster sector to develop standards, to promote Canadian lobster, and to support the sustainability of lobster as well.

• (1235)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: Thank you very much.

In the supplementary estimates, \$68,000 has been taken from the operational expenditures to provide a source of funds to establish a business transformation and renewal secretariat of the Privy Council.

What is this, and what is it all about?

Mr. Roch Huppé: It is basically a unit that was formed in PCO to overlook horizontal issues and see in what areas savings could be generated. In order to set up that unit in PCO, departments were asked to contribute financially to cover the expenditures, including the salary expenses of that group.

DFO's contribution to the setting up of that group is \$111,000 a year. Our contribution for 2012-13 is \$68,000.

That's why there was a transfer done to PCO.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. MacAulay.

Mr. Donnelly.

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Swerdfager, you mentioned you believe the cuts to the number of DFO or habitat offices in the field would make the department more efficient. I'm wondering if you have considered those in the field, or others in DFO, in fact, who are very concerned with these cuts.

In terms of the Fisheries Act, I would submit that these changes have created more uncertainty. In fact, I'm hearing from the development community, and even in some instances from industry, that this uncertainty exists. There was discussion about consultation, and I think there are a number who feel they haven't been consulted on these changes, including the regulation you referenced earlier, and especially first nations.

Unfortunately I don't have enough time to ask questions on those. I do want to get to my question, but there was also another comment about the promotion of aquaculture. I'm just looking on the website, where you have the national aquaculture strategy action plan, on which I believe you work with the Canadian Council of Fisheries and Aquaculture Ministers. It says:

Strengthening Sustainable Aquaculture Development in Canada

Canada has considerable untapped potential in aquaculture. The National Aquaculture Strategic Action Plan (NASAPI) was developed to help Canada realize that potential....

It then goes on to comment further.

It's certainly a very confusing message we're hearing at the committee today, and given this document, essentially you could interpret that as promoting the industry.

Certainly Cohen, in his deliberations, also commented about the confusing mandate of DFO to promote aquaculture and at the same time protect or conserve wild salmon. One could argue about that being the reason for the Cohen commission in the first place. Unfortunately, I don't have enough time to ask all those questions, so I'd like to talk about the closure of BIEAP and FREMP, the Burrard Inlet environmental action program, and the Fraser River Estuary management program.

On February 28 of this year, FREMP and BIEAP announced that they would be closing their doors on March 31 of this year. They say that it is due to the federal government cutting \$150,000 in funding to that program, which represents a significant portion of their \$350,000 annual operating budget. This also, of course, follows on the department's significant cuts to habitat protection and staff in other offices.

I'm wondering if you could comment on that. Then I have another question about the coast guard.

•(1240)

Mr. David Balfour: As you've noted, this office is being closed. The DFO is a partner in that operation, one of five agencies that have been part of this initiative. Suffice to say, though, that this closure is not going to be something that'll affect our posture in terms of the fish protection program, and we're not looking to reduce resources as a part of this.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thank you.

In the remaining time that I have, I'd like to turn to the Kitsilano coast guard station closure.

Ms. Thomas, it's my understanding that Ms. Vija Poruks, who was the assistant commissioner, western region, was fired, and that Gary Sidock was brought in from the east coast to shut the facility down. I'm wondering if you have a quick comment on that, if that's the case or not.

Ms. Jody Thomas: I can tell you absolutely that Assistant Commissioner Vija Poruks was not fired. She is on leave. She has chosen to leave the coast guard after a long and illustrious service in the public service, many years with the coast guard. She was in absolutely no way fired.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thank you.

Officials have been reassuring members of this committee that the closure of the Kitsilano coast guard station is having no impact on coast guard response times. However, the recent incidents in Vancouver have raised serious concerns, primarily that response times would be much quicker if the Kits station were still open.

In response to yesterday's early morning incident with the sunken fishing vessel, the minister claimed RCMSAR responded in 11 minutes. However, a spokesperson for RCMSAR confirmed the auxiliary crew arrived on scene after the hovercraft, which came from Sea Island station.

There were also reports that the assistant commissioner of the coast guard's western region stepped down or went on leave after refusing to close the Kitsilano station on short notice. Given the outstanding concerns of many British Columbians that closure of the Kitsilano station is putting lives at risk, I'd like to move my motion:

That, because the safety of Canadians will be compromised with the closure of the Kitsilano Coast Guard Station, the busiest station in Canada, and because there was a lack of consultation with stakeholders and experts the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans immediately study the impact of the potential consequences of the closure of Kitsilano Coast Guard Station.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Donnelly.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: I do have copies in both official languages.

The Chair: We have copies as well. Thank you, Mr. Donnelly.

Proper notice was given. Even with the topic today, that notice wasn't required, but anyhow it's a topic at hand. It's been moved by Mr. Donnelly:

That, because the safety of Canadians will be compromised with the closure of the Kitsilano Coast Guard Station, the busiest station in Canada, and because there was a lack of consultation with stakeholders and experts the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans immediately study the impact of the potential consequences of the closure of Kitsilano Coast Guard Station.

On the question, Mr. Kamp.

Mr. Randy Kamp: Mr. Chair, as is our practice, I would move that we would go in camera for the consideration of this motion.

The Chair: It's moved by Mr. Kamp that the committee go in camera for consideration of this motion.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We will suspend at this time so the officials can leave, and the committee will take this motion into consideration.

Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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