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Chair: Mr. Ken McDonald



Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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• (1630)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 121 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 want to make a few comments for the benefit of witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking.

For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

Please address all comments through the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), and the motion adopted on Monday, September 16, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of the impact the reopening of the cod fishery on Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec.

Welcome to our witnesses.

On Zoom, from FFAW-Unifor, we have Dwan Street, inshore member representative of area 3Ps and president-elect, and Dr. Erin Carruthers, senior fisheries scientist; and from the Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia, Dr. George Rose, honorary professor. Of course, in the room we have the Honourable Gerry Byrne, Minister of Fisheries, Forestry and Agriculture for the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Thank you for taking the time to appear. You will each have five minutes or less for opening statements.

I believe the FFAW will deliver two sets of opening remarks, one from Ms. Street and one from Ms. Carruthers.

Ms. Street, you can go first, if you're ready, for five minutes or less.

Ms. Dwan Street (Inshore Member Representative of Area 3Ps and President-Elect, Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union): Mr. Chair, honourable members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to address you today regarding the northern cod commercial fishery. I'm here today representing over 13,000 commercial fish harvesters and processing plant workers.

I thank the committee for highlighting the urgent nature of the northern cod decision and the fact that the June decision made by current Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Diane LeBouthillier threatens the continued rebuilding of our historic cod stock, as well as the continued economic sustainability of coastal Newfoundland and Labrador.

For over 500 years, northern cod has been the lifeblood of our coastal communities. Our union is deeply invested in the sustainable management and future viability of this critical resource. Since the moratorium in 1992, our members have worked tirelessly as stewards of this stock. Through collaborative science initiatives, a commitment to sustainable fishing practices and participation in the stewardship fishery, we have seen the spawning stock biomass grow from less than 10,000 tonnes to nearly 400,000 tonnes today. That's a remarkable, 40-fold increase. This growth has allowed the stock to move from the critical to the cautious zone in 2024.

While this is certainly positive news, we must not repeat the mistakes of the past. The decision to reopen the commercial fishery with a 6% allocation to offshore dragnets is deeply concerning. It threatens to undermine decades of rebuilding efforts.

Let me be clear: FFAW-Unifor vehemently opposes any offshore trawling activity on this stock. Targeting dense pre-spawning and spawning aggregations during winter months poses an unacceptable risk to continued recovery. Our position on access and allocation, of course, remains unchanged. We stand firm in our conviction that the first 115,000 metric tons of northern cod must be exclusively allocated to the inshore sector and indigenous groups of our province. This is not merely our position but a long-standing commitment of the federal government, as evidenced in the briefing note provided to your honourable members.

This commitment dates to the late 1970s. It's been consistently upheld by successive governments. It recognizes the critical importance of the northern cod fishery to our coastal communities and the inshore fleet's reliance on this adjacent resource. The commitment also recognizes the crisis that resulted from the moratorium, the voices of inshore harvesters who were ignored in the years leading to the collapse and the hundreds of communities in our province that were left irreparably devastated by the consequences.

The inshore sector has demonstrated tremendous capacity to harvest northern cod. In 2023, our members landed 70% of the 12,999-tonne maximum allowable harvest in just four weeks. This was achieved while adhering to stringent conservation measures and weekly landing limits. From 2023 to 2024, the total allowable catch for northern cod increased by 6,000 tonnes, yet our inshore members received just 2,000 tonnes of this increase. These are the same harvesters who have acted as stewards of this resource for the last 32 years. Seeing the status of northern cod move from the critical to the cautious zone is a result of their hard work and dedication, but seeing a return to the dragger fishery is a slap in the face to our inshore harvesters and our plant workers and a symbol of great disconnect between the sitting government and the people of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Introducing new offshore capacity is unnecessary and harmful to the economic sustainability of our owner-operator fleet and to the land-based processing workers. This season, we harvested 75% of the inshore allocation in four weeks. Our harvesters have the capacity to land a significant volume of high-quality fish, providing frozen product year-round without targeting these vulnerable spawning aggregations.

We urge this committee to recognize the economic importance of this fishery. Owner-operator harvesters are genuinely stewards of the resource. They take the long-term sustainability of this fishery very seriously, having lived through the moratorium. They've invested heavily in sustainable gear and quality handling techniques and have participated in a fisheries improvement project that recently received an "A" rating from international NGOs.

As we look to the future, we call on government to take several critical actions.

First, immediately revert the management plan for 2J3KL northern cod to a stewardship fishery model and rescind the access of domestic and international offshore dragger fleets.

Second, uphold the 115,000 metric ton commitment for exclusive priority allocation to Newfoundland and Labrador inshore harvesters and indigenous groups until such time as the stock has sufficiently rebuilt.

Third, formalize a system of harvester participation and input into all aspects of fisheries management for northern cod.

• (1635)

In closing, I want to emphasize that the decisions made regarding northern cod and its management will have far-reaching implications for coastal Newfoundland and Labrador. Our communities, which have existed for centuries because of this fishery, are counting on responsible, sustainable management of this resource. The future of northern cod is inextricably linked to the future of our coastal communities.

We urge the committee to recommend management measures that recognize this reality and support the long-term sustainability of both the resource and the people who depend on it.

Also, Minister Lebovich's parallel decision to allocate the majority of the redfish unit 1 fishery to the corporate dragger fleet has left our community-based, Gulf of St. Lawrence inshore fleet

struggling to survive. To add insult to injury, current management rules mean they cannot even access the small bit of quota they do have.

We therefore urge DFO to adjust the minimum fishing depth to align with the current location of the redfish stocks. This will allow our harvesters to access this very time-sensitive fishery.

We learned hard lessons from the 1992 collapse of northern cod. Now is the time to apply these lessons, prioritize the adjacent inshore fleet and ensure that the benefits of stock recovery flow to those who most depend on the resource. We cannot repeat the mistakes of the past. We cannot let the voices of fish harvesters be ignored all over again.

I thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you. That was a bit over.

We'll try to make that up now with Dr. Carruthers.

You have five minutes or less.

Dr. Erin Carruthers (Senior Fisheries Scientist, Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union): Thank you for taking the time to hear from the Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union on this important issue.

As the fishery scientist with the FFAW, I will focus my remarks on lessons learned and lessons forgotten from the collapse of the northern cod fishery in the 1980s and 1990s, and we'll also comment on our concerns with how the federal government chose to end the cod moratorium.

What I'm going to do here is step through some of the research around the northern cod collapse and why it matters.

It's been over 30 years since the collapse of the northern cod fishery, yet the timing and explanations for the collapse remain contentious. When the northern cod assessment model was developed, it included extremely high natural mortality between 1992 and 1994, and subsequent variations of the northern cod assessment model, including the one used in the 2024 assessment, all attribute the collapse to an unknown natural mortality event.

Now, for those folks who are not at stock assessment meetings on the regular...at its most basic, a stock assessment model tracks recruitment, growth and death in a fish stock. There are only two ways to kill a fish in an assessment model. It's either attributed to fishing as fishing mortality, or it's everything else, which is that grab bag of a natural mortality. That includes unaccounted-for fishing mortality and discarding, as well as everything else. In the official DFO stock assessment version of an event, something unknown knocked out millions of fish in the early 1990s. The loss of capelin can explain some of that collapse, but not much.

However, the DFO stock assessment is not the only peer-reviewed and published account of the stock collapse. Academic research from the mid-1990s onwards showed sequential decline in fishery catch rates of inshore gillnet fisheries in the early 1980s, midshore and offshore gillnet fisheries in the late 1980s, and then from the Canadian trawler fleet in the late 1980s as well. Research papers from the mid-1990s showed that offshore catch rates declined first in the north and that these Canadian draggers were fishing on pre-spawning and spawning aggregations.

Multiple research papers on the collapse of northern cod showed that northern cod became increasingly concentrated, shifted south and were distributed deeper throughout the 1980s and 1990s. These changes contribute to, number one, increased vulnerabilities, particularly to offshore dragger fleets, and number two, to over-estimation of stock health.

The term “hyperstability” was coined by Dr. George Rose and Dave Kulka, and it was used to describe how fishing fleets can maintain high catch rates, even during stock collapse. This happened with northern cod. That particular paper has been cited over 400 times, and I say that metric to indicate that these issues are well known within the fishery science community.

