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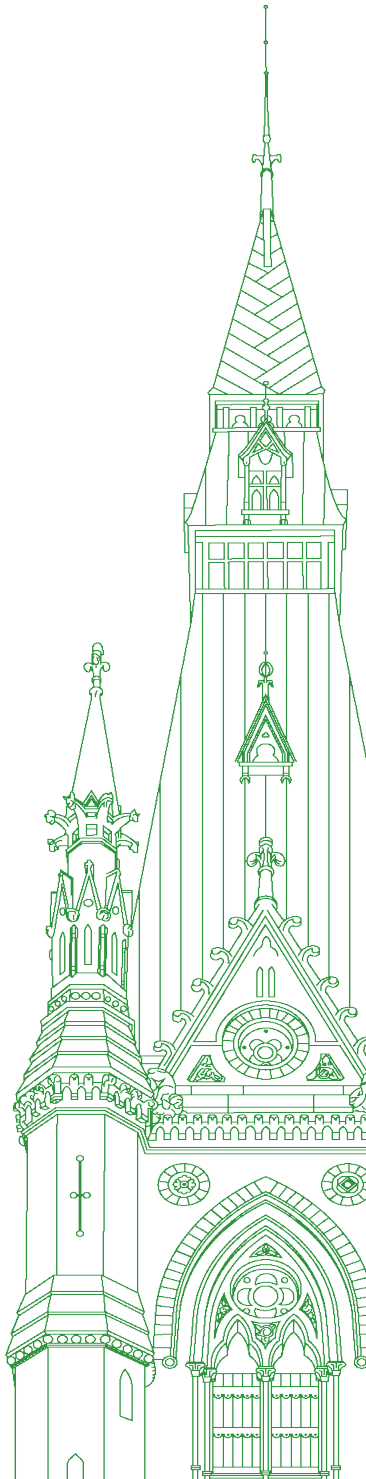

Chair: Mr. Ken McDonald

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Thursday, May 30, 2024

● (1535)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Ken McDonald (Avalon, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 112 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans. This meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the Standing Orders.

Before we proceed, I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of our witnesses and members. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking, and address all comments through the chair. I think everybody's quite familiar by now with the earpiece and where to lay it when you're not using it. Have your mic turned off when you're not using it. Keep your earpiece away from the microphones, of course. When you're not using your earpiece, place it face down on the sticker placed on the table for this purpose. Thank you for your co-operation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on June 16, 2022, the committee is resuming its study of population sustainability of Yukon salmon stocks.

I want to welcome our witnesses. We have today, from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Mr. Peter Westley, Wakefield chair in fisheries and ocean sciences; from the Beaver Village Council, of course, Chief Rhonda Pitka; and David Curtis, documentarian and fisherman.

Thank you for taking the time to appear today. You will each have up to five minutes or less for opening statements. We will start with Peter Westley.

I want to remind members that when we get to the rounds of questioning, please identify who you are asking the question to. It will make things go smoother.

Chief Pitka, you're up for five minutes or less, please.

Chief Rhonda Pitka (Chief, Beaver Village Council): Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were asking Peter Westley to start first.

The Chair: I was, yes. I skipped down a line and saw your name. Forgive me for that.

Mr. Peter Westley, you have five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Peter Westley (Lowell A. Wakefield Chair, College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences, University of Alaska Fairbanks): I always defer to Rhonda, but I'm happy to oblige.

Good afternoon. I'm Dr. Peter Westley. I'm an associate professor and the Wakefield endowed chair of fisheries and ocean sciences at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

I'm joining you today from the unceded homelands of the lower Tanana Dena people, who for at least 11,000 years have stewarded these lands and waters on which the University of Alaska now resides. The Dena people have been and continue to be deeply connected with salmon that also call the Tanana River—a major tributary of the Yukon River here on the U.S. side—home. It's a privilege and honour, and a responsibility that I take very seriously, to share with you what I understand about the plight of salmon and salmon people in the Yukon.

I'll give you a bit of background. I'm a western-trained scientist. I have a bachelor's and a master's in science from the University of Washington School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences. I have a Ph.D. in biology from Memorial University of Newfoundland.

As a lifelong Alaskan, it was a highlight of my life to live in St. John's. I lived there for five years. My son Finn was born in St. John's in 2010. My time there really underscored the vital importance of the best available science to make informed fisheries decisions and policies. As a professor here in Alaska, I teach some of those heart-wrenching lessons that were learned from the collapse of the northern cod.

I am arguably more concerned, or as concerned, with the ongoing declines of chinook salmon in the Yukon as I think people were in Newfoundland in the early 1990s. The situation is absolutely as grave. The causes of the declines are complex and complicated. They occur at different scales across time and space and they all operate in the context of a changing climate.

So I am here. I'm happy to field questions. I'm so glad for the invitation. I ultimately urge a focus on research along avenues that are actionable, where we as people have some hope of actually making a difference for salmon in our lifetime. I think it's really easy as researchers for us to propose and to do really good science, really good salmon science, but that really may not be good for the salmon, or good for the salmon and people, and I think we really need to prioritize that. I want to urge you to keep your eyes on the science that really is likely to make a difference.

Thank you again for the invitation—I look forward to the questions and the conversation and the discussion—to speak towards this really vital and ongoing crisis.

● (1540)

The Chair: You were a bit short on time, but that's good. We will save that up and somebody will use it along the way, I'm sure.

We will now go to Chief Rhonda Pitka for an opening statement of five minutes or less, please.

Chief Rhonda Pitka: Good morning. I'm Rhonda Pitka. I'm the chief of the village of Beaver. I've been the chief of the village since about 2011. Beaver is a small, remote, fly-in community.

I'm also the chairwoman of the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments, which is a consortium of nine tribal governments in the Yukon Flats area of Alaska, I sit on the Yukon River Panel and I am a federal subsistence board member.

Our people have relied on chinook salmon for millennia. We've had difficulty finding food before, but it's never been to this degree. Our food security has become so imperiled. We live in an area where the moose density is much lower, and our people have traditionally relied on moose and salmon for the majority of their diets.

I can't even begin to tell you the pain that the people on the river have felt for the last five years, as the salmon stocks have dwindled lower and lower.

Our conservation of the salmon has cost us thousands of dollars and thousands of hours in time, advocacy, man hours and policy. We've learned so many things about ocean science that I never thought I would need to know as a fisherwoman on the Yukon River.

The vast majority of our people depend so heavily on the Yukon River salmon—not only as a source of food, but as a source of culture—that the crashes have devastated our communities in a lot of different ways.

I've testified before that we've seen incredible rises in the rates of prediabetes to the point that when they started to do regular testing in our clinics, the number of those tests coming back as prediabetic was upward of 70%.

As our people are no longer allowed their traditional and cultural use of salmon and access to things that have provided health and wellness for them, we've seen so many different social effects happening with the dwindling of resources.

It's been so difficult to see the rise in domestic violence. You can see from the data yourself, when you look at it, that with the rise of domestic violence, prediabetes and all of these numerous effects, not only nutrition-wise but spiritually, people have suffered.

The backbone of our communities is often the traditional salmon fishery. We've always felt like we never had to voice these ideas in this particular way before in our advocacy, and it's been really difficult for our people on the ground to sit back and not fish for the last five years.

Right now, we're going into this seven-year moratorium. On top of the five years already, that will be a total of 12 years of not fishing for chinook on the Yukon River. It's already been devastating for our people, and it's going to continue to devastate our people.

I think that in my last testimony, I spoke briefly about the effects of the trawl fishery on the ecosystem for our people, and the fact that conservation has always been balanced on the backs of the people on the upper Yukon River and Canada. We have so much empathy for our relatives on the Canadian side of the border. They've faced much longer declines in the salmon than we have, and it's devastating to watch them also struggle through that.

Many of our children have not fished in their lifetime. I'm concerned now that some of our elders won't be able to fish within the rest of their lifetime either. The devastation of the Yukon River salmon fishery has been so detrimental to the health and wellness of our people.

● (1545)

At the same time, we can watch our governments do things like subsidize the commercial salmon fishery by buying commercial salmon under food programs, instead of finding more sustainable ways to fish for salmon themselves. Instead, they place the onus and the burden of conservation on the backs of the indigenous people of the Yukon River.

I'd like to thank you all for inviting me again. I was so worried that in my last testimony I probably offended most of the Canadian House of Commons and I would never be invited back.

I thank you all so much for your time today. I appreciate it.

The Chair: That is not a problem.

We'll now go to Mr. David Curtis for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. David Curtis (Documentarian and Fisherman, As an Individual): Hello, my name is David Curtis. I am joining you today from the traditional territories of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation, on whose lands I have had the honour to live for the past 27 years.

I first worked as a field technician on a number of salmon studies within the Klondike region in the early 2000s. This work brought me into direct contact with salmon and their environments. For example, one of my tasks was snorkelling down the Klondike River to assess male to female ratios, which brought me within centimetres of living salmon. My passion for all things salmon has only increased since those days.

