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# Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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Chair: Patrick Weiler





## Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Thursday, September 25, 2025

• (0820)

[English]

**The Chair (Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

[Translation]

Welcome to meeting number four of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans.

[English]

Today and on all days, I do want to start by acknowledging that we are gathered on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people, and by expressing gratitude that we're able to do the important work of this committee on lands they've stewarded since time immemorial.

[Translation]

This meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Pursuant to the Standing Orders, members may participate in person or on Zoom.

[English]

Before we continue, I would like to ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio and feedback incidents and to protect the health and safety of all participants, particularly the interpreters. You will notice a QR code on the card, which links to a short awareness video.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

[Translation]

As regards the interpretation, those on Zoom can select the floor, English or French channel at the bottom of their screen. Those in the room can use their earpiece and select the desired channel.

[English]

I'll remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[Translation]

If members in the room wish to speak, they must raise their hand. Members participating on Zoom must use the "raise hand" func-

tion. The clerk and I will do our best to maintain the speaking order.

Thank you for your patience.

[English]

With that, I would like to welcome our witnesses.

We have Todd Williams, senior director, fisheries resource management operations.

[Translation]

We welcome, by video conference, the following officials from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans: Maryse Lemire, fisheries management and regional aquaculture regional director, Quebec region, and Jean-Yves Savaria, regional director of science, Quebec region.

[English]

With that, we are going to go into our opening remarks, and I will turn it over to Mr. Williams.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

**Todd Williams (Senior Director, Fisheries Resource Management Operations, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** Hello. My name is Todd Williams. I'm the senior director of fisheries and resource management at Fisheries and Oceans Canada. I'm joined today by Maryse Lemire, regional director, fisheries management, and Jean-Yves Savaria, regional director of science. Both are from DFO's Quebec region.

We acknowledge that the land on which we gather is the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe nation. We honour the enduring presence of all first nations, Métis and Inuit peoples on this land and recognize their contributions past and present.

[Translation]

In 2021, Fisheries and Oceans Canada conducted extensive consultations to support the reopening of the unit 1 redbfish commercial fishery, which had been under moratorium for more than 25 years. These consultations were designed to be inclusive, transparent and evidence-based, engaging indigenous communities and organizations, industry stakeholders, provincial governments and other partners across Atlantic Canada and Quebec.

[English]

The department sought input on the principles and criteria that should guide access and allocation decisions. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of adjacency, historic and socio-economic dependence, equity, and indigenous rights and reconciliation. These principles aligned with long-standing policy frameworks and Canada's commitments under the Fisheries Act and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The consultation process generated 48 submissions from a wide variety of participants, including indigenous groups, fishing industry associations, individual harvesters, provincial governments and environmental organizations. While views varied, many called for updating the historical allocation key to better reflect today's realities, including the need for dedicated indigenous access and increased opportunities for some other fleets.

The department also heard views from estuary and gulf shrimp harvesters interested in obtaining additional redfish allocation to provide new opportunities in the face of declines in the gulf shrimp fishery. The views shared helped to inform the allocation decision. It's one that aims to balance economic opportunity, conservation and reconciliation objectives.

Establishing an allocation key for a fishery is a complex undertaking. It is not a scientific formula; it's a policy decision that must weigh multiple factors, including stakeholder input, economic considerations, community needs and reconciliation commitments. In the case of unit 1 redfish, the department used the historical allocation key from the pre-moratorium era as a starting point.

However, given the significant changes over the past 25 or more years, including evolving policy frameworks and the importance of indigenous participation, adjustments were necessary. This approach—using historical context while adapting to today's context—was also applied to the reopening of the northern cod fishery.

[Translation]

The allocation decision for unit 1 redfish was announced in January 2024, more than a year and a half ago. Fishing activity began in June 2024, with approximately 5% of the 60,000-tonne quota landed in the first season. The second year of fishing is currently under way, with just over 4% of the 60,000-tonne quota landed to date. The season runs until March 31, 2026.

Lobster is one of the few species that appears to benefit from warming waters. Indicators of lobster abundance are increasing across most fishing areas in Quebec. In response, the department has launched a knowledge acquisition and lobster fishery development plan in three underutilized zones across large areas of the province.

• (0825)

[English]

This initiative is centred on exploratory fishing, with participants required to carefully document the characteristics of their catches. This cautious, evidence-based approach will help determine whether the stock can sustainably support additional commercial harvesting. It also presents a valuable opportunity for diversification among new licence-holders.

As part of the project, the department issued 74 exploratory fishing licences for areas 17, 18 and 19 that are located in the estuary and the northern Gulf of St. Lawrence. Exploratory fishing began in May 2024 in area 18, and areas 17 and 19 followed in May 2025.

Before implementation, the department conducted extensive consultations with first nations and the fishing industry across the three maritime sectors of the Quebec region. These consultations, along with departmental analysis, informed the distribution of fishing effort and the development of rigorous, objective criteria to select participants in these exploratory fisheries. Those eligible included first nation harvesters, fishers from vulnerable fleets prioritized through industry consultation, and next-generation fish harvesters.

To ensure transparency, the department shared documentation throughout the process, including during licence allocation sessions, which were conducted under strict procedures and in the presence of eligible fishers and witnesses.

[Translation]

Finally, the department has implemented ongoing monitoring measures to support annual decision-making, with the goal of determining whether this additional fishery is viable over the long term.

[English]

Thank you for your work on this issue and the time provided to us today.

We would now welcome your questions.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Williams.

With that, we are going to get right into the round of questioning. The first round will be the six-minute round for questioning.

I know that we have a number of new members. The first round will be six minutes for each party. The second round will be five minutes for the Conservatives and Liberals, then we'll have two and a half minutes for the Bloc. After that, we'll have five minutes for the Conservatives and the Liberals, and then that will repeat.

As you're getting close to the end of your time, I may mention something. Once you've reached the end of your time, I will let you know, so you can quickly wrap your question or the answer up.

With that, we are going to start with the Conservatives and Mr. d'Entremont.

**Chris d'Entremont (Acadie—Annapolis, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being here today.

It's hard to figure out exactly what we're talking about today. On one side, we're talking about redfish allocations and fishery in the gulf, and then we're talking about exploratory lobster licences on the other side.

I want to have an idea, when we're looking at the redfish side, of how quotas are set in the gulf at this point for redfish. There are a number of participants in that who may not be adjacent to that stock. I'm just wondering how quotas are set and how we decided that quota is going down. How is that allocation happening?

**Todd Williams:** Following several years of consultation with stakeholders, we looked at a variety of considerations and took into account their views. With respect to the development, we looked at things such as adjacency. We also took into account things like historic dependence. That's why we looked at the original allocation key as a starting point.

As I noted in my remarks, it's not necessarily a science with respect to how the numbers are arrived at. Whether it's 10% for an indigenous quota, or 12% or 8%, it really does vary. Using that as a basis and taking into account those other priorities we've established and the priorities we've heard from stakeholders, that's how the quota sharing is set.

• (0830)

**Chris d'Entremont:** It concerns me a bit that we would start talking about something that's not science based. The challenges we've had in southwest Nova Scotia to this point have been about trying to put a limit or an idea of what different fisheries are taking out of the ocean. DFO has not done a great job of compiling the data from fishermen, from indigenous fishermen and from other participants in those fisheries.

I want to understand how, in this particular case, the data collection process is structured. How are we going to have confidence in the data we'll be getting out of this?

**Todd Williams:** It's important to first identify the difference between the science-based aspect of this in terms of establishing a total allowable catch and the work that goes into that science, which my colleagues can speak to, as well as the inputs provided by harvesters, whether through at-sea observers or other forms of monitoring, or the work done prior to the commercial fishery by the experimental and indexed fisheries that took place prior to 2024.

How that total allowable catch is then shared comes down to more art than science, and one has to weigh various considerations of those factors I noted earlier: historic dependence, adjacency and other factors.