More than 30 years later, there's still no agreement on how, why, when and importantly where northern cod collapsed. However, one of the lessons that we could have and should have learned was that changes in fish distribution matter.

Northern cod is a stock complex. This means that codfish are not evenly distributed throughout Newfoundland and Labrador waters. There are multiple distinct spawning areas, and most fish annually migrate between particular offshore spawning areas and inshore spawning areas. Updated information and research on these questions, on these linkages, is fundamental for rebuilding a sustainable fishery.

One of the reasons I object to the reopening of the trawler fishery is that there has been no recent work on cod distribution, recovery and vulnerability during the winter and pre-spawning and spawning periods. The most recent acoustic survey of spawning aggregations occurred in 2015. Which pre-spawning and spawning aggregations are recovering and which are not? We don't know.

I expect that recovery is not evenly distributed across historic spawning areas, and I expect that, in part, because the recovery of the fishery is uneven in the inshore, with much-improved catch rates from the inshore sentinel survey in the north in 2J and northern 3K, but no increase at all in southern 3L.

Historically, these different inshore fishing grounds were linked to particular offshore spawning areas. Is the recovery that we're seeing now reliant on one or two spawning areas? None of these questions was reviewed at stock assessments prior to the minister's decision.

Why did the minister reopen the northern cod fishery to Canadian and international bottom trawl fleets without doing due diligence and assessing stock distribution and vulnerability during the winter and spawning period? Due diligence and a lesson learned would have meant research and review of up-to-date acoustic tagging data and linkages between feeding and spawning areas. It would have

meant identification, documentation and, importantly, conservation of spawning aggregations.

• (1640)

The motion also included—

The Chair: I'm going to have to cut you off there, Dr. Caruthers. We've gone over time, and I want to give other people a chance to speak and get to questions.

We'll now go to Dr. Rose for five minutes or less.

Dr. George Rose (Honorary Professor, Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia, As an Individual): There are several aspects to the decision of the minister to reopen a commercial fishery in the northern cod stock with an increased quota and new entrants. I'm going to deal only with the scientific information on the stock and advance my opinion that the decision does not provide for precautionary management in sustainable fisheries and opposes the spirit, if not the letter, of the stock provisions of the Fisheries Act.

To go back a bit, the door was reopened for a commercial fishery in the fall of 2023, when DFO science conducted a new analysis of the productivity of the stock. This resulted in a revised stock recruitment relationship and a lowering of the critical limit reference point—the LRP, as I'll refer to it. They based this on age-0 recruitment, which is very unusual in fisheries science and hasn't really been tested. This LRP, then, is the dividing line between a stock being in critical condition, with its ability to sustain itself seriously impaired, and a cautious zone, where the stock is still below or, in the case of the northern cod, well below its historical abundance and productivity. It is also below any target biomass or upper limit where productivity is not considered to be impaired. That's still undefined by science for the northern cod.

It's very important to emphasize that, despite being moved into the cautious zone, the stock itself did not grow into the cautious zone. At least some of the press I read inferred this, but it's simply that the bar to jump over the line into the cautious zone was lowered.

It's also important to emphasize that the lowering of the LRP was substantial. It was considered that the stock needed at least a million tonnes of spawning biomass to remain productive, as it has historically. As recently as 2023, the LRP was considered by DFO's and other scientific analyses, including some done by me and my colleagues, to exceed 800,000 tonnes. The new LRP reduces it to somewhat above 300,000 tonnes.

This rewrites science history, which is a very important aspect. The lowering of the LRP suggests that the stock has been in the cautious zone since 2016, with production—meaning reproductive success recruitment—not seriously impaired. The evidence to date, however, indicates that recruitment has been well below historical averages for all of the seven or eight years since then. This provides very little evidence that the LRP is justified.

It's reasonable to think that if productivity were not seriously impaired, as it's supposed to be now, at least one or two years of historically average recruitment would have occurred in the past seven or eight years. However, it has not. While I applaud DFO science for its investigation and research, I will remain skeptical about this new lowered and unverified LRP until there's evidence that the stock can be as productive for fisheries, not age-0s, with such a low spawning biomass. I think it is too soon to use it to determine management. This is my opinion.

What about the stock itself? Since 2016, when, according to the LRP, the stock was out of the critical zone, the impacts of a lack of strong recruitment, fishing removals and unspecified natural mortality—which Dr. Carruthers referred to—have all led the stock to have zero net productivity, with a negative or flatlined biomass in some years, and with no improvement in sight according to the latest stock assessment. My assumption when approaching this is that a management objective is stock growth. It's axiomatic that stock growth requires positive net productivity. As it stands, the current stock assessment indicates that the stock is in a very weak position for growth, even with no fishing. Projections suggest further decline.

• (1645)

It seems clear that the assumed management objective has not been met on stock growth. To be fair, stock growth is dependent on several factors in the environment that are now not favourable, especially the lack of capelin, the main food of the northern cod. Management does control fishing removals, though, and up until this year and this recent decision it has done an admirable job of keeping those removals low enough so as not to result in stock decline, even when environmental conditions were poor.

Maybe that's the best we can do right now, but we're not doing our best. The current decision to increase the quota considerably, by nearly 50%, and to impose two new entrants in the offshore increases the likelihood of stock decline, even to the extent of collapsing the spawning biomass back below the new LRP. From the DFO latest assessment, the probability of doing this is worryingly high, at 42% with no fishery and 52% with a doubled harvest. According to the fish stocks provisions in the Fisheries Act—

The Chair: Dr. Rose, I have to cut you off there. You've gone over by more than a minute, and I want to get to the last speaker before we run out of time.

Dr. George Rose: All right.

The Chair: We'll now go to Minister Byrne for five minutes or less, please.

• (1650)

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Minister, Fisheries, Forestry and Agriculture, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador): Thank you, Mr. Chair and distinguished members.

I would like to acknowledge, with appreciation, my co-panellists appearing today as witnesses.

It is a sincere pleasure for me to return to this table. This time, however, it will be at the other end of the committee room. As some of you may know, I had the privilege of serving on the House

of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans for several years, and I believe we did important work back then, as you continue to do now.

I have been witness to every aspect of the rise and fall of our northern cod resource as well as the pain and suffering surrounding its slow and difficult rebuilding.

In 1994, as a much younger man, I was asked to serve as the special adviser to the then-minister of fisheries and oceans. This was just after the two-year moratorium had been already declared by then-minister John Crosbie in 1992.

In 1994, the two-year moratorium became a moratorium of indefinite duration.

In 1996, I was honoured to be asked to serve in public life as the member of Parliament for Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte. I served in the House for just shy of 20 years, including in the cabinet of Mr. Chrétien.

In 2015, for some of the very reasons we sit together today at this table, I took a decision to seek office in the provincial legislature, where I currently serve as Minister of Fisheries.

Prior to my parliamentary career, I worked briefly in marine ecosystem research in northern Newfoundland, having trained at Dalhousie University.

My perspectives on the past and ongoing failures of northern cod management are both professional and personal. In these difficult times, the one thing I believe we, the people of Newfoundland and Labrador, need to be able to rely on is that this committee will serve the interests of a better fishery and a better future for those who have been waiting in hope for its return. Now is not the time for partisan loyalties or entrenchments.

In my time here, if there was one committee on Parliament Hill that rightfully cultivated the reputation of being beyond politics and in service to our coastal communities, it is, indeed, this committee. I can't ever remember any member of this committee looking to join so they could be a shill for their party, nor can I remember dissenting minority reports being the norm, as it is with other committees. This committee always came together to speak truth to power. Keep hold of that.

With that said, it was disturbing to have learned through internal DFO documents that the 32-year moratorium was somehow over by virtue of a switch of a single word and in defiance of scientific advice. The legal and political consequences of relying on a single word—commercial over sentinel—to generate a false hope are offensive. Talking points don't change 32 years of loss, the anxiety of cultural separation or the economic and social upheaval that this brings forth. It doesn't change the past, but, unfortunately, that single word, as we have discovered, does have a material effect on our future.

For anybody to think that the decisions around the 2024 harvest plan, or CHP, for northern cod would result in street parades or songs and poems being written in celebration of the weight of the past 32 years being somehow lifted exposes the fact that the magnitude of this decision was never understood by DFO. It wasn't understood in 1992 and clearly still isn't understood to this day. There was no political win deserving to anyone here.