I later became involved with salmon as a food source when I acquired a commercial fishing licence. Unfortunately, this coincided with the tail end of a viable chinook fishery. When it closed in 2010, I shifted my efforts to harvesting fall chum and developed a small business sustainably fishing them for local consumption. Fishing allowed me to remain engaged with salmon while helping address food security in the face of climate change. Sadly, with the catastrophic collapse of the chum run in 2020, I haven't been able to harvest any salmon for over four years.

Many important points have been raised and eloquently addressed by previous witnesses, especially regarding the possible causes of the decline of Yukon River salmon. I will not repeat these, but instead will focus on issues regarding the human-fish interface that often goes unaddressed, yet are the very things we can do something about, such as fishing practices and commercial fishing in particular.

When considering the decline of the Yukon River salmon, a lot of energy and resources continue to be expended on contributing factors that we have little or no short-term control over—climate change, diseases, increasing water temperatures, salinity and changes in the ocean food chain, etc. Amongst these worthy conversations, little is said about the history, evolution and cumulative impacts that commercial fisheries have had along the river, [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] gear and techniques used.

There can be no denying that the cumulative effects of previous harvest practices have had detrimental impacts, not only on the number, but also, and probably more importantly, on the quality of fish making it to the spawning grounds.

From the 1840s until now, there has been some form of a commercial fishery in the Yukon River. Over this time, distinctly different management regimes have evolved between Yukon and Alaska. One thing they share is the commercial fishers' desire to maximize their yield in relation to management decisions. Commercial fishing has often been practised without direct concern for long-term impacts on the resource—at least not until returns approached the tipping point of potential extirpation.

The Atlantic cod fishery is an excellent example, amongst others, of how conventional management regimes based primarily on commercial fishing interests have failed the very resource they are set up to protect.

With this in mind, I'd like to stress that it has been known for quite some time that there is a direct correlation between the type of gear used by commercial fishers to target specific age groups for size, weight and sex that, if left unregulated, will lead to the demise of the resource.

I'll quote from C. E. Walker's 1976 study of Yukon salmon for Environment Canada's fisheries and marine service, in which he raises concerns about the potential extinction of chinook salmon. Remember, this is 1976:

> A change toward heavier use of gillnets, particularly with larger size mesh, will increase the catch of female chinook salmon. This has two advantages to the fisherman: it increases the weight of catch and provides roe which in itself has high value on the market. Increased exploitation of female chinook salmon may threaten the salmon population with extinction.

Communities along the upper portion of the river, along with scientists and activists, have for decades been sounding the alarm about how chinook salmon are on the precipice of extinction. They have called for commercial harvesting practices, especially in the fishery at the mouth, to be changed if a total collapse is to be averted.

While I am in total support of the indigenous-led initiative for a moratorium on harvesting of chinook for one full life cycle, I hope this will be accompanied by plans to conduct low- and no-harm monitoring studies of the run for the duration of the moratorium.

The moratorium, while being important unto itself, provides a rare opportunity to conclusively determine whether harvesting practices have negatively impacted the chinook runs. Even though this moratorium impacts my ability to harvest fish for my community, any personal loss this represents is dwarfed by the massive sacrifice this entails for every community along the Yukon River.

● (1550)

I am hopeful that this agreement, your work on this study and its recommendation signal a shift in management policies towards ones that integrate both traditional and scientific practices to increase the health of the salmon population and, in turn, all the people who live along the Yukon River.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Before I go to questions, I want to mention that, of course, we want to welcome Mr. Green of the NDP back to committee and Mr. Kurek and Mr Epp—who seems to have lost some weight—for the Conservative party, but I'm sure he'll be recognised somewhere along the way.

We'll now go to our questions. Again, I'd like to remind questioners to identify who their question is for.

We'll go to Mr. Arnold first for six minutes or less.

Yes, I knew Mr Epp would show up sooner or later.

Thank you, Mr Epp. You're just in time.

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr Chair.

I believe I'll start with Mr Curtis. It sounds like you've done a lot of field work with salmon and possibly other species. I'd like to touch base on the evolution of species and natural selection, whereby it's often the weakest that are taken out by the group by predators and so on, leaving the strongest to survive. We've heard about how there used to be large chinook salmon—70 to 90-plus pounds—in that system and the benefits of those larger females' laying more eggs and larger healthier eggs.

What do you see has happened in the system in your time there?

Mr. David Curtis: From my time fishing and also working as a habitat technician, and also from the history of other fishers whom I've talked to on both sides of the border, there has been a continuing decrease in the size and weight of the fish returning, at least onto the Canadian side of the border.

There are a number of different reasons for this, I think, but one of the potential ones that is really important to keep in mind is the targeting of large fish through large mesh nets for decades at a time, which scientifically has proven to be detrimental to the health of a run. As you mentioned, the larger the fish, the more fecund the fish, the better the returns. Also, a thing to understand, as well, as many people pointed out, is that this is a very long system. In the Yukon River itself, the salmon run is over 3,000 kilometres. That's the distance some of these fish go. You need large fish to make the return that far up the river. It just only really makes sense. The larger the fish, the more reserves it has, the more muscle mass it has to be able to make that long journey.

I hope that answered your question.

Mr. Mel Arnold: That leads to the next question: What could be done to ensure that those large fish make it through if and when—I will say "when" because I believe in being positive about this—stocks are returned to abundance? How can we ensure that those large fish that are important to the evolution and the continuation, the sustainability...? How can we operate to make sure that happens?

● (1555)

Mr. David Curtis: Yes, that's a very good point and a good question, and it's one that I think really comes down to management, rigorous management programs that consider the mesh size, the fishing techniques, the lengths of nets and things like that used throughout the fishery. I'm speaking primarily to commercial fisheries, but I think, as well, that all fisheries should be considering this as part of moving forward. We have a moratorium now, which I think is a fantastic move towards rebuilding the stocks. However, as I said in my opening statements, I think it's also an incredible opportunity to understand better what effect these fishing practices have had over time on this run and to possibly work towards rectifying that.

There are a number of different ways that this could be done, but the key one here, I think, is just having a really solid understanding of that relationship between mesh size, the way in which it targets specific sizes of fish and how that needs to be managed in a way in which we no longer do that. So, using smaller mesh nets is one way of doing that.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Okay, if I can—quickly—I want to get on to another question as well. The mesh size now.... Is that in reference to in-river or marine fisheries or both?

Mr. David Curtis: That's in reference to in-river specifically. That's what I'm talking about.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

I'd like to move on now to Chief Pitka.

Chief, you've mentioned that food security is becoming a challenge. Seven years or more now without salmon is certainly concerning. What plans have been put in place, or what work has been done to replace the loss of harvested salmon for your people?

Chief Rhonda Pitka: One of our largest regional non-profits in our area, Tanana Chiefs Conference, has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars of sockeye salmon to our area from Bristol Bay. Oftentimes they would come in, and we would have these whole frozen salmon. That's one thing that they've done.

I'm not sure how well you know the State of Alaska system right now, but within the last year or so, they've had backlogs of up to eight months for review of the food assistance programs, the SNAP, that they operate. There have been people who haven't even been able to access food cards in Alaska.

We've tried numerous ways to contract some of those programs and make sure that some of those processes work better for our people, but that's not a really great long-term solution, flying in fish from other areas, and it's not sustainable for a lot of our people.

The freight costs in our area are pretty outrageous. It's upwards of 50¢ a pound. You know, if you have five sockeye salmon, they're at minimum 15 pounds apiece, so it can be very, very expensive and very, very unwieldy to fly in salmon, especially to people who are very used to fending for themselves, taking care of themselves and being able to fish for themselves.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arnold.

We'll now go to Mr. Hanley for six minutes or less, please.

Mr. Brendan Hanley (Yukon, Lib.): Thank you.

I want to first thank all three of you for coming. I hope to have questions for each of you.

Chief Pitka, congratulations on your niece's graduation, and welcome back to the committee. You're certainly welcome.

I want to start with Mr. Curtis.

David, you and I have had many salmon conversations over the last couple of years. I want to allow you to talk specifically about chum salmon and the significance of the collapse—perhaps a more recent collapse—of the chum fishery and how we may have overlooked that somewhat in our focus on chinook salmon, but also the interplay, you know, the effect on the overall ecosystem and the interplay between chum salmon and chinook salmon survival and sustainability.

● (1600)

Mr. David Curtis: Chum salmon are something that I feel very passionately about as well. There was a collapse in 2020 from one year to the next, where approximately 13% of the run returned of the 10-year average. That was a very serious and catastrophic collapse that happened essentially within a one-year cycle. That continues. The chum have not recovered in any way, to my understanding. I think that 19% was the highest of the returns that came across the border.