**Chris d'Entremont:** Redfish aside and lobster on the other side, we're looking at different zones. Climate change has allowed the lobster to move further north into the bay and into the gulf. We're starting to look at local adjacencies, so we have indigenous fishers and non-indigenous fishers.

In your calculations, what is the population sharing of that? How many indigenous folks are there sharing what kind of total allowable catch of lobster in those zones?

**Todd Williams:** I'll defer that question to Madame Lemire.

[Translation]

**Maryse Lemire (Fisheries Management and Aquaculture Regional Director, Quebec Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** Thank you for your question.

The department implemented a knowledge acquisition and lobster fishery development plan in three fishing zones in the estuary and northern Gulf of St. Lawrence. As part of this project, approximately 50% of exploratory fishing licences were granted to first nations and 50% to fishermen who are owner-operators.

**Chris d'Entremont:** What is the indigenous population in those regions?

**Maryse Lemire:** Unfortunately, I don't have that information on hand. I will have to provide you with a written response.

[English]

**Chris d'Entremont:** The reason I asked that question is that in the southwest, when we looked at the actual sharing of total allowable catches, especially in lobster, we have looked at an indigenous population across Canada somewhere closer to 6%, and the actual licensing that first nations have at this point is somewhere near 13%. The sharing of fifty-fifty seems a little on the high side, but we understand they're exploratory licences and we're seeing who has capacity to actually catch these things. I'm still trying to get to the science or the non-science of sharing the total allowable catch.

What do we think that total allowable catch is going to be in the gulf at this point? Will that sharing work for all participants in that? The sharing we have right now in the southwest and across Nova Scotia does not work for everyone.

**The Chair:** There's time for a short answer.

**Todd Williams:** The quick response is that redfish is different from lobster, so there's an allocation question or how much that impacts, depending on the fishery.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. d'Entremont.

Next we'll be going to Monsieur Cormier for six minutes.

• (0835)

[Translation]

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

My questions will focus mainly on redfish fishing.

For my colleagues in attendance and the people watching today, I would like you to give us an overview of all the steps involved in closing and reopening a fishery like the redfish fishery, for example, which was closed for almost 30 years.

What decisions are made before public servants recommend an action plan to the minister? How are the quotas distributed? Do historical shares come into play? Is new access being considered? In short, normally when a fishery is closed, how is that process determined and what steps are involved?

[English]

**Todd Williams:** I'll use redfish as a specific example, but I think this applies more broadly to other fisheries that go through this type of moratorium and then reopen.

With redfish, it is what we call a pulse fishery, so it is susceptible to significant ups and downs, if you will.

We closed it around 1994, and then several years later we instituted an index and an experimental fishery. This was to ensure that we had data that we could use, which also ensured some level of access to harvesters to maintain a foothold in industry, and that continued for a number of years. Once we saw that there was enough recruitment in the stock and that it was rebuilding to a healthier biomass, the conversation then shifted to change that from an index and an experimental fishery back to the commercial fishery. We launched consultations, even before getting into numbers, on exactly what would be the most important criteria to consider. Of course, we heard different things from different groups, depending on their perspectives, and we were left with any number of choices.

Again, using the historical allocation key as a basis from which to start, we then looked at other issues. We noticed that the estuary and gulf shrimp harvesters had suffered immensely, possibly and quite directly as a result of the burgeoning redfish, where there is a predation-prey relationship.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** Mr. Williams, I don't mean to interrupt you, rather I wish to add to your comments.

If I understand correctly, when a fishery is opened, in most cases, the historical shares allocated to the different fleets prior to the closure of that fishery are normally used.

Is that correct?

[English]

**Todd Williams:** I think, in general, we use that as a basis, and we saw that with northern cod as well, with some modifications.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** Excellent.

With regard to redfish, you said that a new process involving index and experimental fisheries, among others, was adopted, based on the new redfish population, the health of the stock and so on.

Furthermore, you recommended, probably to the minister or various ministers of Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the Canadian Coast Guard, the adoption of a new allocation key, based on which the historical shares would be allocated to groups such as indigenous fishermen, shrimp harvesters and other small groups here and there.

Is that correct?

[English]

**Todd Williams:** That's correct. We also provided, in terms of the TAC, what we call a reserve allocation on top of that, which would have been, and remains, accessible to anyone who wishes to fish that as well.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** When it comes to the redfish fishery, you recommended then that the minister adopt a new method that could be called "the new emerging fisheries policy" instead of using the historical shares allocated at the time this fishery was closed 30 years ago.

Somehow, you decided that the redfish fishery was a new fishery. That's why the historical shares were dropped in favour of allocating the shares among new fleets, if I can summarize it like that.

Is that correct?

● (0840)

[English]

**Todd Williams:** To some degree it is, again, using the historical allocation key as the basis from which we worked.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** All right.

Ultimately, the minister has the final say on the new quotas you proposed, whatever they may be.

Is that correct?

[English]

**Todd Williams:** Absolutely, the minister does.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** Okay.

Let's come back to the new allocations the fleets received.

When the redfish fishery closed 30 years ago, did groups like the shrimp harvesters and indigenous fishermen already have a redfish quota?

[English]

**The Chair:** There's time for just a short answer.

**Todd Williams:** Not specifically within the allocation key, but they may have had it through other licences.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

Mr. Deschênes for six minutes.

**Alexis Deschênes (Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine—Lestiguj, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Lemire, I believe you are a biologist. Is that correct?

**Maryse Lemire:** That's correct.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Are you familiar with the emerging fisheries policy?

**Maryse Lemire:** Yes, I am.

**Alexis Deschênes:** That policy, adopted in 1996, was updated in 2008. It sets out the steps that must be followed when new fisheries open.

Before exploratory fishing, would I be correct in thinking that the first step is experimental fishing?

**Maryse Lemire:** That's not always the case. Sometimes, exploratory fishing can be done right from the start.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Would I be correct in saying that, unless otherwise indicated, the policy applies to all new fisheries that are undertaken?

**Maryse Lemire:** It applies to species that have never been subject to commercial fishing and about which we have no information.

**Alexis Deschênes:** The idea to start with an experimental fishery is based on what principle?

**Maryse Lemire:** When we possess no information about a specific species, it allows us to determine whether that species is present or not in a targeted sector.

**Alexis Deschênes:** You said the following: "When we have no information." However, the Wolastoqiyik had an experimental fishery in zone 19 for four years. At that time, we had scientific data.

**Maryse Lemire:** There was indeed an experimental fishery at the western end of zone 19.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Let me get back to the policy, which states that a scientific base for assessing stock responses to new fishing pressures is vital.

This policy also refers to taking a "preventive approach" and an "approach that integrates scientific data." There are also frequent references to a precautionary approach.

When the exploratory fishery opened in all zones, why did people violate Fisheries and Oceans Canada's policy by failing to follow the clearly outlined steps, which state that experimental fisheries must come first? Why did you immediately issue all the exploratory fishing licences?

**Maryse Lemire:** Thank you for your question.

This project involves acquiring knowledge and developing lobster fishing in zones where abundance signals are present and increasing, and where the resource is already being commercially exploited to a certain extent. Moreover, these zones cover large areas.

The tool used to implement the project is exploratory fishing. This involves a cautious approach that will give us the chance to see whether the resource can support additional commercial harvesting in a sustainable way. The approach takes a cautious stance in that exploratory fishing licences may not be reassigned. In other words, they remain in effect for only one year and they must be renewed. Any negative signals may lead the department to revise its plan. These zones have already been exploited. We already had information on the presence of the resources and indicators of lobster abundance.

The policy makes this possible.

• (0845)

**Alexis Deschênes:** The policy states that, in exceptional cases where no market exists for the resource, an exploratory fishing licence may be issued immediately. The policy emphasizes the need to take a precautionary approach, collect scientific data and begin with experimental fishing.

In this case, Fisheries and Oceans Canada decided to open approximately 12,000 new fishing traps between the Côte-Nord and the Îles-de-la-Madeleine, without any scientific data to support this decision.