The only political win that can ever be created is from a fishery that has been honestly rebuilt on a foundation of sustainability, with windows and doors to allow transparency and a protective roof made up of informed decision-making, with fishermen and scientists working together towards an informed joint decision-making process. This is the kind of house we need to build to have a future. This was, and is, too much for Newfoundland and Labrador to ask, apparently.

I don't know exactly what to say to that, but over the next 90 minutes, if you were to ask me what I knew about the long-standing Government of Canada allocation policy of the first 115,000 metric tons of harvestable quota, I would tell you.

If you were to ask me what has been the long-standing position of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador on the inshore-offshore allocation split, I would tell you.

• (1655)

If you were to ask me what I think of the supposed necessity of Canada's having no choice but to recognize the fishery as being commercial, with all of its legal implications within NAFO, I would tell you why this was untrue and defeatist.

If you ask me what I feel about the risks of foreign distant-water fishing fleets, foreign bottoms, entering the fishery under the current NAFO convention and its system of voluntary rule, I will tell you what I think there.

If you ask me if there are other Atlantic fisheries that demonstrate just or even more clearly how far off track DFO is from understanding the past and learning from it to make better conservation decisions in the future, I will point directly to what is happening today with redfish in unit 1, Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Most importantly, if you ask me how all of this was able to occur in such a vacuum here in Ottawa, with no one offering honest, pragmatic advice to the emperor about the clothes they think they are fashioning, I will tell you. It's time now to speak truth to power. I will explain why joint management's time has come.

Mr. Chair, I look forward to the questions to come forward.

The Chair: Thank you for that. We'll now begin our rounds of questions.

I remind members to please identify to whom you're asking the question, because we have members on Zoom and somebody in the room.

I'll go to Mr. Small first, for six minutes or less.

Mr. Clifford Small (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for showing up at this very important study.

Mr. Chair, my first question here is for Mr. Rose, who is the pre-eminent expert on northern cod biology, for sure.

Mr. Rose, you made mention of the lowering of the lower reference point back in October of last year. Do you think that was a part of what a lot of people are calling a political decision? Do you think that was a part of the political equation for reopening the commercial northern cod fishery?

Dr. George Rose: I can't really speak to that other than to hope certainly not. I think it was a result of investigative science that was perhaps pushed a little too hard into the management regime. I won't question the ethics of my scientific colleagues on that.

Mr. Clifford Small: We had officials here at this committee a couple of days ago who told us that data going back to 1954 had been pulled in to change the reference point on that cod stock. In that same meeting, these officials talked about how important the logbook data was that was coming back from fishermen in the northern cod stewardship fishery. However, an Order Paper question that I submitted last October that came back in December revealed that the logbook data from 2020, 2021 and 2022 was still on the shelf.

Does the fact that that logbook data had been sitting there for three years indicate that the data was valuable to DFO?

Thank you.

Dr. George Rose: There are several issues with the new stock assessment and the lowering of the LRP that I'm aware of. That may be one, but there are others.

I have had an opportunity now to read the stock status report, which just came out days ago, to see some of the details of how they arrived at these new calculations. I remain, as I say, skeptical about them and about how this was put together.

I think the general statement here that needs to be thought about really clearly is that this new modelling approach and the lowering of the LRP rewrites the scientific history of this stock going back 50 years. It goes back to some of the most well-known Newfoundland fishery scientists, right back to Wilfred Templeman, and their analyses and opinions and data on this stock. It rewrites most of that, as does the current assessment model.

My view of this right now is not to dismiss the new model or say that I know absolutely that it's incorrect, but I'm skeptical about such a rapid rewriting of scientific history on this stock. It seems to be unquestioned that here we are; we have a brand new world, and we're supposed to accept this. Science doesn't work that way. Science remains skeptical until there is convincing evidence that the new—

• (1700)

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Rose. My time here is limited.

Dr. George Rose: I'm sorry.

Mr. Clifford Small: My question was about bringing data from 1954 into this equation when data that was only three or four years old was sitting on the shelf and not made a part of the equation. Does that make sense to you, Mr. Rose?

Dr. George Rose: Well, no, just stated like that, it doesn't, but I don't know the details of that data, so I can't really say with any certainty.

Mr. Clifford Small: It's fish harvesters' logbook data, Mr. Rose, that shows catch rates about 50 times higher per unit per hour than they were in the eighties, at least.

You've had extensive experience at the NAFO table, I understand. Is that correct?

Dr. George Rose: No, it's not.

Mr. Clifford Small: Okay. I was misled. I'm sorry.

I know you're very aware of NAFO. In your experience with NAFO, Mr. Rose, do you think that Canada was facing pressure to change this fishery from a stewardship fishery to a commercial fishery? Do you think there was undue pressure from NAFO to do so?

Dr. George Rose: No, not that I'm aware of.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you.

What would you like to see changed—

The Chair: I'm going to have to cut you off there, Mr. Small. You have nine seconds left, so you won't get a question or an answer.

Mr. Clifford Small: I get nine and Gerry gets a minute and 20 more.

The Chair: We'll now go to Ms. Jones.

Welcome to the committee.

You have six minutes or less.

Ms. Yvonne Jones (Labrador, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's a pleasure to be here at committee today.

I want to first welcome Dr. Rose and say that it's nice to see you again, sir.

I also will congratulate Ms. Street on her recent election to the FFAW.

Minister Byrne, welcome back to committee in a different capacity.

Like most people in Newfoundland and Labrador, I've been involved in this fishery in one way, shape or form all my life. My family comes from the fishing industry of northern cod. From 1992 to 1996 I worked as an employment counsellor with fishers and plant workers who were displaced from the closure of northern cod. I eventually served in provincial politics and as the minister of fisheries in Newfoundland and Labrador.

From my perspective, I look at this for what it is. Since 2016, cod in Newfoundland and Labrador have been outside of the critical designation. Over that period of time, we've had a tremendous lobby, not from NAFO but from fishers in Newfoundland and Labrador, from the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, from the FFAW, from the offshore and from Mr. Small to reopen the cod fishery at a TAC of no less than 25,000 metric tons. What the minister did was reopen it at 18,000 metric tons, 7,000 metric tons lower than any of those people requested—

The Chair: Wait one second, Ms. Jones. We have a point of order from Mr. Small.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My point of order is regarding Ms. Jones' comment that I asked for a reopening. I asked simply for an increase in the quota. I made no reference to any reopening but simply to an increase to the quota under the stewardship framework.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Serge Cormier (Acadie—Bathurst, Lib.): That was not a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Jones.

Ms. Yvonne Jones: Thank you.

I hope it doesn't come off my time, Mr. Chair, but I have a copy of the letter by Mr. Small. It's already been tabled in committee. It does not speak to maintaining a stewardship fishery. It speaks to increasing the total allowable catch for northern cod in Newfoundland and Labrador.

There are letters that were written by fishers, by the MP and by many members of the FFAW, and from the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador there are three letters to the federal government, asking that this happen.

I'm going to go to Ms. Street first in my questioning.

Moving from a stewardship fishery to a commercial fishery in Newfoundland and Labrador allowed many of your members in the Labrador region to obtain a Labrador northern cod quota for the first time in their history. It allowed them to have access to this resource that they could not have access to under a stewardship fishery. I ask you, as the head of the union, do you support those fishers who wanted that done in Labrador and wanted that quota?

• (1705)

Ms. Dwan Street: Thank you.

We certainly support harvesters in Labrador, and I want to be clear here. When we supported—

Ms. Yvonne Jones: Thank you very much. I appreciate your response.

I'd like to now go to Minister Byrne, please.

I would like to ask you, Minister Byrne—

Ms. Dwan Street: I wasn't finished.

Ms. Yvonne Jones: I'm sorry; I'm on limited time here.

I want to go to you, Minister Byrne.

Do you support the fishers in Labrador that the inshore harvesters there should finally get access to northern cod adjacent to their communities and have access to that quota as a commercial fishery, or do you hold the position they should not?

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Mr. Chair, I'm somewhat at a loss as to the somewhat passive-aggressive nature of the question, in that naturally we are in support of inshore fishers from Labrador.

Ms. Yvonne Jones: Well, let me explain it to you for just a minute.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: I don't understand where that question would come from.