Chum are often overlooked because they're not traditionally as important a food source. They were harvested a lot for dog teams in the past. I did a lot of work in early 2010 to bring it back as a table food within our community as a local wild protein source.

They're also very, very important, as you mentioned, MP Hanley, to the environment. The thing that often gets overlooked that Chief Pitka brought up, which I really appreciated, is that the entire ecosystem depends upon these salmon coming back—chinook, chum and coho—for their health and well-being. This is a watershed that is estimated to be 25% larger than the province of Alberta or the state of Alaska. It's a massive ecosystem that has depended upon the salmon for its health and well-being forever. Having these species go extinct in such short order will, I'm sure, have devastating knock-on effects for the environment. That's something that causes me great concern for future generations.

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Thank you for that.

Hopefully, I'll come back to you later. I just want to move to Professor Westley for a couple of minutes.

I want to ask you something, Professor Westley. It's very interesting that you're drawing a parallel, not a surprising one, with the Atlantic cod fishery collapse. Can you elaborate a little more on where you see our potentially going with the Yukon River salmon vis-à-vis the history of the Atlantic cod fishery? Where might be the points of intervention that can prevent this happening? You sound not very optimistic. I wonder where we can usefully intervene at this point.

Mr. Peter Westley: I really appreciate that question.

I think it was MP Arnold who was saying he wanted to stay optimistic. I, too, try to remain optimistic, but you also need to be realistic. My opinion has continued to change as the evidence has continued to change and as the runs have continued to decline. Ten years ago, I probably would have given you a different answer on where I think things are at. I'm gravely concerned.

I'll just start off by mentioning some of the parallels that I see in broad strokes between northern cod and salmon.

At the time, there were questions about whether the collapse of cod was a climate story or an overfishing story. There were different views of the world. And, of course, the answer to that is it was the interaction between the two. The fishery vastly overharvested northern cod by number, but also the diversity of those cod was greatly reduced, and we've been talking about that. To be clear, for the chinook story, in particular, as the numbers have gone down, so too have the size and numbers of eggs and the depth to which females can dig nests, all these things that are tied to things we think are influencers of productivity and survival.

A lot of that diversity had been lost, and then in the context of a changing climate—Newfoundland is always cold, and it got really cold in the early 1990s—the cod stock then did not have the built-in resiliency and diversity to withstand that shifting environment, and it led to a collapse.

I think there is something to that in terms of the parallelism here. We do have a changing climate, and it's undeniable. It's a fact. We have lost the numbers and we have lost the quality, the size. That is a huge component of concern.

What can we do about that? This came up in a bit of the previous question about natural selection and so forth. Some of the real challenges, as we know, are that the age and size at which salmon mature is in large part controlled by genetics. There are environmental controls on that, but there's also a genetic control. For a chinook salmon to be really big requires them to spend a lot of time in the ocean, and there is some genetic control over when fish decide to mature. They're not cognitively thinking it through, but they are genetically programmed as to when, given size and age, they will transition to become mature.

And partly because of, yes, absolutely—

● (1605)

The Chair: Thank you for that. We've gone a little bit over time. I have to move on.

We'll now go to Madame Desbiens for six minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens (Beauport—Côte-de-Beaupré—Île d'Orléans—Charlevoix, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for their valuable presence.

Mr. Westley spoke to us not only about the problems associated with the run, but also about all the factors that led to the outcome we're seeing today.

Mr. Westley, to what extent has the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, in past years, taken note of the deterioration and realities you're telling us about today? You say it's a combination of factors that have been adding up for several years. To what extent has the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, which manages these fisheries, reacted? Has it reacted in any way?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Westley: Thank you for that question.

I will be more punctual. I didn't realize that there was a six-minute response time, so I'll talk faster.

I think there has been a response. The response has been that as the stocks have declined in abundance, there has generally been a decrease in the harvest and more and increasing restrictions. That is consistent with our basic understanding of fisheries management that if there is a surplus of individuals beyond what is needed for the spawning stock to replace itself, that can be harvested and that, as the stock goes down, the harvest needs to be restricted.

There absolutely have been responses. I think the question before us now is.... That has already been done in-river and, to Chief Pitka's point, that conservation has been on the back of the local people. They've been doing that. That still seems to not be working. The salmon stocks are still declining. The question before us is, what do we do in addition to those other tools? What is in front of us? Turning our attention to other sources of mortality beyond what's happening in the river, what's happening in the ocean that we might have some control over?

The ones that come to mind are things that have been brought up. Bycatch by commercial fisheries is part of this. It is not “the only”; it is part of this conversation to the point that you have to be big and old to go that far up the river. If the ocean is much more dangerous now because of things like bycatch, that's a problem, and we have some control over that. We also know that, ironically, there are a lot of other salmon in the ocean right now: other species of salmon that are competing with chinook salmon and chum salmon for food. We have some control over how many fish are in the ocean, partly because of our commercial fishing practices, but more importantly by the release of these fish from hatcheries that we have control over.

That's my point about actionable things. What pieces of the system do we have an ability to respond to in continuing to think about bycatch and other sources of mortality in ocean fisheries, and also the hatcheries, the hatchery releases? I would also add to the list that more and more evidence is pointing to the role of the resurgence of marine mammal predators and other predators in the ocean, so that the ocean apparently has become much more dangerous in recent times than it used to be.

We need to think about the things we can do to respond to that.

● (1610)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: I'll now continue with Mr. Curtis.

In fact, I want to tell you that we're experiencing the same situation in Quebec with respect to the decline of several species, to the detriment of other species of fish. There's also a lack of predictability in the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and we've sounded the alarm about that. Quebec fishers are asking the department to open the redfish fishery. They've been asking for this for at least five years, because there are no more shrimp. Now it's too late. Striped bass is probably wiping out capelin, smelt, and flounder throughout the St. Lawrence. Cod has been decimated in part by pinnipeds. You can see this happening just about everywhere, even in your region.

What could we do at this point to halt this decline and start over from a position where we can turn things around?

We're seeing the same thing across Canada, from east to west.

[*English*]

Mr. David Curtis: Thank you for that. You brought up really good points.

Quickly, I think the first nations' initiative of having a moratorium for one life cycle, currently, of chinook is a really important part of taking action. That is something I believe is well overdue, and I look forward to seeing how that impacts what we see and how that will impact the run over the coming seven years.

I also think there's definitely work to be done about raising awareness of this part of the world and of the salmon and the role they play both culturally and in regard to food security within the whole length of the Yukon River.

I very much agree that more work needs to be done, as well, in controlling overfishing and looking at environmental conditions within our oceans. As was mentioned before, in 2020, when the collapse of the chum fishery happened, the official reported bycatch from NOAA of chum salmon just in the pollock fishery alone was 560,000 fish. That's bycatch, which is fish that are mulched, essentially, and thrown overboard. They don't return to the environments in which they originated. We don't know exactly where those fish originated from. They could be from all sorts of different places.

To go back to the notion of fish hatcheries and the impacts of other hatchery fish coming out, it's estimated there's somewhere in the area of 5 billion pink and chum hatchery fish released throughout the north Pacific every year between Russia, Canada, the U.S., Japan and South Korea. I don't know if that number is exact, but those types of impacts definitely need to be studied, understood better and controlled. High seas fisheries, ghost ships, factory vessels out there fishing with massive trawlers, it's incredible technology.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Curtis. We've gone over time here.

We'll now go to Mr. Green for six minutes or less, please.

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Again, it's indeed an honour and privilege to be back at this committee. I'll have to admit off the top that I'm here sitting in for my colleague Lisa Marie Barron from the west coast. I am a Great Lakes guy out of Hamilton.

I want to pick up on the questions by the previous speaker, particularly on the moratorium. This question is for Chief Pitka. Since your appearance at this committee in February, the U.S. has signed the seven-year moratorium on the Yukon chinook, and it has been called monumental and a huge step forward.

However, there have also been some concerns that perhaps it's too little too late—and you voiced concerns about consultation, so I want to give you an opportunity to reflect on that. You had suggested that it was just thrown at you.

How could the consultations have been done better?

● (1615)

Chief Rhonda Pitka: The consultations could have started earlier in the process. I think the agreement was also thrown at the Yukon River Panel, so it wasn't just the indigenous tribes in Alaska. We felt like we were very much left out of that particular decision-making, and you are correct that we also feel like it's too little too late. Since we've had five years of no fishing on the Yukon River, none of the runs have come back. There are other factors at play here, and we wanted to explore those more.

Mr. Matthew Green: I want to give you the opportunity now to reflect on that process, if you could, and how you were essentially left out. What would you have said if you were consulted?

Chief Rhonda Pitka: I would have said that I want stronger protections on the cultural fishing of salmon for potlatch and ceremonial purposes. I also would have said that we've had five years of no fishing with very little success in bringing that run back.