**Maryse Lemire:** Scientific surveys and stock assessments show that the resource is healthy. We based our decision on existing scientific information and on abundance and landing indicators, which have been increasing in recent years.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Ms. Lemire, you're a scientist. Did the Department of Fisheries and Oceans provide a scientific opinion recommending a direct transition to exploratory fishing and the issuance of exploratory fishing licences before the minister made her decision? Was there any scientific opinion of this kind?

**Maryse Lemire:** The approach to developing a new fishery is based on available information about the state of the resource. The new emerging fisheries policy makes it possible to start the exploratory phase.

**Alexis Deschênes:** My question was the following. Did the Department of Fisheries and Oceans provide a scientific opinion suggesting that the experimental phase be skipped, that the exploratory phase be launched immediately and that over 11,000 traps be authorized?

Was there any scientific opinion of this nature before the minister made her decision?

**Maryse Lemire:** The latest stock assessment confirmed that the stocks were healthy and, as I said, the indicators showed an increase in landings.

**The Chair:** Mr. Deschênes, your time is up.

We've finished the first round of questions. We'll now begin the second round, starting with the Conservatives.

Mr. Généreux, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Bernard Généreux (Côte-du-Sud—Rivière-du-Loup—Kataskomiq—Témiscouata, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses.

We'll probably have two rounds of questions. With your permission, I would like to address a topic that differs slightly from the topic at hand this morning.

In my constituency and in Montmorency—Charlevoix, on the Côte-Nord and in Saguenay, you reintroduced a species of fish a number of years ago. This fish is becoming increasingly prevalent and is incredibly ferocious. It eats everything in sight. You have probably recognized this fish. It's the striped bass.

Please correct me if I'm wrong. In Gaspésie, I believe that commercial fishing isn't allowed, but that recreational fishing is permitted, at least. Fish of a certain length may be kept and fishers can keep two fish. In the western part of the region, up to the Quebec City bridge, recreational fishing isn't allowed and fish must be released.

My colleague, Gabriel Hardy, and I wrote yesterday to the minister to request a meeting. We want to know how the Department of Fisheries and Oceans plans to deal with the striped bass. Many recreational fishers and even commercial fishers are realizing the devastating impact of the striped bass in the region, particularly in the river. It's causing a significant decline in the population of a number of other species.

Ms. Lemire, since you're a scientist, you might be in a somewhat better position to tell me what the department plans to do about this.

I may have further questions later.

**Maryse Lemire:** I'm actually here today not as a scientist, but rather as a fisheries management regional director to answer your questions about the lobster data collection plan.

I don't have any information on the striped bass today. This involves aspects related to the Species at Risk Act. I'll take your question under advisement.

• (0850)

**Bernard Généreux:** Okay.

Did you see the latest report on the striped bass on the show *La semaine verte*, which aired a few weeks ago?

**Maryse Lemire:** No. I didn't see it.

**Bernard Généreux:** Since you work at Fisheries and Oceans Canada, you could bring this issue to the attention of your colleagues. It has become an increasingly significant problem in the St. Lawrence River, in my region. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on this matter.

Mr. Chair, I'm not sure how much we can ask our witnesses to provide information on this topic, given that it doesn't relate to our study. Perhaps we could receive a written list of the people to contact. We would be grateful for this.

I'll get back to our main topic. I'm from Saint-Roch-des-Aulnaies, but I was born in La Pocatière, where the Bas-Saint-Laurent region begins. Our region is connected to the Bas-Saint-Laurent and Gaspésie regions through our local and regional television stations. We've heard over and over again, somewhat through the grapevine, that fishers have been extremely frustrated with the approach to issuing fishing licences, particularly when it comes to the percentage of fishing licences issued to the first nations. Some fishers or even groups of fishers outright believed that Ms. Lebouthillier, the former minister, had prioritized political interests over resource conservation, in some instances.

Do you have any opinion on the fact that these fishers have been quite vocal? In recent years, particularly in the past year and a half, I believe, they have voiced their dissatisfaction with the issuance of these licences.

Have you noticed or seen this too?

**Maryse Lemire:** Thank you for your question.

When implementing the plan for knowledge acquisition and development of lobster fisheries, Fisheries and Oceans held many consultations with the first nations and the fishing industry. Throughout the process and the development of the plan, we held a number of consultations with commercial lobster fishers in the affected zones and with members of their representative associations. Individual fishers wrote to us and we took their comments into account. We even took the time to meet with fisheries organizations that contacted us directly. We took their comments into consideration.

**The Chair:** Ms. Lemire, please wrap up quickly.

**Maryse Lemire:** Yes.

The plan was implemented in consultation with the industry. It took into account the policies of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, or DFO, and analyzed historical examples in particular. We took a range of information into account when implementing the plan.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Généreux.

I'm sorry. I know that five minutes is quite short. However, we'll be meeting with the Minister of Fisheries in two weeks. You can ask her questions, just as you did today. It will be a good opportunity.

[English]

Next, we're going to Mr. Morrissey for five minutes.

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

My question is for Mr. Williams. You can direct it to either of your colleagues.

Could you provide the committee with a bit of history on past practice within the department on granting experimental and exploratory licences in various species? I'm referencing only the east coast. Am I correct that this is an existing practice?

**Todd Williams:** That is correct, yes.

**Robert Morrissey:** Could you give the committee a history—let's go back a good way—on the department using this tool to open up new fisheries?

I know my part of Prince Edward Island would have been locked out from crab if we had not been granted this particular process. It has worked out very well for that part of Prince Edward Island.

I want to get some data on the three zones we're referencing, because these zones are on the north coast of the St. Lawrence estuary. Is that correct?

• (0855)

**Todd Williams:** Yes.

**Robert Morrissey:** Could you advise the committee on the scale of the commercial fishery that existed in those zones prior to...?

**Todd Williams:** With respect to the first question, I can tackle that with a brief history of experimental licences, and then I'll turn to Madame Lemire for the second one with respect to those lobsters.

With respect to experimental fisheries and exploratory fisheries, there is a policy, as referenced earlier, within the department. We normally start with what's called a section 52 licence. That's a licence issued under the general fishery regulations. That allows us to essentially partner with harvesters and others to conduct a fishery to gain more information. This works well in a closed fishery.

**Robert Morrissey:** I'm familiar with the policy, but I would want to know the history of licences' being made permanent as a result of the process and whatever species the process was used for more so than the policy. I understand the policy, and the legitimacy of it is a pragmatic way, a reasonable way, for the department to both introduce new species to the marketplace and open up areas that have not traditionally been fished.

That's not my question. My question is on results and the licences that are now permanent as a result of that process—where they are in the east coast and for what species. If you could provide the committee with that information.... I know you wouldn't have it today.

The second part is to advise the committee on the scope of a commercial lobster fishery that existed in the three zones that were referenced—zones 17, 18 and 19—the size of that. Do you have that information, or does one of your colleagues?

**Todd Williams:** Madame Lemire.

[*Translation*]

**Maryse Lemire:** I can answer that question.

In zone 18, the first zone where the exploratory fishing project began, there are currently eight commercial fisheries. This zone covers about 700 kilometres of coastline. In zone 19, there are eight commercial fisheries for about 450 kilometres of coastline. In zone 17, there are 16 commercial fisheries for about 500 kilometres of coastline.

[*English*]

**Robert Morrissey:** Thank you.

If you could provide to the committee the effort they would be utilizing, how many traps they would be using per fisher, and the last seasonal catch average per fisher in these zones, it will allow the committee to determine to some degree and to validate whether it is an area that is benefiting from climate change as the habitat improves and as the resource improves—and, therefore, the ability for more to benefit from exploiting.... Could you do that?

[*Translation*]

**Maryse Lemire:** We'll need to gather the information together and send it to you later.

[*English*]

**Robert Morrissey:** Thank you.

I believe my time is just about out, Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Morrissey.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Deschênes, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Thank you.