Ms. Yvonne Jones: As a stewardship fishery, the people of Labrador, for the last four years, the inshore fishers, could not access their own quota in Labrador and have a commercial-led fishery. In order for them to have their own quota, we had to move it to the next stage, a commercial fishery. We did so by increasing the TAC from 12,000 tonnes to 18,000 tonnes.

Do you agree that Labrador inshore fishermen should have access to the northern cod stock?

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Mr. Chair, the premise of the question is flawed. The designation of a commercial fishery versus a sentinel fishery is not less than any kind of—

Ms. Yvonne Jones: It was not a sentinel fishery, Mr. Chair; it was a stewardship fishery, and my question is very clear. Under the stewardship fishery, for four years they were rejected. I am asking you today: Do you agree with Labradorians' having access to fish stocks adjacent to their shores under a commercial fishery?

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I believe the premise to the question is that in order to get additional quota, there would have to be a required move to a commercial fishery from the test fishery, from the science fishery, to move to that additional quota. It automatically implied the designation of a commercial status. There is no evidence whatsoever to support that in either a fisheries term or a legal term. It is semantics, in other words.

Ms. Yvonne Jones: In fact, Mr. Chair, I want to outline for the minister that the only way that could be done was moving to a commercial fishery.

The other thing I'd like to ask you, Minister, is this: Do you support the three indigenous groups in Labrador having access to northern cod under a commercial offshore fishery adjacent to their shores, or should they have been left out again from this allocation?

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Mr. Chair, I believe a straw man argument is being set up here. This is a requirement. The notion there is that there's a legal or binding scientific element to the designation of a commercial fishery versus a science-based fishery. I am not aware of any such terminology or designation that insists on the deployment of such a term—

Ms. Yvonne Jones: Mr. Chair, the minister is not aware, so let me move on.

If the minister is not aware, I'll ask the head of the union.

Do you not support an offshore northern cod fishery in Labrador that allows access for the Innu nation, the Nunatsiavut government

and NunatuKavut? That's what you're telling us here today and that's what the minister has told us here today.

Ms. Dwan Street: Mr. Chair, we support the upholding of the first 115,000 metric tonnes going to inshore and indigenous interests. We believe, as has been proven, that those indigenous allocations can be harvested by inshore harvesters and don't necessarily require mobile gear.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jones.

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

• (1710)

Mr. Serge Cormier: Mr. Chair, on a point of order, I'm not sure if I was the only one, and maybe there are other witnesses, but I was not able to see Minister Byrne when he was talking. I'm not sure if I was the only one, but I was not able to see him on the screen when he was responding to Ms. Jones.

The Chair: Thank you for pointing that out, Mr. Cormier.

Madame Desbiens, you have six minutes or less.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Mr. Chair, seriously, we're supposed to see the witnesses when they answer questions. I was not able to see the witnesses. I think Ms. Barron was also not able to see the witnesses respond. I'm not sure if there are others, but we're not able to see the witnesses respond to questions.

The Chair: Did we see them when they gave their opening remarks?

Mr. Serge Cormier: Yes, but we don't now. We're also supposed to have access to the witnesses when they answer questions. I think Ms. Barron agrees with me on that.

The Chair: Yes, I see her head nodding up and down in an affirmative manner.

We'll take a very short pause to see if we can straighten this out.

Thank you.

• (1710)

(Pause)

• (1712)

The Chair: We're back. I'm told everything is all good.

Madame Desbiens, when you're ready, please go ahead for six minutes or less.

[Translation]

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

I'd like to thank our witnesses.

Of course, you're always highly interesting, competent and relevant to the our study.

If we have to present a little pedigree, I'll submit mine, which flows from the land, since I saw my father crying in his canoe thinking that there would probably be...

[English]

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair, and I apologize to Madame Desbiens for interrupting. It's just that the microphone wasn't on, so we weren't able to hear the beginning of what Madame Desbiens was saying.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: In that case, I'll start again.

I thank the witnesses for coming.

If we have to provide a little pedigree regarding our experience, mine is closer to the land, since I saw my father crying in his canoe. He told me one day to eat cod and enjoy it, because if we stop the seal hunt, in a few years we'll see cod disappear from the St. Lawrence and just about everywhere.

Today we are reaching a pivotal moment when a moratorium that shook the entire fisheries and fishing community many years ago will be lifted. We hear that the moratorium on northern cod will be lifted. As with redfish, large shares of the new quotas are being given to offshore vessels. In the past, we were taught that this was a very aggressive fishing method for the biomass, which had the repercussions we're familiar with today. It seems we're not learning from past experience.

Minister, I'd like to know if you make any connection, if you see any correlation between the recent redfish quotas that were given, the historic shares that have been given to offshore vessels, and the fact that we're also giving them some for the northern cod fishery. Are the dangers the same? Is this as illogical, according to what we hear in the field, in both cases?

• (1715)

[English]

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Thank you very much for this question. I think it does have immediacy and value for the study of the northern cod, because, realistically, what we face in 2024—this calendar year, this fishing season—is the opening of two very iconic groundfish fisheries: not only northern cod, which was under a moratorium since 1992, for 32 years in total, but also redfish, for which unit 1 was under a moratorium since 1995.

Last year the total allowable catch of redfish in unit 1 was 4,500 tonnes. This year it is 60,000. At its peak in the 1960s, the total allowable catch of redfish in unit 1 was not far off 60,000 tonnes. To go to that magnitude in one single year, having faced a moratorium of just about 30 years.... I am challenged to understand the sensibility of that particular position.

Notwithstanding that, realistically, what we need to do is examine this: Have we learned anything in 30 years? Has the Depart-

ment of Fisheries and Oceans learned anything in 30 years of moratoria? Well, one would say that the cause of the northern cod and redfish collapse was indeed because too many fishermen were chasing too few fish. There were too few fish and too many plants. There was too much capacity. There were irresponsible demands on the resource created by politics—everything from the resource short plant program to the advanced monetary and public investments in infrastructure.

Redfish is unique because at the time of its reopening 30 years later, very little infrastructure existed in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. There was infrastructure on the west coast of Newfoundland, where there was a viable redfish fishery that existed. There were plants. There are boats in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, inshore boats with mobile outer trawl gear, capable of fishing redfish, but what is the answer from the Government of Canada? Did they say, "We are going to control capacity. We are going to control the number of boats. We are going to control the ability to fish this. We're going to make sure the quotas are set at reasonable, incremental amounts, so that we can monitor and gauge the activity. We're going to allow our fishermen, who go fishing, a reasonably efficient and economically effective way to fish it"? None of the above were followed—none.

In this day, in the 21st century, for the Government of Canada to say, "We don't have enough plants, fishermen and boats in some locations, and we have no way to market this fish except for the few who have the ability to do this in western Newfoundland and southern Labrador, so we're going to allow more fishermen and plants into the fishery, get everybody involved and spend government money to do it," while at the same time, those who engaged in the sentinel test fisheries and science fisheries are now restricted from ever being able to reasonably catch any of that redfish.... Mr. Chair, the best cheque to ever write is the one you think will never get cashed, and that's what the Government of Canada has done.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Desbiens. There are only seven seconds left. You're not going to get a question in, let alone an answer.

We now go to Ms. Barron for six minutes or less, please.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses. I wish I were there in person with you. This is an exciting day for me. To be lighthearted for a moment, this is the first time I've been surrounded by this many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians outside of Newfoundland and Labrador since my last family reunion, so it is exciting for me to be amongst all of you.

I say it at every single meeting, because how can I not? I want to reiterate how important this is. We know that this isn't just about fishers and their livelihoods, and marine ecosystems and protecting stocks, but also about the coastal communities that rely on the industry. My family moved from St. John's, Newfoundland to the west coast as a result of the cod moratorium, so I know first-hand the real implications for families, even if they are not fishers.

First and foremost, I offer the opportunity, through the chair, to you, Ms. Street, to both finish your opening comments and to more fully answer the question that Ms. Jones asked you.

• (1720)

Ms. Dwan Street: Thank you. I had been trying to say that, yes, we absolutely support indigenous groups having allocations and having access to the stock, as I said when I finished, but we don't necessarily feel that mobile bottom trawlers are necessary to get that fish out of the water. Many of our members in Labrador are indigenous, of course, and they fish northern cod and certainly do not support bottom trawling.