Through my work on the Yukon River Panel, we've learned through the years that the years when we've had those really large runs return to the spawning grounds were also years that we've had a full subsistence fishery. Based on those factors, it just doesn't seem like it's going to be a very effective tool. At this point, we've had over 15 years or so of restrictions on net size so that we can have those larger salmon escape. We've had all of these different conservation methods every single year. None of them have made as much of an impact as we would like.

I've heard this run referred to as a way of having more salmon on the spawning grounds because it's like putting money in the bank, but these are natural ecological systems that are very complex. It's not a very good analogy, but I understand how people who don't have backgrounds in fisheries can try to simplify those terms in ways they can understand. I get it, but at the same time, it's simplifying a very complex system in a way that doesn't quite relate to reality.

I would have also said that the only reason there is the amount of knowledge that we have on that particular run and the accuracy of that knowledge is because of those indigenous fishermen in the state of Alaska who have fished that river their whole lives, who have voluntarily given indigenous knowledge to the State of Alaska to manage those runs.

Mr. Matthew Green: Have you in that panel had the ability to provide submissions?

Forgive me, I'm subbing in at this committee.

Have you provided either this committee in past iterations or through the American counterpart committee, direct recommendations on what you'd like to see out of this?

Chief Rhonda Pitka: Yes. The panel process is a bilateral process with the United States and Canada. The United States has their own particular agenda and how they wish to run that.

I'm sorry, by the "United States", I really mean the State of Alaska.

Mr. Matthew Green: Sure.

For the benefit of this committee, could I ask that you forward those recommendations for consideration by the committee at the report writing stage?

Chief Rhonda Pitka: Okay.

Mr. Matthew Green: I just want to make sure that it's clear and on the record, because I think I heard you say this, but I would love it if you just explicitly stated whether or not you think this agreement will support the recovery of the Yukon chinook.

Chief Rhonda Pitka: I think that there are a lot of good things in that particular report, but some of the things feel like too little, too late. I don't think that stopping the subsistence fishery, if there's a harvestable surplus, is going to bring back that run to what it used to be without any further limits on the bycatch of salmon in the ocean or stopping the trawlers.

Mr. Matthew Green: My colleague referenced in her notes for me that you had an exchange with her, and I believe that what you'd stated is that it was less than 1% of statewide harvesting.

Is that correct?

● (1620)

Chief Rhonda Pitka: Yes, that is correct.

I forgot to mention my source to her at our last committee meeting. That was actually from the State of Alaska website on subsistence. Of the total take 1% is subsistence-related.

Mr. Matthew Green: I'll likely come back to this same line of questioning of you, Chief, at my next round.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

We'll now go to Mr. Perkins for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Rick Perkins (South Shore—St. Margarets, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I say, MP Green, that was pretty good for a guy from Lake Ontario.

I have a fellow Lake Ontario Conservative...Lake Erie. Sorry, I shouldn't mix up the lakes. We have a Lake Erie member here in Mr. Epp.

I'd like to start perhaps with Dr. Westley.

I believe I heard in your opening that you said that we need to focus on science that will make a difference.

I might draw two things. One is that we haven't done science that makes a difference with regard to the Yukon salmon. Two, what would that exactly be that's not being done now?

Mr. Peter Westley: Thank you for that.

We have done a lot of really good science and we have learned a lot about the ecology, the biology, diseases and migration. We have learned a lot and we have done a lot of good science.

My point is, science that helps inform decision-making around things that are actionable is what is needed. We know there are a lot of hatchery fish being put into the ocean. That's a fact. We need science that can better understand, if we change the number of hatchery fish that are put into the ocean, what is the effect that would likely have on the growth of chinook and the survival of chinook? It would help inform the decisions of how many less fish or what fish should be released into the ocean.

That's a complex question, but science can help inform, essentially, the trade-offs: If we do this, what are we likely to get from that decision?

Science that helps inform trade-offs and decision-making is what I mean by actionable science. That is really important science.

To David Curtis's point, science that is really good for helping understand salmon ecology and biology, while fascinating and important, may not provide the levers for us to pull to make a difference, if that makes sense, sir.

Mr. Rick Perkins: This is just a little more precision, but I think it's there. I think I have it, between what Mr. Curtis said and what you're saying.

We've heard this from other testimony. The amount of farmed, hatchery—whatever you want to call it—or commercially bred pink and chum that is being thrown into the ocean, particularly by other countries, is shocking and I don't think we have control over that.

There's only so much food for salmon, so if you overpopulate one it's obviously going to have an environmental impact on the others.

Is that some of the science that you say we don't have?

Mr. Peter Westley: Thank you for that.

As the facts have changed, our minds need to change. Our opinions need to change as the weight of evidence changes.

When I was studying fisheries 20 years ago, the ocean was really still taught as a black box—that we don't know what goes on in the ocean. There was not evidence at the time that the ocean was limited in terms of the amount of food. It stands to reason that there are always limits in nature, but we did not really have the evidence to say that the ocean has a capacity and that we are close to it.

Now the evidence is that we are at that limit and sometimes past it. The capacity is changing.

Yes, you are right. The hatchery fish from other countries are a huge part of this complex issue, but let us not kid ourselves that 60 million or so Bristol Bay sockeye salmon that are all wild are also sharing that ocean. There are a lot of wild fish that are part of this, but we have more direct control on the hatchery.

This is not to villainize hatcheries. It's the fact that we have control over that and we can use science to inform those decisions on how we should be reforming what we do with hatcheries.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Testimony here from earlier witnesses was that over the last number of years, there's actually been little to no DFO C and P enforcement on the river, no matter what the rules were.

Is that something that you, as somebody who spent a lot of time studying this river in this situation, have seen, as well?

Mr. Curtis.

● (1625)

Mr. David Curtis: Commercial fishers on the Canadian side and first nations fishers have complied very well with DFO management regulations and efforts at conservation, especially since I've been involved in the fishery from the early 2000s. Prior to that, I can't really speak with any authority on it.

The fishers on this side of the border have worked hand in hand and followed conservation efforts that have been brought to us by DFO and by managers.

There hasn't been a lot of—

Mr. Rick Perkins: I get that. I just wanted to make sure about DFO, not—

The Chair: The time is up. We've gone over.

We'll now go to Mr. Hardie for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to start off with Chief Pitka.

The moratorium is for five years with no fishing on the Yukon River. Is that correct?

Chief Rhonda Pitka: No, it's seven years if we don't make escapement of 71,000 on the Yukon River.

Mr. Ken Hardie: For seven years there's no fishing on the river.

When we spoke about this at one of our previous sessions, I believe it was Chief Frost who provided the answer. We asked the question, what about at the mouth of the river? What about out in the ocean before the fish reach the river?

The term she used was “abundance”. It suggests that we could do an awful lot to control fishing up and down the Yukon, but if the fish are being intercepted before they make it to the river, then we have a big problem.

Professor Westley, would that be your take as well?

Mr. Peter Westley: It stands to reason that, if fish are being caught before they get to the river, they're not going to make it farther upstream and to the spawning ground, so absolutely. I mean, the real point is that, in these times when there's real scarcity, populations are struggling to have enough spawners such that they are able to produce enough offspring to replace themselves. It is true that, functionally, every fish matters.

It is also similarly true that every fish that is caught in bycatch or intercepted might not make it back to the river itself, so there are some truisms in all of the parts here. That's why there is accounting for where the fish would have been going using genetics, taking into account that, if it were a young fish, that fish might not have been maturing this year or even next year to do the accounting of how many would have made it back. There are complications on the end, but all I know—and I think people would agree here—is that in these times of real crisis, every fish that didn't make it back to the river is a real loss, and we need to get really serious about trying to ensure that every fish makes it.

Mr. Ken Hardie: In testimony for various studies over the years—and some of us have been on this committee for a few years—we've skated over the issue of the Alaska fishery and the process by which Alaska fishers intercept a lot of fish headed to British Columbia, Washington state and perhaps even Oregon. With the evidence that interception is potentially one of the difficulties salmon are facing on the Yukon River, what can you say about the State of Alaska's management of the ocean fishery?

Mr. Peter Westley: I guess what I would say is that all fisheries at some level are mixed-stock fisheries, so even within the river, you get different populations that are mixed up heading upriver. In the ocean, it gets bigger, harder and messier.

I'm someone who has trained in fisheries and understands, and I'm a lifelong Alaskan, so I try to find and take pride in the successes that Alaska has had in fisheries. My biggest concerns for Alaska and fisheries in Alaskan management are about the large-scale marine fisheries that are inherently mixed stocks of other areas, other places in Alaska and other countries. Those are the fisheries that I have the most concern about, and I think those are the ones that are causing Alaska big issues, and I think they need to be put under the microscope more. I don't know what else to say.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Thank you for that.

Mr. Curtis, based on your observations, etc., have we basically fished the big fish to extinction and all we're left now is the genetics to produce smaller fish?

● (1630)

Mr. David Curtis: I would say, with current data and the current situation, yes. I am hopeful, though, that, with the seven-year moratorium, we might see some returns of some of these larger fish.