Ms. Lemire, you spoke earlier about signals of abundance. The regional plan for knowledge acquisition and development of lobster fisheries in zones 19 and 17 was prepared by your department in January 2025. However, the plan states that, in part of zone 19, exploratory fishing “followed experimental fishing carried out between 2018 and 2022.” It also states that no data on lobster is available in four other sub-areas, specifically sub-areas 19A1-A, 19A1-B, 19A1-C and 19A1-F. This covers 140 kilometres of coastline between Rimouski and Capucins.

You had no scientific data to determine whether the resource was ready to accommodate these new exploratory licences. Is that right?

• (0900)

**Maryse Lemire:** Given that there had never been any fishing in certain sub-areas, the plan was developed using a cautious approach. It was implemented in phases, gradually. That way, if any negative signals had been observed, the plan could have been adjusted.

It was done that way.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Do you acknowledge that there wasn't any data? I'm quoting your documents. Do you dispute the fact that there wasn't any data on lobster for the sub-areas between Rimouski and Capucins that I listed?

**Maryse Lemire:** There had never been any fishing in these sub-areas.

**Alexis Deschênes:** So there wasn't any scientific data.

Why was the minister in such a hurry to begin exploratory fishing without first issuing experimental fishing licences? Were there any discussions with the minister about why she wanted to proceed so quickly?

**Maryse Lemire:** It's often hard to tell the difference between the first phase and the second phase of the new emerging fisheries policy—

**Alexis Deschênes:** Ms. Lemire, my question isn't about the difference between the two phases. I fully understand both phases. My question is the following. Why was the minister in such a hurry to proceed directly to the second phase and open 12,000 traps when a scientific opinion wasn't even available in a number of sectors?

**Maryse Lemire:** The department proposed a cautious plan to the minister. I can tell you that much.

**Alexis Deschênes:** It's the minister's decision—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Mr. Deschênes, but your time is already up.

[English]

Next, we're going to Mr. Dawson for five minutes.

**Mike Dawson (Miramichi—Grand Lake, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to ask some questions about the lobster fishery in my area, the riding of Miramichi—Grand Lake.

Are there any plans to reduce the fishing for the first nations, so that the fishing doesn't become a commercial fishery to make a disaster for zone 23D?

**Todd Williams:** Unfortunately, I won't be able to provide an answer to that, as it's outside of my area of focus, but we can take that back.

**Mike Dawson:** What is DFO doing to prevent another escalation like we had in 1999 with the fishing dispute in Burnt Church?

**Todd Williams:** Unfortunately, that area is outside my focus and work, so we'll have to take that back.

Thank you.

**Mike Dawson:** Okay. I don't seem to be getting too many answers.

Does DFO know the total catches the first nation licences have?

**Todd Williams:** Unfortunately, that is something outside of my work, and I would have to take that back to the committee.

Thanks.

**Mike Dawson:** Is DFO worried about the depletion of the lobster due to the overfishing of the first nations, specifically the out-of-season fishing that they do? It's supposed to be "a moderate livelihood", but it seems they're overcatching, fishing out of season.

I'm sure that everybody sitting around the table here heard, when we had the election back in April, from all the non-first nation fishermen about the depletion of the catches and where the industry is going to move forward in the future. Does DFO have any answers on that?

**Todd Williams:** I will speak generally to the importance of conservation and protection, and it is a focus for the department for areas such as this and the issues brought up by the honourable member. As for more specific information, we can certainly provide that to the member and to the committee.

**Mike Dawson:** Do you know if there have been any discussions with the non-first nations fishermen and first nations fishermen with regard to the out-of-season fishing and the industry in general in terms of how they're going to proceed moving forward?

**Todd Williams:** No, I'm not familiar with those discussions.

**Mike Dawson:** Okay. I'm going to shift a bit to wharves in the area.

We have several wharves that are in dire need. Certain wharves get special attention, it seems—

• (0905)

**Robert Morrissey:** Chair, I have a point of order. I'm not one to interrupt, but there is a study motion that was adopted, with clear

parameters. I do not recall it being about wharves. We may get to that or to some other areas some other time.

Could you give clarification on the scope? The witness was called to speak to a specific matter that the committee is studying.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Morrissey, for clarifying that.

Of course, we are doing a study right now on attribution of red-fish quotas and exploratory lobster fishing licences. I want to remind all members to keep their questions relevant to the matter at hand.

We will be having the minister here in a couple of weeks, and a broader range of questions would be appropriate at that time.

I see Mr. Arnold on the same point of order.

**Mel Arnold (Kamloops—Shuswap—Central Rockies, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Yes, on the point of order, I believe it's the members' prerogative to use their allotted time as they so choose.

**The Chair:** Absolutely, but I'll remind you that this is what we're here to discuss and what the witnesses will be prepared to answer. It is the prerogative of the members, but try as much as possible to keep your questions relevant to the matter at hand.

With that, I am going to turn it back to Mr. Dawson.

We have stopped your time. You still have about two minutes and eight seconds left.

**Mike Dawson:** We do need fishing wharves for the lobster fishermen to fish, but we'll move on to something else.

Please describe the process to develop a commercial fishery, including the progression from the feasibility to exploratory to commercial stages.

**Todd Williams:** I'll speak briefly in the context of redfish and then turn to my colleague about lobster.

In redfish, it should be noted that this fishery had continued for some time since 1998, I believe, as an index and then experimental fishery. There was no direct connection between those who participated in those fisheries and those who have access today as that fishery unfolded and we moved to a commercial fishery.

That is not always the case in different situations, such as lobster.

I'll turn to Madame Lemire.

[Translation]

**Maryse Lemire:** In terms of the exploratory fishery development, as I explained earlier, many indicators of lobster presence and abundance gave us the opportunity to proceed directly to the exploratory phase. We also received a lot of information and feedback from the industry.

The exploratory phase will help us check whether the resource can support additional commercial removals in a sustainable manner. We'll need to verify this before we can confirm the long-term viability of commercial fishing. As with exploratory fishing, exploratory licences are issued for one year only. That way, we can respond to even the slightest negative signals and adjust the plan accordingly to protect the conservation of the resource.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Dawson.

Next we are moving to Mr. Cormier for five minutes.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll continue with my questions about redfish.

We heard earlier that the new emerging fisheries policy was used as a basis for allocating quota percentages to the various fleets.

Can anyone tell me what percentage of the new quota has been allocated to each fleet for redfish?

[English]

**Todd Williams:** With the allocation key, we now see the offshore mobile gear with 58.69%, the inshore mobile gear fleet with 14.84%, midshore with 5.72% and inshore fixed gear, which primarily use it for bycatch, at 0.75%. Then we have estuary Gulf of St. Lawrence shrimp harvesters at 10% and indigenous communities and organizations, also at 10%, if they have mobile gear and a groundfish licence.

In terms of where it was reallocated, all of the reallocation essentially came from the offshore component for the shrimp and indigenous organizations.

• (0910)

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** Foreign fleets obtained almost 60% of the quota.

The fishery is now reopening. When it was closed 30 years ago, offshore companies still managed to slip through. However, unfortunately, other fleets were unable to turn to other fisheries. For example, shrimpers have been struggling lately. The redfish species feeds heavily on shrimp. It could be blamed for the decline in shrimp stocks, but I don't think that it's the only cause.

The decision was made to opt for a new redistribution of quotas, instead of allocating historical shares. An attempt was made to distribute quotas to other fleets that needed them, such as shrimpers.

Instead of assigning quotas of 10%, could a decision have been made to set them at 15%, 20% or 25%? If so, who could have made that decision?

[English]

**Todd Williams:** In terms of establishing the new allocation key, decisions were made by which to strike some level of fairness. We do know that in the offshore sector, those harvesters continued to have those licences and make business decisions based on those. Even though there was a moratorium, there was intrinsic value in

those licences. We do know that others in the inshore, for example, with groundfish licences, avail themselves to other species.

In terms of the shrimp harvesters, it was deemed that this would be an appropriate amount of quota in addition to the fact that we do have a reserve allocation that is available to anyone. Perhaps a final point to add for the committee's consideration is that the choke point here really isn't the allocation key. Harvesters are not catching more than 10% of their allocations. It's really a market issue.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** Thank you, Mr. Williams.