I think the issue here is the Liberal government's failure to uphold its promise on the first 115,000 metric tons of northern cod being allocated to our members in the inshore and to indigenous groups, so yes, obviously, we do support indigenous groups having access.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Ms. Street.

Did you want to finish any of your opening statement, or do you feel that has come out already in the answers you've provided?

Ms. Dwan Street: I was one of the only ones lucky enough to finish my opening remarks, but thank you so much for the opportunity.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: That's right; it was Dr. Carruthers who didn't finish.

Ms. Street, in your opening statement, you said:

Owner-operator harvesters are genuinely stewards of the resource. They take the long-term sustainability of this fishery very seriously, having lived through the moratorium. They've invested heavily in sustainable gear and quality handling techniques and have participated in a fisheries improvement project that recently received an "A" rating from international NGOs.

Can you expand on that a little and tell us a bit more about those comments that you made?

Ms. Dwan Street: Sure.

Out of the moratorium, here at FFAW we have a harvester-led science program. I'm sure Dr. Carruthers can speak to that in more detail. It's a sentinel fishery and it's harvester-led. It's been providing data input into stock assessment since the moratorium. That program has been very, very important to harvesters.

As we moved forward and the stock did move into a much healthier zone, even though it was still in the critical zone, we did see the TAC increase. We realized that the markets we had in the 1980s and 1990s weren't necessarily there right now. At FFAW we worked with a number of processors to ensure that handling on vessels was producing the highest-quality cod we could. We developed a set of protocols and ran a program for, I think, five years whereby harvesters in all areas harvested their fish, had a separate allocation and utilized these protocols to ensure that their fish was top quality.

We've been doing everything we can in that regard. We actually started the fisheries improvement project in 2016, I believe. Again, Dr. Carruthers can correct me on that. I was lead on that project for quite some time in my days in the science program here at FFAW. We did a lot of work. Again, there's the quality program, the handling, the working with plants on MSC certification and what it

would take for our fish to be MSC-certified and be able to take advantage of those markets once we did have a TAC that was sufficient to land fish year-round.

Of course, in the 2000s, when we did have a very limited TAC coming in, the fishery was pretty much over in a few weeks. What we've been able to do, in instituting a series of weekly limits and management measures, is spread that fish out. We usually open late July or early August and run into a fall fishery, which right now is just about to close. We've been able to spread that out for the market.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Great. Thank you, Ms. Street.

I have only about a minute left, Dr. Carruthers, but I want to ask you if you have any final comments that you want to make. I know that you were the one who got cut off.

As well, in your opening statement you talked about the dense pre-spawning and spawning aggregations during winter months and the activity of large offshore draggers. I'm wondering if you could elaborate a bit on the implications of that.

• (1725)

Dr. Erin Carruthers: During the winter period and when they're in pre-spawning and spawning aggregations, fish are aggregated really tightly together. One of the heartbreaking things about this re-opening of the fishery is that if you go through the papers of fisheries science from the 1990s and 2000s, you can actually see the fish stock collapse. You can see that in the 1980s there are distributions along the shelf edge, and then sequentially, each year, the number of aggregations drops out until it links out to nothing. Multiple papers published in the 1990s and early 2000s show this sequential collapse, so it's quite shocking that we aren't considering the spatial distribution, because it is evidence. Some truly excellent fisheries science came out of the cod collapse.

There's another thing I want to comment on with the time I have. Our fisheries improvement project is a comprehensive improvement project, and we've been improving the data that's coming in from the recreational fishery, which is a problem. We have these great line cutters, which means that people can responsibly release leatherbacks and other bycatch to the best possible post-release survival. We have removed tons of old gear that was left on the wharves in southern Labrador as part of our fisheries improvement project.

It's a comprehensive project. It's not simply what the status of the stock is. It's all the components that will be needed to make a sustainable fishery.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Ms. Carruthers.

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

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

I want to start off with Mr. Byrne.

Minister, the current fisheries minister was shuffled into her position because the previous minister had a penchant for not listening to Canadian harvesters. The current minister told Canadians—and I was there when she told harvesters—that she would be different and she would listen more.

Minister, when the federal fisheries minister met with the provincial ministries of the Council of Fisheries and Aquaculture Ministers this past August, were you and other provincial fisheries ministers heard by the minister? Did she listen to you?

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

We had a difficult meeting, for sure. It is a matter of public record that no communiqué resulted from the 2024 Canadian Council of Fisheries and Aquaculture Ministers because there was no consensus on the results of the meeting.

It was very difficult because the federal minister attempted to unilaterally set the agenda and would not accept discussion points arising from her federal and provincial counterparts. I said this quite openly and publicly, joined by the majority of other ministers who were at the meeting as well.

Allow me to say that this is not necessarily unique to this minister or to a previous minister. This has been a structural impediment of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and its ministers for a very long time.

The ability to dialogue and collaborate is an absolutely essential component to fisheries management. Those who have big stakes and big investments in the game here—I'm not just talking about financial; I'm talking community, cultural, social, economic, financial and historic—often feel as though the department is very unilateral in its approach.

We've had institutions within the management of fisheries resources that allowed greater dialogue and feedback. I'll give one example, which was the fisheries resource conservation council. Coming out of the 1992 moratorium on cod and groundfish stocks—

Mr. Mel Arnold: I'll ask you to be brief if you could, Minister. I have more questions.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: The decision to remove and eliminate the fisheries conservation council in 2007 was yet another example of an administration that was simply not listening and not interested in dialogue.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Minister, if your premier makes an announcement, are you as the minister expected to uphold that announcement?

Hon. Gerry Byrne: I would think that within the context of the Westminster parliamentary democracy and the cabinet process, that would be a reasonably minded expectation of the ministers, in cabinet solidarity.

• (1730)

Mr. Mel Arnold: If you had to go contrary to that announcement by your premier, would you be expected to explain that to your constituents?

Hon. Gerry Byrne: I have the advantage of having a very progressive premier. If I took a position that was different from his, I am blessed by the fact that, through the presentation of fact, logic and evidence, my premier would be prepared to change his mind if there was cause to change his mind.

I really appreciate the fact I have a very progressive premier.

Mr. Mel Arnold: What do you believe was the reason the federal fisheries minister made an announcement contradictory to what her Prime Minister had publicly stated in his 2015 promise?

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Mr. Chair, if the members of the committee approve, what I'd like to do is answer that question by removing the politics from it and just using the facts and the evidence. I sat not in this room, but in the committee room back in 2008, when then-associate deputy minister David Bevan said this to the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans:

That policy was put in place as we made significant decisions, for example, on 2J3KL cod. The first 115,000 tonnes go to the inshore and the remainder would be shared between the inshore and the offshore.

I'm demonstrating this because it has been a government policy.

The second thing I will note for the committee is that it is not unreasonable for someone to come to the conclusion that the Government of Canada's long-standing policy has been that inshore-offshore split. I'll cite the allocation policy for northern cod that the current Government of Canada articulated as recently as June 2021, in the 2021 2J3KL northern cod stewardship fishery management approach by DFO. The report reads:

The 2021 Management approach also includes a decision to allocate the first 115,000 t of Northern cod to the inshore sector and Indigenous groups. When a total allowable catch (TAC) for Northern (2J3KL) cod is established, the first 115,000 t of directed Canadian access will be allocated to the inshore sector and Indigenous groups in Newfoundland and Labrador. At a TAC level less than or equal to 115,000 t—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Byrne.

Thank you, Mr. Arnold.

We've gone way over the time. I have to get to Ms. Thompson for five minutes or less, please.

Ms. Joanne Thompson (St. John's East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am so pleased to be able to join this committee today. For me, it's particularly special. My grandfather was a schooner captain in the days of wooden dories going over the side on the Grand Banks, and I have family who are still involved in the fishery.

It's a very important conversation. I will say to you what I say consistently, which is that conservation must be at the forefront of our decisions. I think we have an opportunity this year to be able to build on the science that we know was missing from the Harper days, when there were significant cuts, as well as due to the challenges through the COVID years.

I'm also really pleased to note that we are on target with our marine conservation areas. That's very helpful when we open the 6% allocation to the offshore.

What I'm struggling with today is the inconsistencies in so much of what I'm hearing.

Mr. Small, to you, the letter of May 9 to the minister, which I know has been tabled—I won't read it out again—asked for a larger allocation than was decided on in the end. There's a link to the focus on the economy. Also, in a follow-up note, which I thought was very unscientific, you wrote, "I look forward to hearing from you soon. Otherwise, be prepared for blitz in question period and all media." I find that a bit political and partisan.