There was a study in 2008 at Rampart Rapids, when there was a closure of the fishery at the mouth and of commercial fishing along the river. The size of salmon escaping up that area was proven to be considerably larger, with more females. These are numbers that are readily available through the study that was done. I think it's an example of possibly where we need to go with the moratorium and to do low-to-no-harm monitoring of what happens over these seven years to see about those impacts.

I stay focused on that because that is really where my experience lies, on this river in this region on this side of the border, and so I'm hopeful, but yes, it's not looking good.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

We'll now go to Madame Desbiens for two and a half minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Curtis, you talked about overfishing and factory vessels. We see them returning to Quebec right now under the principle of historic shares in the redfish fishery.

This is of great concern to us, because it was the factory vessels that deteriorated the biomass 30 years ago. Now they're up and running again, fishing for bycatch. We're even wondering whether their owners aren't more interested in bycatch than in redfish itself.

In a context where many species are at risk, including chinook salmon, are factory vessels still part of the modern way of fishing? Do we need to rethink the way we fish our resource in general?

[*English*]

Mr. David Curtis: Absolutely, I think so and, as I've mentioned, on the river but also on the ocean. New technologies and new fishing techniques both provide for the ability to better target species for mixed fisheries and prevent bycatch, but at the same time that also increases the efficiency of the catch, so that has long-term impacts.

We're also facing fisheries on the high seas. These fish know no boundaries. As has been mentioned, they're mixed stocks. There are fish heading into open water, high seas, where we have no controls. There are many fisheries that are happening out there, which we have no data from and have no control over as well. I think, for the high seas—and there's been some commentary about this, both scientific and legal—that there needs to be some consideration given for international agreements to better manage fisheries and/or eliminate fisheries in the high seas and to keep fisheries within exclusive economic zones so that each country can properly manage these impacts you're talking about.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Desbiens.

We now go back to Mr. Green again for two and a half minutes or less, please.

Mr. Matthew Green: Chief Pitka, can you please explain to the committee, going back to the limited harvesting opportunities for educational and ceremonial purposes, how you think the Alaska Department of Fish and Game should be engaging with you on this issue?

Chief Rhonda Pitka: As of right now, I asked for an application to fill out for a culture camp we're having this summer to teach children and students in our area survival skills and camp skills. I haven't had a response yet, but they told me it sparked a huge discussion—I'm not necessarily sure what that means. We were looking for a camp permit to take five or 10 fish. I'm not sure what they thought about it, but I still don't have the permit. That's where my current [*Inaudible—Editor*] in having the State of Alaska able to affect the potlatch take for ceremonial use of salmon.

● (1635)

Mr. Matthew Green: I defer to the fact that we may have some different agreements, both by treaty and by law, through Canada to the States, but I think that your input's important.

You mentioned timelines and the timeliness of approvals and exemptions. I'm wondering if you've given thought to how these exemptions to the suspension of the fishing can be developed and applied. Are there other recommendations we should be considering at this committee that might be helpful for, say, the Yukon first nations and others?

Chief Rhonda Pitka: Yes. I think one thing that Canada can do is make sure that those particular uses are protected on both sides of the border and that the language is stronger, because right now it says it's at the discretion of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the State of Alaska. Obviously....

Mr. Matthew Green: That's very helpful.

To go back to the subsistence harvesting, can you just talk about some of the externalities? I understand that part of the blame was put there, but I just want to give you the opportunity to close out with some thoughts on that.

The Chair: Give a short answer, please.

Chief Rhonda Pitka: The responsibility of conservation has been put on the back of the upper Yukon River for so long, and we just feel blamed consistently by the Canadian side and the State of Alaska managers for the decline in the fisheries when it wasn't necessarily our fault. We are not taking billions of pounds of biomass out of the ocean.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you so much for your time here, and congratulations again on your graduation.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Green.

We now go to Mr. Arnold, for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I go back to you, Mr. Westley, on some of your comments regarding other forms of mortality, and that there are more hazards in the marine environment and so on. You also talked about having control over hatchery releases. Can you elaborate a little further on the hatchery releases? Are those releases in-river releases or is the Alaska state hatching fish and then releasing them, actually, into the ocean or into estuaries? Can you inform the committee a little on that, please?

Mr. Peter Westley: The Alaska perspective when it comes to hatcheries is that the large hatchery programs in Alaska are of two species, pink salmon and chum salmon, and primarily in two regions of Alaska. This is in south central Alaska in Prince William Sound and then southeast Alaska. Pink salmon are produced in Prince William Sound and chum salmon are produced in southeast Alaska.

Between those two species, over two billion juvenile fish are not released in rivers. They are released in the nearshore areas close to rivers, but they're actually purposely released away from major wild-stock rivers. They're designed to be separate from those wild stocks. There are no large-scale hatchery releases into the Bering Sea from Alaska that would be interacting with Yukon River chinook.

The hatchery fish that Yukon River chinook would be interacting with primarily would be Asian chum salmon from Hokkaido. The data are really, really poor from Russia. It's really not clear what Russia is producing, but it would be hatchery fish from places like Sakhalin Island in Russia, and then lots of wild production, wild chum salmon and wild pink salmon, from places like Kamchatka. Those are competing with Yukon chinook.

Simply put, the Alaska releases of hatchery fish interacting with Yukon River chinook I think is less of a concern, but hatchery fish in general in the Bering Sea in the north Pacific is an issue.

● (1640)

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

Can that be determined by sampling of the returning fish to the river? If those fish are out there for the same period of time they used to be and they're coming back smaller, I can see that there would be a correlation drawn there. Has that science been done to see if the fish just aren't growing to size in the same amount of time, or if they're being harvested, or if there's other mortality before they're reaching that large size? Which would it be? Has the science been done?

Mr. Peter Westley: Let me speak to this very concisely. I've been involved in a collaborative project looking at the size of Alaska salmon of all the species we had information on from across all the state—over 12 million individual records of size of salmon—and all salmon across the species that we have information on have declined in size. Chinook salmon in particular have gotten smaller. All the salmon have gotten smaller, especially after about the year 2010. That year was a real changing point for sizes. Things were kind of going up and down, but there was a precipitous decline in size.

The answer to your question is that it is not that fish are just maturing younger. The older fish are being lost and are not surviving. As fish grow, they potentially could just be growing faster, or maybe there's more food, and they could mature younger. But that is not what is happening. There's been a change in age structure that is likely tied to a change in genetics.

The ocean seems like it is increasingly dangerous. Fish that are programmed to spend a lot of time in the ocean are not surviving. We are losing those genes.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

You talked about other forms of mortality. Just briefly, because I think I have only about 30 seconds left, what other types of mortality would you suspect may be having a significant impact that we could pull a lever on and make a difference?

Mr. Peter Westley: On the U.S. side of things, the Marine Mammal Protection Act has been incredibly successful. There are now way more nearshore marine mammals, such as seals and some other things, that used to be harvested by local people. That's not happening nearly as much anymore. There are way more seals than there likely have been in the ocean for thousands of years now because of the Marine Mammal Protection Act and because indigenous people have been displaced, erased off the landscape, and aren't harvesting marine mammals as much as they used to. That is something we have some control over.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you for that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arnold.

We'll go to Mr. Hanley for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Thank you very much.

I want to maybe clarify some of the discrepancies, perhaps, that we've been hearing on ocean bycatch. I'm reflecting on when Steve Gotch from DFO talked to us. He was referring specifically to chinook bycatch, but he said the State of Alaska has very careful monitoring. Basically, it amounts to a few hundred fish a year that are documented bycatch, and yet we're hearing, really from all three of you and from different angles, that this is a serious and overlooked issue. Maybe it's related to the species, or maybe they're not monitoring everything.

I wonder if each of you can clarify what you see or what you perceive about the relative importance of ocean bycatch. Again, I want to be thinking about and focusing on solutions in how we engage on this.

Maybe I'll let you begin on this, Professor Westley.

Mr. Peter Westley: Thank you. Actually, I wanted to speak towards this earlier. This is a very important question.

This is my opinion based on everything I know around this issue. When we talk about ocean bycatch, we are almost always talking about the pollock fishery and bycatch in the pollock fishery in the Bering Sea, and that there is very.... I trust the data. I do. I absolutely trust the data. They are monitoring. There are people observing the catch on those boats. I think we have a very good handle on how many of those fish are being caught. Those boats are targeting walleye pollock, Alaska pollock. It's a massive fishery. They're not targeting the bycatch. The fishing industry does not want to be catching salmon, I assure you. They've been doing a lot to avoid salmon.

That being said, the scale of the fishery is so large that you inevitably still catch some salmon despite all the technology. We can do better and we can move in time and space, and those things should be looked at, but inevitably there are some fish that are intercepted and bycaught. I just wanted to clarify that.