A fishery that had been closed for 30 years has just been reopened. An allocation of almost 60% has just been given to offshore vessels, meaning large boats often over 100 feet long.

In your opinion, what could explain the decline in redfish stocks over the past 30 years? Any of the witnesses may answer.

[English]

**Todd Williams:** As I noted earlier, redfish is what we consider a pulse fishery and is subject to significant increases and decreases over time. I should also add that while the allocation has been provided to those offshore vessels, to date no vessel over 100 feet has caught fish in unit 1.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** I understand that no vessels longer than 100 feet are there.

However, do you think that, if these vessels have access to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the risk would still remain and we would have another moratorium on redfish? Couldn't we instead give these allocations to fleets experiencing greater difficulties in order to help them and ensure sustainable fishing for years to come?

**The Chair:** We have time for a short response.

[English]

**Todd Williams:** What we have now is a whole suite of management measures that all fleets have to abide by, whether that's new seasonal closures, area closures, at-sea observers and the like.

Thank you.

• (0915)

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

[English]

That finishes our second round. We're going to move on to the third round, starting with Mr. Arnold for five minutes.

**Mel Arnold:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the witnesses for appearing today.

Mr. Williams, you described how TAC, or total allowable catch, is allocated. Then you said that how TAC is allocated is more of an art than a scientific process.

Can you describe how that art works? Is it more of a political process?

Finally, how is that made transparent, so that Canadians can know how that process is played out?

**Todd Williams:** I think the point earlier with my comment was that it's not necessarily a hard science in terms of what my colleagues do when establishing a total allowable catch. The science, if anything, is a social science. It's a policy question in which various considerations have to be taken into account.

In that respect, there are a number of things we did to ensure that we had some level of transparency. This was a wide-ranging consultation that took over two years. We produced "What we heard" documents in terms of the information that we collected. We heard from almost every group in terms of what they wished to be their share. Simply, it wouldn't work mathematically if we were to say yes to everything. In terms of where we landed, we tried to balance all of those considerations. That's the allocation key that we have.

**Mel Arnold:** Could you provide in writing to the committee the "what you heard" documents and the transparency that you say there is behind the decisions in these allocations? Thank you.

Has the policy or the art of the allocation of the TAC changed in recent years? If so, why?

**Todd Williams:** I think there are new considerations that simply weren't present perhaps 20 or 25 years ago, namely our focus on indigenous reconciliation and rights-based fishing and our incorporation of that into allocation keys. We simply didn't see that when this fishery existed previously. As well, there was a desire to really assist those harvesters in other fisheries who could have access here, such as the shrimp harvesters in the gulf.

**Mel Arnold:** Thank you.

Is all catch in these fisheries reported and recorded from all harvesters? Could you provide in writing to the committee the process that the DFO is using to collect catch data for redfish and the experimental lobster fishery?

**Todd Williams:** Yes, absolutely we can. We can even show the evolution of those measures over time.

**Mel Arnold:** Is all catch reported and recorded?

**Todd Williams:** Yes.

**Mel Arnold:** Okay.

Can you also provide in writing to the committee the scientific data that the DFO based its decision on with regard to opening the experimental lobster fishery, as well as any reasoning around the allocation of that fishery?

**Todd Williams:** I'll turn to Madame Lemire to answer that question.

[*Translation*]

**Maryse Lemire:** Thank you for your question.

As I said earlier, the latest stock assessment shows that the resource is in good health. We also received a number of observations and reports from fishers stating that lobsters were present and that they could be seen at low tide.

These are pieces of information—

[*English*]

**Mel Arnold:** Thank you. I just ask for that information to be provided.

I'd like to go back to Mr. Williams again.

Please describe to the committee here the art that you talked about.

**Todd Williams:** It's, again, perhaps mislabelled as social science in terms of weighing those considerations.

Again, we looked at, as a base, the historical allocation key, recognizing the importance of stability in allocations across all fisheries. At the same time, we considered the inputs that we received from harvesters and the fact that we knew that we couldn't make the math work in terms of providing each group, each fleet, with the amount requested. Therefore, it was a balancing act through which we arrived at the new allocation key.

• (0920)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Arnold.

With that, we'll move to our second questioner in the third round.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Cormier, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Serge Cormier:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

I just want to come back to my previous question for Mr. Williams.

Mr. Williams, what I was saying is that, in the redistribution of the quota, offshore gets 60% of this new redfish quota. I'm not sure if you're aware of this, but in the 1970s, former minister of fisheries Roméo LeBlanc imposed a kind of a fishing ban in the Gulf of St. Lawrence for vessels over 100 feet. He did that because he was, at that time, very concerned about the decline of the redfish. He imposed a restriction on boats of over 100 feet coming to fish redfish in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Were you aware that the former minister of fisheries did that in, I think, 1976 or 1977 or whenever—some time around then?

**Todd Williams:** I'm aware of the statement. However, we've been unable to uncover any type of concrete evidence that this policy remains.

**Serge Cormier:** It was a policy, right?

**Todd Williams:** It was at least a statement by the minister, yes.

**Serge Cormier:** We're now saying in 2025—actually, DFO is saying—that we want to have a more sustainable fishery. We want to protect the resources. We want to make sure that fleets and fishermen can live through the fisheries. We're making sure that at-sea agents are also taken care of.

In that case, where in the Gulf of St. Lawrence is the 60% offshore quota that was given coming from? What are those companies? Who are they?

**Todd Williams:** I should add as well that these vessels are based in Atlantic Canada. They are Atlantic Canadian companies with Canadian crews, with landings at Canadian ports and processing plants. There are nine licence-holders—

**Serge Cormier:** What are one or two names of the big companies that own these big offshore boats?

**Todd Williams:** Mersey would be one.

**Serge Cormier:** Is that Mersey Seafoods?

**Todd Williams:** Yes.

**Serge Cormier:** Where are they based?

**Todd Williams:** In Nova Scotia.

**Serge Cormier:** Okay.

Mersey Seafoods, for example, didn't have any redfish quota for the past 30 years, because the fishery was closed, right?

**Todd Williams:** They would have had the licence for groundfish in the gulf, which would have included redfish had it opened, but they weren't accessing it at the time.

**Serge Cormier:** Okay.

I think we can all agree around this table that Mersey Seafoods do very well, even if they've had no redfish quota for the past 30 years, right?

**Todd Williams:** I'm not going to speak to the economic viability of a private enterprise.

**Serge Cormier:** Okay. Perfect.

Look, I guess my point is this. You're saying that we develop a new redfish fishery. Instead of going with the historical share, we went on and did another new fishery with new entrants. We gave quota, for example, to first nations as well as to shrimp fishers, who were a bit more in trouble and needed some quota through redfish.

How can we make sure that no boat over 100 feet is coming into the Gulf of St. Lawrence to fish redfish? What will be the mechanism? What will be the process to not have those big boats come into the Gulf of St. Lawrence to have a hard impact on the resources again, just like they had before the fishery was closed?

**Todd Williams:** I think for those licence-holders—Belle Baie, Madelipeche, Mersey and others—the key here is with respect to fisheries management measures. The fact that they have 100% at-sea observer coverage and the fact that we have certain area closures and depth restrictions are key in having a well-managed fishery. This type of fishery operates on very thin margins. We need a wide range of stakeholders and harvesters to develop those markets. We think there's value in that.

• (0925)

**Serge Cormier:** Okay, but don't you think, Mr. Williams, that if five or six or eight big boats over 100 feet—we're talking about big boats when we're talking about boats like that—come into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, do one or two passes and cut the quota, there will be nothing left for other small fleets, such as shrimp, for example?

I'm going to be honest: I was happy that at least the shrimp fishers got 10%, because it was a start, but don't you think that having big boats in the Gulf of St. Lawrence again will put redfish resources in a difficult spot again, if you let that happen?