Within the provincial government, there are the letters that, again, were tabled from 2021, 2023, 2024 and, of course, today on allocations, different fisheries ministers and different perspectives. When we speak to joint management, what does that look like when we've seen such inconsistencies over the last number of years?

Mr. Byrne, this question is for you. On the day the northern cod moratorium was reopened, Premier Furey tweeted, "Our province has waited a long time for the end of the Northern Cod moratorium. A sustainable harvest that provides maximum benefits for all Newfoundlanders and Labradorians is most important. The return of the Northern Cod fishery will support local jobs and boost our economy."

I should note that the tweet remains on his Twitter feed to this day. A copy will be tabled with the clerk so that it can be used in the report writing process.

Mr. Byrne, the premier celebrated the news with this tweet because the minister did more or less exactly what the province asked for in 2021 and 2023. Can you tell me—your stance has been different—why this tweet is still up to this day?

• (1735)

Hon. Gerry Byrne: I don't think anyone should be in the business of cancelling history or revising what has been said, but I think we should all be in the business of putting a context to information and not attempting to weaponize it.

In 2021, the Government of Canada made a clear, unequivocal statement that the first 115,000 metric tons would indeed be going exclusively to the inshore. In 2022, the Government of Canada said the 2021 plan would be a rollover of the previous plan. The events that established the 115,000-metric-ton threshold have a 25-year-old history—

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Excuse me, Minister Byrne. I'm truly sorry to interrupt, but I have limited time.

The challenge is that the letters from the former fishery ministers contradict what you're saying. In terms of management, we have different opinions within a very short period of time. What I'm trying to understand is where the consistency is when we talk about being able to co-manage or being able to understand from a provincial-federal perspective how you want to move forward with the fishery.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: The honourable member is wrong. The context is taken inappropriately. The interpretation is taken inappropriately. We all have a celebration when, because of hard work, discipline and stalwart adherence to science, a quota could come up when we do the necessary stewardship. That is a celebration worth having.

However, we also recognize that there is a principle amongst all around the table, from the FFAW to the Government of Canada to the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, whereby if we respect and understand the 115,000 metric ton principle, we acknowledge that there is a future role for the offshore. We all have to say that and say it out loud. There will be a future role for the offshore. Here is the point that is often missed, though. Since NAFO became involved, we are now forced to be in a defensive position, and this was the mistake of allowing NAFO to be able to be engaged in this fishery.

Mr. Chair, I'd really appreciate, if I'm going to be asked a question, the opportunity to be able to answer it.

Here is where a mistake was made. When NAFO became involved, we automatically were put in a defensive position, because, if we did not take every pound of fish that was allocated to Canada out of the water, then guess who comes looking for it: Russia.

The Chair: On that note about time to answer a question or to ask it, the member owns the time. If it goes over and the answer is not given, the witnesses are always asked if they could please provide that in writing, if we know they haven't got time to answer it, or whatever. If there's something that any of the witnesses have been asked here today and haven't had a chance to answer or to finish answering, they're more than welcome to submit an answer to the clerk, and it will be included in the study.

I'll now move on to Madame Desbiens for two and a half minutes, please, or less.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Byrne, you said that the worst-case scenario was coming true, that we hadn't learned anything from the past. That's what I'm saying too, as are many Quebec fishermen.

In Quebec, we're asking that the people on the ground be given a better hearing; we need a better reading of what the reality on the ground is telling us. There have been several fishing closures in our region, leaving fishers completely destitute. And yet, they were providing important data; I'm thinking in particular of mackerel fishers.

Today, you argue that we should insist more on the federal government decentralizing our decision-making powers regarding the measures and direction of our fisheries.

Could you elaborate on your thoughts?

• (1740)

[*English*]

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Not only do I say that, but so does every premier of every province and every territory in Canada, in our federation, including the Premier of Quebec and including the Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador. All 13 premiers of our country, of our federation, argue that there should be a decentralized structure.

In July 2024, Dr. Andrew Furey brought forward to the Council of the Federation the matter of joint management, the opportunity for joint management. All premiers of Canada—the 13 premiers from 10 of the provinces and three of the territories—agreed that joint management would produce a better result for Canada's marine resources. That's one of the things I attempted to bring to the floor at the Canadian Council of Fisheries and Aquaculture Ministers in August 2024, and I was informed by the federal minister of the day, at the time, that there shall be no discussions surrounding any conversation or any conclusions made by the Council of the Federation because that has no place at the Canadian Council of Fisheries and Aquaculture Ministers. It was not allowed to be included in the communiqué, in the discussion. That, Mr. Chair, I don't think is appropriate behaviour, given the nature of our federation.

The second thing that I will say is that Newfoundland and Labrador is advancing a very specific request for joint management. That is a healthy proposition, because it allows a better sounding board for important decisions to be made and to be more collegial and more collaborative, and, I think, would lead to better results of the process. If anyone needs to know what happens when DFO does not collaborate, look at season 2024.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Byrne.

Thank you, Madame Desbiens.

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

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Dr. Rose, you spoke about the lack of precautionary management. We know how important that is. It's within the sustainable fisheries framework. It's used to ensure conservation and the sustainable use of resources. These are things you already know.

Can you tell me a little more about the lack of precautionary management that you've seen and what that means for the decisions that are being made around cod stocks?

Dr. George Rose: Until this year the management that was imposed was precautionary. The new announcement from the ministry, especially introducing two new entrants in the offshore, is not.

You have to realize that the stock itself is at a fraction of what it was historically. It hasn't grown in seven to eight years. Its net productivity has basically been zero. Even more worrisome are the stock assessment forecasts that the stock will decline in the coming years, almost no matter what we do, because of poor environmental conditions for it right now. Increasing fisheries right now is rolling the dice on putting this fishery back below the new LRP.

You must realize that we aren't confident that we're above the LRP now. If we look at this statistically—I don't want to get into too much of that, because everybody will roll their eyes—we see that we are not significantly above the LRP right now, as we speak.

Imposing new fisheries, increasing quota significantly at this time, just doesn't seem to be precautionary to me.

• (1745)

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Dr. Rose.

I have only 10 seconds left, so I would love for you to provide in writing a bit of an expansion on what you were talking about, about rewriting science and the implications that can have on the future sustainability of cod. If we are using science that is so new and then making management decisions based on that science being rewritten, I would love to better understand that and be able to utilize that for the recommendations we'll be putting together for the government.

I don't have time to get a response from you right now. Thank you so much.

The Chair: You're right, Ms. Barron.

We'll now go to Mr. Small for five minutes or less.

Mr. Clifford Small: Back in the day, in 2017, Dr. Carruthers, there was a study done here in this very—according to the Honourable Gerry Byrne—friendly committee. Recommendation 7 was:

That Fisheries and Oceans Canada make every effort to control the seal populations through a sustainable and responsible harvest, to ensure that the seal populations do not prevent the northern cod stock from replenishing in the future.

This is in this study, in this non-partisan document right here—an all-committee, all-party document.

Now, you mentioned there was some unknown mortality. Do you think that could be from seal predation?

Dr. Erin Carruthers: There is an increased seal population in the southern portion of the 2J3KL stock. That is particularly in areas like Renewals and stuff like that. That is true. However, the natural mortality spike that I was speaking about was how the current DFO model tries to explain what happened in the collapse between 1992 and 1994. This is what I was trying to articulate with my reference to natural mortality.

Did I answer your question, Mr. Small?

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you very much.

My next question is for Ms. Street.

Congratulations on becoming the incoming president of FFAW Unifor in Newfoundland and Labrador.

In our last committee meeting—I don't know if you saw it or not—we had Assistant Deputy Minister Burns explain to us that Minister Leboutillier could not help the Prime Minister uphold his promise to the insurer for the 115,000 tonnes. He basically said that the minister decided to go with a commercial fishery because it would provide year-round employment.

We have a quota set at about 18,000 metric tons here. What do you think of that? Do you think the minister has achieved her goal of providing year-round employment from the northern cod fishery?

Ms. Dwan Street: Absolutely not. I said in my opening remarks that 75% of the inshore allocation was landed in four weeks this year. If we're looking at year-round employment on northern cod, obviously it's very far down the road. Employment in Newfoundland and Labrador in the fishery can be year-round, but it's based on a multispecies fishery.