I do think it is really important. I also, on the record, do not think that the pollock bycatch is the cause of the decline of salmon in the Yukon. It's not, but it's certainly not helping. One of my bigger concerns—and I can send this paper, where we looked at essentially emulating a fishery of sorts that was selective on size, like the pollock bycatch fishery is—is that you can also be favouring the maturing of younger fish. You lose the old fish that spend lots of time in the ocean because of the extra mortality that comes from bycatch. There are things that are pushing all these fish to be smaller and younger, which we know has consequences. The ocean is increasingly dangerous, and the pollock bycatch is one of those dangers.

● (1645)

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Thank you.

David, would you like to add to that?

Mr. David Curtis: I can concur with what I've read, which is that the management of bycatch, especially around chinook, has been a very important part. What I want to bring up is that it may not be the same for chum salmon, which are experiencing a decline—a dramatic catastrophic decline—in the Yukon River as well, although the evidence may not be there that these are chum from the Yukon River.

I agree with Dr. Westley. There's a big emphasis put on this. I don't think it's the primary cause in terms of bycatch. It is wasteful and is an unfortunate part of industrial fishing.... Well, not "unfortunate": It's a terrible part of industrial fishing, to be honest. If it can be reduced, I'm all for that, and I think the various agencies in Alaska have been doing some really good work, solid work, to try to address that.

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Chief Pitka, maybe you would like to speak to this as well.

Chief Rhonda Pitka: Yes, just briefly.

I agree with most of what Peter Westley said, but also, I think, one of the problems with bycatch is that they take out the food the salmon eat also, along with everything else in the ocean, and then they degrade the whole ocean, the bottom of the ocean. They take so much out, and they're very non-specific. Even if they don't specifically take out Yukon River chinook salmon, they take out the food that the Yukon River chinook salmon depend on.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hanley.

We'll now go to Mr. Perkins for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Mel Arnold: I'll take the first two minutes, and then I'm going to share with Mr. Perkins.

The Chair: You go right ahead.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

For all three witnesses here today—and I hope we can be nonpartisan here to our home nations at this point—the Yukon River salmon are going to require policy and regulatory change across international borders—this international border and possibly others.

Do you feel that the U.S. and Canada have been collaborating effectively between themselves and with other nations that are potentially affecting Yukon salmon? Have they been negotiating or collaborating effectively? Or is it the lack of this that has put us in the state of a seven-year moratorium?

Chief Pitka, would you like to go first?

Chief Rhonda Pitka: Yes, I think the nations themselves could do a lot more work in collaborating on this issue, especially with those other nations that I believe Mr. Westley and Mr. Curtis mentioned. We need more information on the Russian hatcheries and the Asian hatcheries, and I think collaborating on their fisheries would benefit not only us but them.

Thank you.

Mr. David Curtis: I agree with Chief Pitka. I would also add that I think there is work to be done to continue the good efforts and good work that have been established with the dialogue between Alaska and Canada, and the fisheries, the people and the stakeholders. I think the panel has done some really valuable work. The treaty itself might need to be revisited in relation to new evidence and new science as they become available.

The dialogue is quite strong. We're neighbours and we get along very well. I think everybody's concerned about the same thing here.

● (1650)

Mr. Peter Westley: I guess, ultimately, I'm encouraged that the processes.... I think about the joint technical committees and the Yukon panel. The processes are there and in place. I'm encouraged by that.

I am disappointed by the most recent development. I think a well-intentioned, full-lifetime moratorium makes some sense biologically, but the process by which that was done has actually hurt some of those relationships. There's room to rebuild some of that trust. The state, the U.S. federal government, the tribal governments and Canada all need to equally be at the table, and I don't think that equality and equity have been shown yet.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Okay. Thank you very much.

I'll turn my time over to Mr. Perkins now.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses. This has been really fascinating and important study, but I would like to move a motion that I put on notice. Hopefully, we can deal with it quickly.

We all know that we recently had an emergency crisis to deal with. There was the closure of the crab and the lobster fishery in the gulf related to a right whale sighting and a dynamic closure, imposed by DFO initially, that broke the past policy and moved the dynamic closure into less than 10 fathoms of water.

I am happy that it was resolved, but I would like to move the motion I put on notice because I don't think we can afford to have this mistake happen again.

I move:

> That, in relation to Minister Diane Lebouthillier's decision to backtrack on a lobster and crab fishing ban in waters of less than ten fathoms in LFA 23C, the committee agrees to conduct a two-meeting study to review the minister's decision, and agrees to invite: (a) stakeholders from the Maritime Fishermen's Union; (b) Minister Diane Lebouthillier, Minister of Fisheries, Oceans, and Canadian Coast Guard, and Annette Gibbons, Deputy Minister of the Department of Fisheries and Ocean; and, that the witnesses be asked to appear before the committee for two hours each, and that such appearances take place before the committee's study on derelict vessels, but begin no later than June 6, 2024.

That would be two meetings.

The Chair: Mr. Cormier, you have your hand up.

Mr. Serge Cormier (Acadie—Bathurst, Lib.): Thank you.

I apologize to the witnesses, who will have to go through this again. Mr. Perkins could have waited to the end of the meeting to do this.

For the fishers and those listening at home, I want to be perfectly clear: This member, and all of the other Conservative members—even the leader—never said a word about this issue in the last couple of weeks. There was not a word about this stressful, terrible issue that we had to go through.

That being said, Mr. Chair, we want to get to the bottom of this issue. We want to know what happened during this crisis that we had to live through for one week. This was a terrible mess created by DFO officials, which our fishermen in my riding had to live through, and we want to get to the bottom of this.

Again, though, there was not a word from this member, from the Conservative Party or from the leader about this issue for the last week. Maybe they just want to get their little clip now and feel like they are the hero of the day.

Mr. Chair, again, we want to get to the bottom of this, and we will have some amendments to propose to this motion.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

We'll now go to Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to correct Mr. Cormier's statement that not a word was said, because a press release was issued by the Conservative shadow minister on this issue.

I would like to make a small amendment to the end of Mr. Perkins' motion that the findings of the committee be reported to the House.

● (1655)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kelloway.

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): I would like to move a motion to amend if I can read that in.

The Chair: We will deal with Mr. Arnold's amendment first.

Mr. Mel Arnold: The amendment was just that at the end of the motion—where it says "June 6, 2024"—it be added that the findings of the committee be reported to the House.

The Chair: Do we need to go to an individual vote, or is it unanimous consent for this?

Are members all good with it?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Your amendment to the motion is carried.

Mr. Kelloway.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: I would like to move an amendment to the motion. I will read through just what we're looking to replace, and then I will do the usual and read out the amended motion very quickly. I will make sure this is circulated around.

I move to amend the motion by replacing “Minister Diane Lebouthillier” with the "Department of Fisheries and Oceans” and replace “minister's” with “department's". I would also add "other stakeholders as required"; strike “Minister Diane Lebouthillier, Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard”; add “Adam Burns, Assistant Deputy Minister of Fisheries and Harbour Management”; and strike “and that such appearances take place before the committee's study on derelict vessels, but begins no later than June 6, 2024.”

The amended motion would read:

> That in relation to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans decision to backtrack on a lobster and crab fishing ban in waters less than 10 fathoms in LFA 23C, that the committee agrees to conduct a two-meeting study to review the department's decision and agrees to invite:
>
> (a) stakeholders from the Maritime Fishermen's Union; and
>
> (b) Annette Gibbons, Deputy Minister of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans; and Adam Burns, Assistant Deputy Minister of Fisheries and Harbour Management, and that the witnesses be asked to appear before the committee for two hours each.

We have a copy of this that can be circulated around.

Mr. Rick Perkins: I appreciate the Liberals' attempt to shield the minister from the decision made by her and her department, after which she had to go down and put toothpaste back in the tube and reverse her own decision. I think she is accountable for the department, the last time I checked the Parliament.

Obviously, you're trying to delay the urgency of this, because this is the period of time where right whales are present up and down and past Nova Scotia—by Mr. Kelloway's riding—and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence as well. We could have another sighting any moment now, and the minister could make the same mistake.

I won't be supporting the amendment for the obvious reasons that I just stated. One, it shields the minister; and two, it doesn't have any urgency attached to it and the need to get this done. I think we need to get this done ASAP before we have another major mistake by this Liberal government in this regard.

The Chair: Mr. Morrison, you're pointing at the screen.

Mr. Cormier.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Mr. Chair, maybe just to correct my colleagues again, the minister already committed next week to have the protocol measure for a right whale review. On top of that, all of the industries in my region blamed DFO officials for the mess that we had last week. I just want to put that on the record.

Again, we want to get to the bottom of this, Mr. Chair. I do not agree with Mr. Perkins what he just said about the whales being here. Yes, they are here, but we already committed to review the measure.

On top of that, Mr. Chair, if you remember, this committee put a report together regarding protection measures for the right whale. This is what I want to know from DFO officials: did the DFO officials not retain one single recommendation from our report? There were some good measures and recommendations in it, and I think the DFO officials need to respond about what happened the past week here in my riding regarding the situation that we have with the whale.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

We'll now go to Madame Desbiens.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: I'd also like to correct a few things.