**The Chair:** Please give a short answer.

**Todd Williams:** Thanks very much.

Again, we have fisheries management measures in place. We have the science to back up the total allowable catch. The fact is that so far this year and last, the under-65 fleet has done a considerable number of those landings.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

Mr. Deschênes has the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have some more questions, this time concerning the indigenous aspect. Exploratory licences have been issued in three zones. In zone 17, or the Anticosti zone, the total number of traps authorized is 4,500. Of this number, 2,250 are allocated to indigenous people.

In zone 19, 52 licences were issued. However, the number of traps isn't the same. Just in terms of traps in this zone, 7,750 traps were authorized for exploratory licences. Of this amount, 4,250 traps, accounting for 55% of the total number of exploratory licences, were allocated to indigenous people, and 3,500 traps were allocated in phases to other fishers.

Ms. Lemire, I don't have the figures for zone 18. For the Côte-Nord region, we can see that the equivalent of 25 licences were issued. Of that number, how many were allocated to the first nations?

**Maryse Lemire:** I'll have to get back to you on this, since I don't have that specific information on hand.

**Alexis Deschênes:** We'll wait for your response regarding zone 18. However, I'll keep talking about the Côte-Nord. In the notice of interest for fishers in zone 18 on the Côte-Nord, dated April 11, 2024, one sentence caught my attention. It reads as follows: "It should be noted that indigenous communities are not required to meet the eligibility criteria."

Of course, there are criteria, and not everyone can expect to obtain an exploratory fishing licence. However, why was this sentence included?

**Maryse Lemire:** These eligibility criteria were determined in order to focus on owner-operator fishers who would receive what we call an individual license. In the case of indigenous communities, we refer to “communal exploratory fishing licences.” That’s why these specific criteria didn’t apply to indigenous communities.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Okay. So, that’s the zone—

**The Chair:** Sorry, but your time is up.

[*English*]

Next, we will go to Mr. d’Entremont for five minutes.

**Chris d’Entremont:** Thank you very much, Chair.

Again, there’s always this challenge of talking about redbfish and lobster at the same time. I don’t know if they’re really good to be together.

To what Mr. Cormier had to say, there are a number of bigger boats. They’re not huge boats. I know there’s been a range from 55 feet to 100 feet in some cases, from companies like Scotia Harvest and Mersey to Belle Baie and Caramer, which are all in our ridings. They’re all employers in our ridings. Mr. Cormier, I think Belle Baie is in yours. Scotia Harvest is in mine. They are sharing, and they’re catching product. They had existing markets. They’re the ones that have been doing the largest amount of work on this. They’re the ones that actually have the most regulations on observer coverage and those kinds of things. There is a sharing of responsibility here in how much offshore gets versus how much inshore gets.

That’s on redbfish, but that goes to the point, I think, of what we’re starting to see in what this report is trying to show us. There are a lot of decisions here that were not necessarily scientifically based. They were not necessarily based on cautionary principles or on new, emerging policies. They were done for political expediency by the minister. I think in an effort to appease a number of fishing organizations in Madame Lebovillier’s riding, she sort of pushed the department into coming up with new, emerging species and trying to create new fisheries to try to appease those people.

What we’re seeing is that a lot of times, when we go down these roads, it creates a precedence in other fisheries across the Atlantic that are so important for us.

My question is for the staff here, and again, thank you so much for being here. It’s really hard to try to put that Jell-O back into the plastic bag that was created here. Can you give us a bit of a timeline on when this exploratory versus emerging fishery thing started to happen in the gulf, when it came to lobster more specifically? I know there have been some other sharing arrangements because of shrimp and redbfish.

● (0930)

**Todd Williams:** Certainly, very quickly on redbfish, it was when the biomass and the stock and the individual fish reached a marketable level that it switched from index and experimental to commercial.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lemire may want to comment.

**Maryse Lemire:** Yes.

In terms of the plan for the knowledge acquisition and development of the lobster fishery for the three zones in question, the Côte-Nord communities had been lobbying the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, or DFO, for nearly 10 years, noting that they had observed an increase in lobster abundance. This issue has been brought up with the DFO for quite some time. In recent years, they had also observed an increase in abundance indicators, such as the number of landings and the opportunistic sightings in places where lobsters hadn’t been seen before. All these indicators helped to move things forward.

[*English*]

**Chris d’Entremont:** In testimony just a few moments ago, Mr. Deschênes talked about the lack of data in zone 19A, yet we now have licences in that zone.

Again, we skipped over a part of the process here in allotting these licences, because there was no data per se. Yes, maybe they saw some lobsters in those areas, but that’s anecdotal. How do we go from anecdotal information to actual scientific information to fund the art of quota setting?

[*Translation*]

**Maryse Lemire:** In the zone 19 referred to in the question, exploratory fishing carried out in the western end since 2023 has detected the presence of lobster. Fishers have also made many observations and reports pointing to the presence of lobster on the north shore of Gaspésie.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. d’Entremont.

With that, we are going to move to our last questioner in the third round.

Mr. Klassen, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Ernie Klassen (South Surrey—White Rock, Lib.):** Thank you very much. Thank you to all the witnesses.

We keep talking about experimental and exploratory law around both the lobster and the redbfish. Can I get a bit of an explanation on the difference between experimental and exploratory? Also, how many phases are there in the process before the quotas are handed out?

● (0935)

**Todd Williams:** There is a new emerging fisheries policy within DFO that governs how this operates.

Essentially, it’s in three stages. The first one is feasibility, in which we would issue what we call a “section 52 licence”, the experimental licence. From there it goes to an exploratory phase. The only difference there is that it has met the first test in terms of sustainability, and now we’re looking at commercial demonstrations. For that, we would use a section 7 licence, or a regular commercial licence. Finally, stage three is full commercial.

From a policy perspective, that's it as outlined.

**Ernie Klassen:** When it goes to the commercial stage, how long is the licence for the quota given to the commercial fishers?

**Todd Williams:** The general principle of the policy is that those who've participated in the expansion of that fishery and the early work that went into that process, and who have carried that out, would then have commercial access.

How that is determined in terms of allocation can vary significantly depending on the fishery, the other players and some of the other considerations we've been speaking about here today. That licence, like just about every other licence that we have, is renewed annually at the discretion of the minister.

**Ernie Klassen:** Thank you.

The redfish fishery was closed for 30 years. Was it ever closed prior to that? How do you analyze when to reopen the fisheries again, since it was a 30-year period? What's the process that you go through?

**Todd Williams:** Specifically, with unit 1 redfish, it was largely unregulated up until the middle of the last century. When it did close, we had the index and experimental fisheries continue to provide us with that information and allow harvesters to experiment with gear, different areas and that type of thing.

What we look for is really from the science, from the surveys and from the input provided by harvesters. What we were seeing was a burgeoning mass of redfish throughout the early part of the recent decades. We were hoping it would get just a bit bigger in terms of the fish size from a marketability perspective, but it plateaued. We think, right now, that fish size is about as good as it may get for the foreseeable future.

That's what we were looking for with the redfish.

**Ernie Klassen:** Is there any idea why the redfish are now smaller than they have been in the past?

**Todd Williams:** In this particular case, there's speculation from our side that it could be just the carrying capacity of the ecosystem. That's essentially why it has plateaued.

**Ernie Klassen:** Okay.

For information purposes, again, with regard to the economy of their redfish, what percentage of the harvesters in that area would you say are due to redfish? What percentage of the economy does that represent?

**Todd Williams:** As I referenced very briefly earlier, this is a fishery that operates on very thin margins. In speaking with harvesters, they're getting about 20¢ to 30¢ a pound at the wharf.

We are investing through the Atlantic fisheries fund to expand markets and product lines, partnering with harvesters and first nations, but to date it is still not a large fishery. For example, last year only 23 licence-holders actually participated.

• (0940)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Klassen.

That completes the third round. We're going to start the fourth round with Mel Arnold.

You have the floor for five minutes.

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

I want to go back to Ms. Lemire for a quick answer.

Could you please provide to the committee in writing the scientific data on which DFO based its decision to open the experimental lobster fishery?