I did hear Mr. Burns's comments, and I find any insinuation that we're going to be harvesting on a stock 365 days a year very troubling. We even had, at NAFO this year, Mr. Burns, who was head of the delegation, stressing that we needed a seasonal closure when it came to the offshore, whether that be domestic or international. To even insinuate that we're going to harvest a stock year-round is problematic. I just look at the 3Ps fishery right now. We don't harvest that year-round, even though that is commercial. I don't think that statement really holds any true weight.

The largest groundfish plant in Newfoundland and Labrador right now, which is Icewater Seafoods, does operate pretty much year-round, and that's on a number of different products and secondary processing. I don't think it's a valid reason on northern cod.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you, Ms. Street.

I have right here the NAFO meeting minutes going back to 2020. I did a word search, looking for northern cod. The assistant deputy ministers who were here earlier this week, and the officials, insinuated that there had been pressure from NAFO to convert from a stewardship fishery to a commercial fishery. We couldn't really find much of that—any reference to northern cod at all—in those NAFO meeting minutes.

Are you aware of any pressure in the last five years, like seriously, coming from NAFO to convert this fishery to a commercial fishery so that they could get access? What's your opinion?

• (1750)

Ms. Dwan Street: I don't have any personal knowledge of any pressure at NAFO.

I did attend my first NAFO annual meeting this year. Unfortunately, the decision had already been made at that point.

What I will say is that if there had been pressure, whether that was in side conversations or in bilats at NAFO, I think it's the duty of the Canadian delegation and the head of delegation to push back and not buckle to that pressure.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Small.

We'll now go to Ms. Jones for five minutes or less, please.

Ms. Yvonne Jones: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, let me clarify that the NAFO agreement has been in place since 1996. It was negotiated, at that time, at 5%, and it remains that way today. Minister Byrne was an MP for nearly 20 years of that time. That has been the case since 1996. It's not that NAFO pressured the government; it's not this big story that seems to be trending at the table. That's the information.

The other thing I want to outline here is that I'm sensing no support for the offshore licences in Newfoundland and in Labrador that gained access. That very much upsets me, because this is both professional and personal for me. Without that codfish allocation in

Labrador, my plants go empty and my people's boats go empty, and that is not fair access. It's adjacent to their shores.

However, let me say this. We have three letters on record from the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, stating that they would propose, if we're going to open it up to NAFO—which they know we have to; the agreement has been there for 30 years—that we also open it up to the offshore.

The first sign from the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador that it would not go to an offshore fishery came when Minister Byrne came into play. I have the letters here.

Mr. Small indicated, as well, that we should increase the northern cod allocation from 12,000 tonnes to a minimum of 25,000 tonnes. Maybe he doesn't remember that. Maybe Steve Kent wrote those letters for him as the bagman for the Conservative Party, when he had him on one of those two contracts that he paid him for in Newfoundland and Labrador, but the facts are the facts.

Stephen Harper cut the Fisheries Council of Canada. He cut the science in DFO. He got rid of all the scientists. It wasn't important in the fishing industry in Newfoundland and Labrador.

My memory is long. That is what I want to say to the member opposite and to the minister.

What we did in Newfoundland and Labrador this year was good news. It was good news to open a commercial cod fishery after 30 years, to let boats on the water and to let fish be landed in plants.

Let me tell you that the offshore licences that granted access to cod are landing cod in Arnold's Cove in Newfoundland. It is being processed in that plant. The boats are owned by Newfoundlanders.

Can you confirm that, Minister? They're fished by Newfoundlanders. The quota is landed in Arnold's Cove. It is processed by Newfoundlanders.

I would have to ask Minister Byrne and the head of the union why they would not support Newfoundland boats with Newfoundland crews landing fish in Newfoundland plants being processed by Newfoundlanders, when you allowed for them to sell product outside of Newfoundland and Labrador this year to other provinces and other plants. That is an irony I do not understand. Both the union and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador push for fish to be sold outside of our province but will not accept their own people fishing the resource, landing it in their own plants and employing their own people, and they are against this 6%.

Let me tell you why they're against it. It is because until the fishermen went out in the street and thought that maybe we should have done better here—that 6% should have gone to the inshore or that 5% should have gone to the inshore—none of these people had any issues with it. They were writing letters pressuring the minister to do just that.

I want to put it on the record, and I want to ask both Minister Byrne and Ms. Street why they would not support offshore cod being landed and processed in Arnold's Cove, giving people there more weeks of work this year than they had in previous years.

• (1755)

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Thank you.

I'll lead the answer and leave it to the president-elect, Ms. Street, to follow, if that's okay.

I have to report to the committee that there was an interesting news story done on the fisheries broadcast by Paula Gale. I'll send the transcript through you, Mr. Chair, for distribution.

Ocean Choice International is an enterprise allocation holder for northern cod. The president of Ocean Choice International says publicly that he supports the 115,000-tonne backstop.

There is an appearance that the government has offered something that was not really wanted. Now, I'll let committee members decide for themselves what exactly that transcript says, but that is what was recorded.

The second thing I will say is that the Labrador Shrimp Company is one of the most excellent companies I've ever encountered in terms of quality product and treating their people well. With that said—

Ms. Yvonne Jones: Why, then, would you not want them to have access to the resource?

The Chair: Ms. Jones....

Hon. Gerry Byrne: —I often recognize that the—

Ms. Yvonne Jones: I want to pick up and ask a question.

The Chair: You're out of time to ask a question.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: —Labrador Fishermen's Union Shrimp Company lands its fish in Port Hawkesbury.

Thank you for the protection, Mr. Chair, as we say.

I often remark that intra-fishers are the heart and soul of the Labrador Fishermen's Union Shrimp Company. Occasionally the Labrador Fishermen's Union Shrimp Company land their shrimp in Port Hawkesbury, Nova Scotia.

There are choices to be made, but we as public stewards have choices that we have to make as well.

Ms. Yvonne Jones: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I want to clarify that the shrimp landed by the shrimp company in Port Hawkesbury is market-ready. It's processed on board.

Mr. Mel Arnold: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The MP's time is up by over a minute.

The Chair: The time is up. Anything you haven't said in an answer, again, you can submit in writing, please.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Sure. Thank you.

The Chair: I want to get to Mr. Arnold for five minutes or less, please, before we finish up.

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

I want to go back to Mr. Byrne for a few minutes.

Minister, can you tell us why the CCFAM meeting went so poorly that it wasn't even able to produce a joint communiqué?

You touched on that briefly, but it sounds like trust has been lost in not just the department but in the minister's and Prime Minister's decisions on fisheries management. We've gone through five ministers. We're now on number six embroiled in this turmoil over the northern cod fishery, and her decision has gone counter to her boss's decision, the Prime Minister's decision.

We have fisheries and aquaculture ministers from across the country who have spoken out about the displeasure they sensed around that meeting.

Can you tell us why it went so poorly?

Hon. Gerry Byrne: We always live in hope that the moments that we experience can be turned around and things could get better.

That was a very, very difficult meeting for all participants. I think it turned out to be a very difficult meeting for the federal minister in the end.

I know that Nova Scotia's Minister Kent Smith expressed frustration because he wanted to talk about illegal and unreported catch, which was not put on the agenda. I wanted to talk about many things, including gulf redfish, gulf shrimp, northern cod and some other matters, but I really also wanted to talk about the solutions to all of the above, which was joint management. That was not allowed to be on the agenda.

It was the first time ever that a federal minister had acted on a unilateral basis to decide the agenda. We are a group of equals, the 14 of us. That's the way the structure of the Canadian Council for Fisheries and Aquaculture Ministers has always worked. We're a group of equals. That day, we were not. The federal minister had the final say.

• (1800)

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Minister.

I want to move on now to Dr. Carruthers.

You spoke about lessons learned and lessons forgotten in your opening remarks.

I'm going to quote another couple of recommendations from this committee's 2017 report, a unanimous report, as Mr. Byrne identified. This committee has worked and produced so many unanimous reports over the years with all parties in agreement.

Recommendation 8 was:

That Fisheries and Oceans Canada immediately create a rebuilding plan for the northern cod stock

Then, it goes through five bullet points on what should be done.