The Leader of the Bloc Québécois asked the Prime Minister two questions directly on this subject. He did so very quickly, when the situation heated up on the New Brunswick side. We're very concerned, on the Quebec side as well, because this is obviously a problem that can happen regularly in Quebec, the Magdalen Islands and the Gaspé Peninsula. In this regard, I'd like to remind the committee that we held a fisheries round table in December 2022 and offered up a number of proposals on a silver platter to the minister and the department in 2022.

In light of what we were told by the scientist Lyne Morissette, who was completing a study on the cohabitation between fishers and the right whale at the time, I would also like to hear the department's explanations. However, I don't think the minister's absence can be constructive. I think she also needs to be here, if only to hear what her department officials have to say.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1700)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also am opposed to Mr. Kelloway's motion.

We have asked the previous ministers—multiple times, I believe—about who is ultimately responsible for that department, and the final decision comes down to the minister. Therefore, it was ultimately her decision that caused the chaos and havoc from this closure.

We need to hear from the minister. When she was considering this decision, was she aware of the unanimous report by this committee from our study on the protection of right whales, and if not, why was she not aware? Those are questions that only the minister can answer. Her staff cannot answer those questions for her, so we need to have the minister.

Thank you.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madame Desbiens said some of the things I was about to say, but I'll just add two more. One is just a reminder that while this incident was in MP Cormier's riding, the response affects all of our ridings, depending on where the next sighting is. The mistake could happen anywhere. It's not about the incident itself in that particular riding, but about the process that led to it.

I'll just remind Mr. Cormier, as a correction to his claim that it was DFO—unless the CBC is wrong, and far be it from me to criticize the CBC.... I'm going to quote from the CBC article here. In it, Mr. Cormier says, “I can no longer defend my government on this issue.” The last time I checked, “my government”, when it's said in the personal, is your government, the one that you're a member of. It doesn't say, “DFO”. It says, “my government”. Therefore, you laid the blame squarely on the minister's table, and that's why she needs to be here.

The Chair: Mr. Hardie.

Mr. Ken Hardie: We have to separate the politics from the practical issue here. More and more, what I hear is a growing lack of confidence in the decision-making process at the DFO. The minister normally has to take the lead because she's not out on the water; she's not in direct receipt of the data coming up. Of course, she's accountable, ultimately, but I rather liked Madame Desbiens' suggestion that she should be here in the room, but the big bright light should be down on the DFO for the input they gave her that led her to the decision that she ultimately had to retract.

I would go directly to Madame Desbiens' recommendation and support that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

I apologize to Mr. Morrissey. He had his hand up before I went to Mr. Cormier, but when I went to go to Mr. Morrissey, he pointed at the screen, so I went to Mr. Cormier. I thought he was giving his time to Mr. Cormier.

We'll go back to Mr. Morrissey.

Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Cormier had his hand up first.

However, I agree with my colleague Mr. Hardie and conversed with Mr. Cormier extensively when the situation was developing.

As Madame Desbiens clearly articulated, yes, ministerial accountability is there, but I am increasingly frustrated with the decision-making process that comes from within senior management of the department.

That's where I want to spend the time. I agree with the two meetings that I believe the motion calls for with the senior officials who prepared the advice that was given to the minister.

The minister can defend herself very well in the House and in committee. I have no doubt about that at all. She is quite combative and is quite prepared to challenge her own departmental staff.

On this, Mr. Chair, I, for one, want to spend the time focused on the key officials who were responsible for providing the direction to the minister and how that information came about, where they received it and why it was not fundamentally but totally flawed, from what I understand.

As Mr. Arnold pointed out, this committee did a very thoughtful and thorough study on the situation of whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the other region, because it's going to be with us. It's increasing and it's actually moving. What region they will feed in will change as quickly as climate change affects the temperature of the gulf as well as the feeding patterns in the gulf.

Everything I heard I do not disagree with. Mr. Perkins as well articulated that it can happen anywhere. What is the next sighting going to be? Beyond this one in Mr. Cormier's area, there was also a closure, I believe, in the Bay of Fundy. Then, magically, that whale, from what I understand, disappeared, and then it was reversed.

The process has to be clear. When the committee studied this, there was a wide variance between the Canadian protocol on closing versus the American one. I want to ask the officials why we are sticking with the protocol that we have to shut down an area. We cannot have a protocol that—and I'm going to use a word that is maybe a bit strong—frivolously closes a fishery that involves well over 200 fishers, their families and their lives, as well as the plant workers who are supported.

I very much look forward to the committee calling the witnesses it identifies as being responsible for the information process that led to the decision. Ultimately, we're correct. The minister makes a decision. In this case, she very prudently, when given different information, had no problem making a decision very quickly. That's on the record. I do not have to re-examine that, Mr. Chair, but I very much, as a member of this committee and as a member of Parliament from Atlantic Canada, want to hold accountable the senior management of that department that was responsible for the information for maintaining a protocol for well over a year that didn't change after the committee did a thorough study and provided very thoughtful recommendations to the ministry on this and on why I don't believe any of it was adopted by the departmental officials.

● (1705)

Again, the committee will choose by majority decision, but I prefer to focus my time, when we do get to this, on questioning at length the officials who provided the information that allowed the department to have a year lapse by since last year's incidents. It still has not adjusted anything as it relates to closure protocols based on the work this committee did and based on the information that's used by the United States.

Everybody, including fishers.... I was very impressed to watch a newscast where a fisher was interviewed and expressed at length their desire to ensure the protection of the North Atlantic right whale. They were supportive of fisheries that coexist...between the industry and protecting the whale.

I know that the point behind reaching out and bringing the minister in is always to get clips here with the minister. However, on this one, I think if we're concerned about the industry and about the communities that are impacted, this committee will focus on the people who are engaged and who accepted the positions within the ministry to make the decisions on ensuring that the information that gets to the minister of the day is 100% accurate because these decisions have a tremendous impact and affect quite a few people.

Therefore, Mr. Chair, I will not support the motion as it was presented. I do support the amendment, which allows the committee to quickly get to examining the process within the department that allowed the decision to be made.

● (1710)

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): Mr. Chair, can I call a point of order?

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: With all due respect to my colleague, I'm just wondering, Mr. Chair, if we should be considering the time and whether we should let our witnesses leave the meeting. It seems like this is going to be continuing for quite a while. I'm unsure whether we will be able to get back to the witnesses.

To the chair, I'm asking that we release the witnesses, so that they do not have to participate against their will in this debate.

Thank you.

The Chair: To Mr. Westley, Mr. Curtis and, of course, Chief Pitka, thank you for your appearance here before committee, albeit on Zoom, and for sharing your knowledge on this important topic, as we were discussing.

I'll let you sign off now instead of listening—

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Hanley.

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Just before the witnesses go, since this is the last full study on this issue and since every meeting has been interrupted by debate and out-of-scope issues, could I just ask that if the witnesses have any further thoughts, could they please submit them in briefs to the committee so that it can inform our conclusions and recommendations?

Thank you.

The Chair: What I will do is offer up to the witnesses that if there's anything they've left unsaid, they can certainly send it in to the clerk and we'll include it in our study of the Yukon salmon.

Other than that, I'll go to Mr Perkins.

Mr. Rick Perkins: I'll just be quick because I don't want to be filibustering this out, as it appears is happening.

I'll just say that what I'm hearing from the Liberals is that the minister is not accountable for the department and that the department makes closures of fishing areas without her authority. I find it unbelievable that the entire 2,000-kilometre area would have been closed without the minister's approving that.

That's why she has to be here to account for those actions. She can throw her department under the bus if she likes, but I'd like to see that happen in committee. I'd like her to be accountable for why she isn't involved in those decisions.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think going into this we need to have eyes wide open as to what the process looks like, because I think one would assume that an important issue like this would need the sign-off by the minister before something like a closure would take place.

However, I'm informed that that's not the case, that the DFO has the pen, if you want to use an old insurance term, to go in and mandate a closure. It's only after the fact, in this case, that the minister, when she became aware of the situation and the dynamics, stepped in and reversed that decision.

We might want to have that discussion about the degree of sign-off that the minister should have in a situation like this, and whether she should be given the option before a decision is implemented to say yes or no. However, it appears that in this case she did not necessarily have that positioning on that decision. We can have that discussion.

Again, it takes me back to the reason why I rather liked Madame Desbiens' suggestion that the officials should be here with barbecue sauce behind their ears to hear exactly what we think about their process, their decision-making process, but the minister should be here to listen to the questioning that we have of those officials. We've had this incident, but we've had other incidents where decisions are made and we say, where the heck did that come from? Then they're reeled back in by a minister who just ultimately sees that that decision by the department is not—

● (1715)

Mr. Rick Perkins: I have a point of order.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Excuse me, let me finish, please. The issue here is....