[*Translation*]

**Maryse Lemire:** We can send you the scientific opinion and the stock status assessment.

[*English*]

**Mel Arnold:** Thank you for that.

Now I'll go to Mr. Williams.

Could you provide what monitoring enforcement measures are in place specific to the new redfish harvest and the exploratory lobster licences, so that DFO can be certain of what is actually taking place out there?

**Todd Williams:** For much of the season, from June 15 to December 31, we have 25% at-sea observer coverage. This was arrived at in consultation with harvesters. For vessels over 100 feet, that is 100% year-round; it's also 100% from January 1 to March 31 for vessels under 100 feet. There is a combination of at-sea observers there plus our regular hail-in and hail-out features and vessel monitoring systems, or VMS, with mandatory reporting.

**Mel Arnold:** Thank you.

I find it interesting that there is only 25% on-board monitoring, when we have fisheries on the west coast that often—or sometimes—can't fish because observers aren't available and they have to have 100% coverage.

How is it you're able to justify 25% on-board monitoring?

**Todd Williams:** Again, this was arrived at in collaboration with our harvesters. We also have 100% dockside monitoring that accompanies this. It is something that we work with all harvesters across all fleets on, and it is a challenge.

We're also experimenting with electronic video monitoring in this fishery.

**Mel Arnold:** Have there been any issues with on-board monitors? We have heard previously at this committee from on-board monitors who basically—let's be politically correct—say their working conditions are not the best.

**Todd Williams:** From what I've heard while chairing the advisory committee for this fishery, the biggest challenge has been the availability and cost, frankly, of the at-sea observers.

We've also heard that at-sea observers actually prefer working on larger vessels due to the accommodation and food provided.

**Mel Arnold:** Thank you.

DFO prioritized eligible candidates for the exploratory lobster fishery licences belonging to one of the fleets identified as a priority by DFO in lobster fishing areas LFA 17 and LFA 19, and “fishers active in fisheries involving distressed or less profitable resources” in LFA 18.

Which fleets were considered a priority in each LFA?

**Todd Williams:** I'll turn to Madame Lemire.

**Mel Arnold:** If you could, while you're at it, Madame Lemire, can you provide the criteria considered to determine which fleets should be identified as being a priority?

[Translation]

**Maryse Lemire:** Our key guidelines for developing the plan were to prioritize the first nations, fleets in precarious situations and the next generation. To determine the priority fleets, Fisheries and Oceans Canada consulted with associations representing the three marine sectors in order to fully understand the realities and challenges faced by each sector.

For example, the priority fleets in the Îles-de-la-Madeleine sector included shrimpers.... No, wait a minute. I'll take a moment and start again.

• (0945)

**The Chair:** Sorry, Ms. Lemire, but your time is up. You can revisit this topic in the next round of questions.

[English]

**Mel Arnold:** Could I get that in writing, if she's not able to provide it further?

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Absolutely.

With that, we're going to go to Mr. Connors for five minutes.

**Paul Connors (Avalon, Lib.):** My question will be for Mr. Williams.

At the beginning, you stated that only 5% of the 60,000 TAC was caught two years ago and, I think, 4% or something last year.

**Todd Williams:** That's correct.

**Paul Connors:** What are we anticipating the total allowable catch to go to? What is the biomass growing to? Are we going to be able to increase that amount?

**Todd Williams:** We think that the total allowable catch, which is set at 60,000 tonnes, is more than adequate in terms of what's required for this fishery and that participation. From a science perspective, it is well within the parameters of what would be considered suitable for a stock in a healthy zone such as this one.

The larger issues often come down to bycatch, which we have to be careful of but which we monitor.

The low landings that you're seeing aren't a reflection of the health of the stock but rather market conditions.

**Paul Connors:** That leads to my next question. We talked about market conditions. Is it about price, the overall global economy, the

global demands? Can you give us some idea of what some of the conditions are?

**Todd Williams:** There are a number of factors. One is that international markets, tariffs, are affecting not just this fishery but many. The fact that this had been closed.... There is also market awareness that needs to be developed, and markets need to be penetrated in that regard.

We are, indeed, investing and partnering with others to develop new product lines. That is something we're working with harvesters on.

Many other challenges are not unique to redfish in terms of the cost of fuel, labour, at-sea observers and that sort of thing. That's in part why we made significant changes to our management approach this past year, to address those and to provide additional funding through the AFF to those harvesters.

**Paul Connors:** Hopefully, as this industry grows, demand improves.

What about our processing capacity? Where are we at with the processing capacity? Do we have the ability to process as the quantities increase?

**Todd Williams:** We heard from some organizations that the in-shore sector, in particular, faces limitations with respect to processing. That's less of a concern for others. I think it really depends on the fleet and, perhaps, the product they are developing. I would think this would improve over time.

Earlier this year, we were able to respond to industry requests and open the fishery, using experimental licences during a previously closed time. That fish was landed, processed and shipped to foreign markets very quickly. The industry is able to adapt when provided the opportunities.

**Paul Connors:** As one final question from me, how is the amount of time they're on the boats and the data that is collected used to...? With the onboard observers and everything like that, can you explain a bit about how that is used to determine the size, biomass, stability and sustainability of the economics of the fishery?

• (0950)

**Todd Williams:** Certainly, all of the inputs from our at-sea observers are collected and contribute to the overall science.

Perhaps my colleague, Monsieur Savaria, has further information in terms of how that science is collected from both harvesters and our own scientists.

**The Chair:** Mr. Savaria, could you do that very briefly?

[Translation]

**Jean-Yves Savaria (Regional Director of Science, Quebec Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** The information is collected and used mainly to monitor bycatch fisheries. We take the information into account during our peer review processes in order to prepare our scientific opinions. These opinions are then provided to fisheries managers for decision-making purposes.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Connors.

[Translation]

Mr. Deschênes has the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Lemire, did you receive an answer to my question regarding the number of traps allocated to indigenous people in zone 18?

**Maryse Lemire:** There are 13 communal exploratory licences in zone 18.

**Alexis Deschênes:** How many traps are allowed per licence?

**Maryse Lemire:** There are 250 traps per licence in zone 18.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Do the 12 other licences also have 250 traps per licence?

**Maryse Lemire:** Yes.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Okay.

We talked earlier about the notice of interest for the Côte-Nord, which clearly states that indigenous communities aren't required to meet eligibility criteria. You explained why.

Can you explain why, in the notice of interest for zones 17 and 19, these criteria apply to anyone seeking an exploratory fishing licence as an individual, regardless of whether they're indigenous?

Why are indigenous people exempt from meeting the criteria in April, but not in December?

**Maryse Lemire:** As I said earlier, the notice of interest for indigenous licences in 2024 concerns communal exploratory licences issued to the first nations.

The eligibility and allocation criteria for individual licences apply to owner-operators, meaning individuals who own their own fishing business. These individuals may or may not be indigenous.

The eligibility and allocation criteria apply to individual licences, whereas the 2024 notice refers to indigenous communal licences.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Thank you, Ms. Lemire.

I have another question for you.

In zone 19, 55% of exploratory licences are allocated to indigenous people. In zone 18, this figure is 52%, and in zone 17, it's 50%.

In Gaspésie, the three Mi'kmaq communities account for a total of 8,207 people. This means that 9% of the Gaspésie population is indigenous, but they obtain 55% of exploratory licences.

Why do you allocate 55% of exploratory licences to indigenous people?

**The Chair:** Please keep your response brief.

**Maryse Lemire:** One of the department's guidelines for developing the plan was to prioritize the first nations, struggling fleets and the next generation. These instructions were part of the key guidelines given to us for this particular project.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Deschênes.

Mr. Gagné, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Bernard Gagné:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Since I'm a visitor to your committee and Mr. Deschênes requested this study, I'll give him my time.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Thank you, Mr. Gagné.

Ms. Lemire, I understand the desire to prioritize the first nations and that everyone supports reconciliation. However, why should they be allocated up to 55% of the exploratory licences when they account for only 9% of the Gaspésie population?