Recommendation 9 was:

That Fisheries and Oceans Canada implement management practices that deliver the greatest value from the resource with the lowest impact on stocks.

Ms. Carruthers, would you say that this government has followed through on the unanimous recommendations from this committee?

Dr. Erin Carruthers: No.

One of the things that I think are being lost in this discussion is that fishing on pre-spawning winter aggregations and spawning aggregations is a high-risk activity. It assumes that you have more than one spawning aggregation that recovers. It assumes that you have your stock assessment correct. It's just a much higher-risk situation, because the sexually mature fish are all packed together, and one of the pieces that has been missed today is talking about what a high-risk way of fishing that is.

To answer your question bluntly, no.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Okay. Briefly, is the new commercial fishery that was announced this year affecting those winter and spawning stocks? Is it extending into those seasons?

Dr. Erin Carruthers: I just saw that the season is to extend, I believe, until April 15 of next year, so the answer is yes.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arnold. There are five seconds left.

Mr. Mel Arnold: I'm so generous with my time.

The Chair: You are. Thank you.

We'll now go to Ms. Thompson for five minutes or less, please.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

Mr. Byrne, if I could ask you quickly, are you familiar with the consulting firm The Focus Group?

Hon. Gerry Byrne: No, I'm not.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: That's interesting. It is a firm owned by a former Conservative member from Newfoundland and Labrador, and this person, Steve Kent, is currently employed by the Conservative Party of Canada.

What I find interesting, Mr. Chair, is that our colleague, Mr. Small, has made 12 payments, for a total of \$16,800, to this gentleman from his House of Commons budget—

Mr. Clifford Small: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, what is the relevance to this committee?

Ms. Joanne Thompson: I'm getting there. This could be a—

An hon. member: It's her time.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: That's right. It's my time.

It could be a conversation related to cod. I do find it stressful that public funds are being diverted to a person who works for the Conservative Party of Canada in a partisan role. He's the senior Atlantic desk.

I would like, Mr. Chair, to table with the clerk the expenses for Mr. Small's office and screenshots of Mr. Kent's LinkedIn profile to confirm his ownership of the firm in question and his employment status with the Conservative Party of Canada.

Mr. Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC): I have a point of order, Chair.

Again, it goes back to relevance. When the first issue of relevance came up, the comment back was, "Well, maybe it has something to do with cod." This has nothing to do with the study. This is purely an attack on another member. It's reprehensible, and again, it has nothing to do with this study.

The member said that in a minute maybe it could have something to do with cod. It has nothing to do with cod, nothing to do with this study today. I ask you to rule on the relevance.

The Chair: The member's time is her time, whether it's a question or a statement she's making. If it's relevant to the study, it'll be entered into the study. If it's not, it won't show up in the study.

Mr. Kelly McCauley: What's the relevance?

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Thank you for that, Mr. Chair.

Certainly, Mr. McCauley, I've seen similar things from you in the past in other committees.

• (1805)

Mr. Kelly McCauley: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I will bring up that I don't want to use unparliamentary language, but as the member opposite knows, that is not true, and it's shameful for her to push away from her actions by pushing such comments against me.

Ms. Yvonne Jones: There's no point of order, Mr. Chair. It's debate.

The Chair: I would ask members to keep comments to what we're studying or doing here in committee, please.

Ms. Joanne Thompson: I will move it quickly. I would like to put the following motion on notice. I move that the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Ocean condemn the improper misuse of public funds for partisan purposes, and that the committee refer the specific matter relating to Mr. Small and Mr. Kent to the Office of the Ethics Commissioner for a priority review.

The Chair: Are you putting that on notice?

Ms. Joanne Thompson: Yes.

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

[Translation]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: My goodness, there's a lot of action today, Mr. Chair. We don't usually see that.

Since my colleagues are using their speaking time to make statements, I'm going to take this opportunity to inform the witnesses that Quebec has been giving considerable thought to various decisions made by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

In recent years, we've had to make some important decisions. One day, we'll have a meetup with independence, but in the meantime, we absolutely must find a way to correct the course, to correct the effects of the decisions made by this government and its predecessor. We have to do it for Quebec's fishers.

Shrimpers didn't fish this summer. There's also a moratorium on mackerel, which the U.S. is still happily fishing. There are also issues related to climate change, to which we are adapting poorly, because we have no power to implement measures commensurate with what we see on the ground. Everything is managed by the federal government, which obviously doesn't listen to the people on the ground. Quebec is experiencing this problem, and so are other provinces.

There is therefore a broad fundamental question to be asked in the context of our study, which concerns Newfoundland and Labrador more than Quebec. That said, we're still concerned about the cod biomass, even though we're told that these are cod with different DNA and that there's no impact on the other type of cod. Some scientists are telling us the opposite. It's all a bit obscure.

In this context, I dare to hope that our study will once again highlight the fact that there are profound gaps in communication and understanding of the field between the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the various scientific organizations, independent organizations and experienced fishers, whose reading of the situation is neglected, according to many. We'd all do well to put more emphasis on what we're told by fishers and people who work in the marine sciences, who collect clear data on a daily basis.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Desbiens. You've gone over time by half a minute.

[Translation]

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

[English]

The Chair: I want to give the last two and a half minutes to Ms. Barron.

Go ahead when you're ready, please.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair.

First of all, I forgot to say congratulations to Ms. Street on her new position.

I just wanted to acknowledge that and say, through the chair, that I'm very excited about the opportunity to work further with you down the road.

With that, we have gotten off topic quite a bit this meeting. I want to offer the remainder of my time.

I have questions that I can ask you, but instead I want to open up the floor to you, Ms. Street, for you to offer any final thoughts that you have for us that we should be considering in our final recommendations to the government.

Ms. Dwan Street: Absolutely.

I guess my last statement is related to something that Ms. Jones asked earlier and that I didn't have time to respond to. There were a couple of tangents there—I'm not quite sure how they mesh together; it was very confusing—and the insinuation, somehow, that we don't support this fish being landed to plants like Icewater in Arnold's Cove. Of course, those plant workers are actually our members.

We fully support the first 115,000 tonnes of this fish being landed to Arnold's Cove and to the shrimp company in Labrador. The shrimp company does absolutely fantastic work and is the engine of its community. However, we need to do it sustainably, and we need to do it with conservation in mind. We need to do it in the ways that our members, our owner-operators and our inshore harvesters have been nursing this stock back since the moratorium. To do that, we use passive gears.

Mobile gears hunt fish, and I've heard Dr. Rose say this. Mobile gears, such as bottom trawlers, are not selective. What you get is what you get. What our harvesters fish, whether it's with gillnets or longlines.... We have harvesters who have invested in longline systems or hook-and-line systems for fall fisheries, to extend that fishery into the fall and create longer employment, as we discussed earlier. However, we need to do it sustainably. If we do that, this stock is going to support our members in Arnold's Cove. It's going to support the plant workers in every other plant where cod is processed. However, if we are going to allow technologies on this stock right now when it's in a vulnerable state and the tech is so low, then we're just going to wind up back to how it was when I was 10 years old and saw the small fish floating on the water in Port Union. I saw what those draggers brought in; I heard what those draggers brought in. I saw that plant empty; I saw houses empty. I saw my friends leave to go to Alberta, never to come back. I saw communities absolutely devastated.

We support those plants and those workers, but we need to make sure that what we're doing makes sense. What the Liberal government has done here makes zero sense, and Ms. Jones should know that, because there has been no fanfare for this decision. It was not the political win that the government keeps trying to defend and keeps trying to claim it was.

If the Liberal government is actually listening, it will know that there is backlash, and there's a lot of it. It's very volatile right now, but for some reason, the message is not getting through.

• (1810)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

That concludes our rounds of questioning.

I just want to say thank you to our witnesses, the Honourable Gerry Byrne from Newfoundland and Labrador, Dr. Rose and Dr. Carruthers, and Ms. Street, the newly elected president of FFAW. I was reminded, just a few seconds ago, that somebody showed me something on a desk one time. It was a wooden plaque kind of thing that said that sometimes the best man for a job is a woman. Hopefully, you live up to that and show them that you're much better than any man who's been at it in the past. Again, all the best.

I want to thank our members for participating this evening, but we have a few minutes now when we have to look at version two of the study we just did. We'll allow our witnesses to sign off, and we'll continue on with a bit of committee business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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