The Chair: We've got a point of order and we're running out of time, too.

So what do colleagues want done this evening? We've got to condense it.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Why don't we call the vote? We can have speeches when the minister's here.

The Chair: I've recognized everyone, I think , who put up their hand, and I recognized Mr. Hardie, and I've got Mr. Morrissey on the list again.

An hon. member: So, have a second go-around.

The Chair: A lot of people have had a second go-around.

Mr. Ken Hardie: There are two things that I think have to be be examined very closely, and I don't disagree with Mr. Perkins.

First is the performance of the department, their decision-making, how they came up with the decision they made, as well as the relative positioning of the minister and the influence she should have on important decisions like this. It seems there are disconnects there. If there are disconnects, then having the departmental officials and the minister in the room would give us an opportunity to really straighten this whole thing out.

I'll leave it at that.

The Chair: Mr. Morrissey, you had your hand up.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Chair.

Just for clarification, it is not a second go-around, Mr. Chair. I was speaking, and I was interrupted by a point of order by Ms. Barron, which you correctly recognized, but I had the floor. Thank you, Mr. Chair. No, it's not a second go-around.

I'd be the last one on this committee to be the least bit concerned or try to defend the current minister's ministerial authority. She will do that very well and very eloquently on her own. I have a good sense of her perspective on the situation, and she would probably articulate it here in very few minutes, as her action showed when conflicting information was given to her by the fishers in the community. The fishers in that community challenged the DFO information that was given. I complimented them because they did it in a very peaceful, documented way. They called into dispute the water depth that was being used by the department in the advice that it gave to the minister.

Mr. Chair, I want to spend the time that this committee will have by examining how the department, how the senior people who were responsible for the decision, made such an error. As I understand it—and possibly Mr. Cormier could correct me if I'm wrong—there were multiple maps being used, which led to such a discrepancy in the water depth and the decision that was made.

On that, nobody on this side is putting forward any concept or notion that takes away from ministerial accountability. Again, I would reiterate that there were probably ministers in the past whom I may have accepted that for, but this particular minister, in her actions since she's been the minister, does not shy away from ministerial accountability. In fact, her actions, Mr. Chair, demonstrated that she is prepared to be accountable, and she made the decision when she was presented with information by fishers from the community that contradicted her own department's people.

That's why my position is that I want to spend the time that I have as a committee member questioning the officials and ensuring that we have the officials before this committee who should be held accountable to explain to this committee, with the full powers that this committee has, how the information was collected that was presented to the minister. Based on that information, the minister made the only decision she could have at the time.

Again, it has nothing to do with ministerial accountability—well, it has everything to do with ministerial accountability. It rests there, but it is the officials within this ministry with whom I want to spend the time that we have in getting some assurance or getting an understanding of how that decision was made, how the information was collected and how it was confirmed within the ministry before it went to the minister.

Mr. Chair, that's what I want to see this committee spend its time on. That's why I can only support the amendment to the motion that will allow us to get to that and to get answers that the fishing industry wants and deserves, Mr. Chair.

● (1720)

The Chair: Mr. Cormier, go ahead please.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Mr. Chair, thank you very much.

The press release that was sent by the shadow minister.... This is probably why we call it “shadow” because he was invisible in the party. The Conservative Party was invisible for a week. This was sent, according to the Conservative website, a week ago on the 23rd—after everything was solved.

Trying to take credit for something that was already dealt with is a little bit funny.

[*Translation*]

Once again, I'd like to thank Mrs. Desbiens for also denouncing what happened in my region.

Thank you for that, Mrs. Desbiens. You also know very well that, when there was the capelin problem in your region, it was initially a decision by officials not to allow this fishery; it was subsequently reviewed.

What happened last week in my region is, once again, unacceptable. Fishers in my area tried to get the attention of Department of Fisheries and Oceans officials in Ottawa, with a lot of evidence they had gathered from various sources. They were never listened to by officials when they told them the depth and location of the whale.

Again, Mr. Chair, that location was established by aerial surveillance flights and then posted on whales.org, where the movement of whales can be tracked. That evidence was given to departmental officials and, I repeat, they never wanted to look at it.

Fishers in my region have done everything they can to be as responsible as possible and not to hinder the protection of whales. They've done everything in their power to prevent collisions in the region.

The officers and officials in the region, whether from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans or other agencies, did a very good job of explaining the situation we were in to officials in Ottawa. Once again, the officials did not listen to them. That's why the officials in Ottawa responsible for this file must appear before the committee to answer for what happened.

Three different marine maps were used to find the water depth. I find this totally unacceptable. In Canada, we have very stringent whale protection measures, even more stringent and better than those in the United States. We had a situation that could have been very damaging to our markets, and yet we continue to use three different marine maps. People don't even know which map to use. Once again, I find this unacceptable.

We need to get to the bottom of things, then. We also need to shed light on what happened during all those weeks for the various fishing associations, especially those of the lobster fishers, but also those of the crab fishers, who have been experiencing this situation since 2017. They have to move their traps every day and every week. It's a very stressful situation for the industry, and it needs to be fixed.

Fishers in my region have shown resilience in recent years. As you know, they now fish with ropeless traps. Our measures to protect whales are being pushed to the extreme. We need to find a way to make them more flexible. We're very advanced in modernizing our fishing equipment. For example, our lobster fishers have new, more vertical ropes, which, again, provide better protection for the whales.

The protective measures we have in place are so stringent that they could have shut down an industry for two weeks. That could still happen tomorrow or next week. These measures must be changed as quickly as possible, without fear of losing our markets in the United States. It can be done in co-operation with the industry. What's currently lacking is co-operation with the industry, and a willingness on the part of Ottawa officials to listen to the industry. That's what we don't have.

I hope we can get to the bottom of this. The minister has already committed to reviewing the measures with the industry very quickly. That's what we're going to work on: making changes to the practices. That's what this committee—and I'd like to thank all my colleagues around the table—is trying to do, and it has produced a very thorough report with some excellent recommendations. However, none of these recommendations were considered by departmental officials, and I want to know why.

Just yesterday, there was an announcement about new equipment, including drones, that could track whales. Why then did departmental officials not even want to put forward these solutions or tools? For our part, we've been proposing such tools, including markers on whales, for two years now. Experts have come to tell us that this was possible.

Mr. Chair, I want to get to the bottom of things. I want departmental officials to appear before the committee, to answer our questions about this situation, which could have been catastrophic for our region.

I've heard officials say that since the lobster industry is a $4-billion industry, losing only $25 million to $30 million during a 15-day shutdown can't be that bad for a region. I find that totally unacceptable, and that's why I want clear, precise answers from these officials in Ottawa.

We've been asking for these measures to be relaxed for three years now.

● (1725)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

That concludes the speaking list. I didn't see any more hands up.

An hon. member: It's time to vote.

The Chair: We need to have two votes. We have four and a half minutes to get two votes done.

We'll do Mr. Kelloway's amendment first.

Mr. Morrissey.

● (1730)

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Can we suspend for a moment?

Mr. Rick Perkins: No. We have only five minutes left, and he called the vote.

An hon. member: The vote's been called.

The Chair: You're voting on the amendment proposed by Mr. Kelloway first. That brings us back to the motion.

Mr. Serge Cormier: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I don't think....

An hon. member: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Cormier, you were saying something.

Mr. Serge Cormier: On a point of order, I don't think you called a vote. I said we are going to deal the motion first—

Mr. Rick Perkins: Are you challenging the chair? He already called the vote.

Mr. Damien Kurek (Battle River—Crowfoot, CPC): On a point of order, Chair, these points of order are not relevant to the fact that a vote has been called on the amendment.

The Chair: I actually said we were voting on the amendment made by Mr. Kelloway first.

(Amendment negatived: nays 6; yeas 5)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mrs. Desbiens, you have the floor.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: I'd also like to move an amendment to the motion moved by our Conservative colleagues.

Among the witnesses to be invited, I would like us to add the representatives of Quebec's lobster and crab fishing associations.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. We have another amendment by Madame Desbiens to amend the motion by adding the Quebec lobster fishers.

Mr. Hardie.

No. It's Mr. Kelloway.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Mr. Hardie is a good-looking man, so that was a great thing.

I was going to propose an amendment.

The Chair: I don't know who got insulted that time or who got the confidence to go, but—

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Trust me— I'm not going to say.

I think where MP Desbiens put forward an amendment, I have an amendment as well, so I guess we'll go through hers first and then mine?

The Chair: Yes.

We've all heard the amendment by Madame Desbiens.

I'll ask the clerk to call the vote.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 11 nays 0 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Mr. Morrissey, go ahead.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: I believe our time may be out, and I would move that we adjourn.

The Chair: We're at 5:35 right now, so we'll have to leave the vote on the motion as amended to the next meeting.

With everybody's permission, the meeting is adjourned.