Furthermore, why allocate up to 50% of exploratory licences on the Côte-Nord to the Innu, when they account for only 17% of the population?

In short, why give indigenous people a number of exploratory fishing licences that really exceeds the relative weight of their population?

• (0955)

**Maryse Lemire:** That percentage relates to a specific project. In terms of exploratory licences, about 50% of the licences were issued to the first nations, and it would be necessary to—

**Alexis Deschênes:** No, Ms. Lemire.

**Maryse Lemire:** —look at the information from a broader perspective by reviewing the data on all the types of fishing licences issued.

**Alexis Deschênes:** I gave you the calculations on the number of traps. In Gaspésie, 55% of exploratory licences were given to indigenous people. On the Côte-Nord, 52% of exploratory licences were given to them. In Anticosti, the figure is 50%.

My question is the following. Why were they given so many licences?

**Maryse Lemire:** The first nations were prioritized.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Did you hear that, this summer, exploratory fishing licences issued to indigenous people were used by non-indigenous fishers because indigenous people received so many licences that they didn't have enough people to fish?

**Maryse Lemire:** I heard.

**Alexis Deschênes:** How do you explain that?

**Maryse Lemire:** Indigenous communal licences are issued under the Aboriginal Communal Fishing Licences Regulations. Under these regulations, an indigenous community may designate the fisher of its choice to fish.

Communities have used this option to fish for lobster.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Ms. Lemire, the notices of interest for fishers clearly state that fishers with exploratory licences must fish themselves and that they can't transfer their licences to other people.

Does this rule not apply to indigenous people?

**Maryse Lemire:** Individual licences aren't issued under the same regulations as communal licences.

**Alexis Deschênes:** It's still exploratory fishing.

I have another question for you. Were indigenous fishers actually allowed to choose their own fishing zones before the remaining licences were allocated?

**Maryse Lemire:** The first nations were indeed consulted. However, in addition to the needs and interests expressed by the first nations, certain continuity principles were also taken into account.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Ms. Lemire, I just want you to confirm that indigenous people could choose, before the other fishers, the locations tied to their exploratory licences.

**Maryse Lemire:** The first nations shared their needs and interests. These were taken into account in the allocation and distribution of exploratory fishing licences.

**Alexis Deschênes:** They were chosen first.

It appears that the Mi'kmaq communities requested all the exploratory licences. I would like to read from an email sent to you on September 26, 2024. This email summarizes a discussion. It reads as follows:

However, their questions and comments suggested that there was room for "negotiation." A 50/50 split wasn't acceptable to them. This position nevertheless opened the door to a percentage between 50% and 100%.

In the end, that's what you did. You gave them over 50% of the exploratory licences.

**Maryse Lemire:** That's the summary of a consultation meeting with the first nations.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Yes, but—

**Maryse Lemire:** It's just one piece of information in a long list.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Okay, but it seems that you're having trouble admitting that you issued them over 50% of the exploratory licences. Maybe it isn't that big of a deal. At the start of your remarks, you said that the percentage was around 50%. When we add it all up, it's over 50%, Ms. Lemire.

**Maryse Lemire:** According to the exact numbers, it's approximately 50%. I don't have the exact number in front of me. As I said, one of the department's primary goals was to give priority to members of first nations and fleets that were struggling.

The plan is in keeping with those goals.

• (1000)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Deschênes.

[English]

Next, we're going to go to our last questioner in the fourth round.

[Translation]

Mr. Cormier, you have the floor for five minutes.

[English]

**Serge Cormier:** Mr. Chair, is it me or the Conservative for South Shore...?

**The Chair:** For the last round, Mr. G n reux gave his time to Monsieur Desch nes.

**Serge Cormier:** Oh. I'm sorry. That's perfect.

[Translation]

Thank you.

Mr. Williams, if this is correct, and I believe it is, this year's red-fish quota is 60,000 tonnes. Is that right?

**Todd Williams:** That's right.

**Serge Cormier:** Who is currently fishing that 60,000 tonne quota?

[English]

**Todd Williams:** We've had a mix of 15 licence-holders currently participating across all fleets.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** I'm talking about the Gulf of St. Lawrence, specifically.

Do you know who's fishing in that area?

[English]

**Todd Williams:** I don't have the specific licence-holders or to which fleets they belong. There are 15 licence-holders that have participated and 68 trips in which product has been landed, for about 4.3% of the TAC. That's 2,500 tonnes.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** Do you know if offshore trawlers are part of the fleet currently fishing part of that 60,000 tonne quota?

[English]

**Todd Williams:** Certainly, there were some in the offshore fishing during our earlier experimental allocation. I believe there are also some inshore fleets and fleets from the gulf as well.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** Mr. Williams, I'm sure you're also aware that the shrimp fleet is participating in a project funded by the Atlantic fisheries fund for experimental fishing using new types of fishing gear and whatnot. In addition, most of the shrimpers in my region are part of the F d ration r gionale acadienne des p cheurs professionnels, the FRAPP.

Are you aware of this fishery and of this project, which are under way at this time?

[English]

**Todd Williams:** Indeed, the Fédération Régionale Acadienne des Pêcheurs Professionnels received \$3.5 million through the Atlantic fisheries fund.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** Redfish is currently selling for 20¢, 25¢ or 30¢ per pound. I'm sure you agree that this fishery relies on heavy volume to be profitable.

[English]

**Todd Williams:** That's correct. It's a volume fishery, and we've heard that from numerous stakeholders.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** When the government decided on the new redfish allocation, it gave shrimpers 10% of the 60,000 tonnes.

Did you divide that allocation by the number of shrimpers to figure out how much money each shrimper would make?

[English]

**Todd Williams:** In fact, we did look at those numbers. Based on what we expected would be landed value, there simply wasn't any way, mathematically, to make that allocation work while also respecting any type of regional fairness across the board.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** You're saying it's mathematically impossible for this fishery to be profitable for shrimpers. As I told you earlier, I think 10% is a start, at least, because the historical shares were set aside. Now there's a new fishery.

Let's look at shrimpers. If the department knew it was mathematically impossible for shrimpers to make a profit off the percentage of quota they received and the price per pound they could earn, why not allocate much higher percentages to the shrimpers? The department knew they were struggling compared to offshore fleets and so on. Why not come up with a formula that would have ensured they could make a profit? Why not allocate a higher percentage to shrimpers?

• (1005)

[English]

**Todd Williams:** There are a number of things to keep in mind there. Those harvesters also have access to this allocation through other licences or other fleets that they may be a part of, such as the inshore. They also have access to the reserve allocation and other licensing measures that provide flexibility, such as buddying up.

**The Chair:** That concludes our fourth round. I'm going to an abridged fifth round here. We'll have two and a half minutes for each of the three questioners.

[Translation]

We'll start the next round of questions with Mr. d'Entremont for two and a half minutes.

[English]

**Chris d'Entremont:** Thank you very much.

I'll ask some quick data questions before we finish up today.

What were the 2025 bycatch rates in redfish? Were any closures triggered by it?

**Todd Williams:** Bycatch was low overall. I do have that specific information here. We didn't exceed more than 10% in any particular fishery. In short, there was plenty of room.

**Chris d'Entremont:** What proportion of the 60,000-tonne TAC is realistically harvestable, given the current markets, gear and processing?

**Todd Williams:** That's a good question, Mr. Chair. It's speculative, and perhaps an industry representative might be better suited to answer it.

**Chris d'Entremont:** In the data you are collecting right now, you have an idea of how much of that TAC is actually being caught.

**Todd Williams:** That's right. We're on pace to exceed last year's landings.

**Chris d'Entremont:** I have one final, quick question.

What is the timeline to publish the exploratory lobster findings and a decision framework for any permanent licence?

Again, we're still talking about exploratory here. When do those exploratories become permanent licences in the gulf?

**Todd Williams:** I'll turn to Madame Lemire.

[Translation]

**Maryse Lemire:** I'm sorry, could you repeat the question?

[English]

**Chris d'Entremont:** Thank you.

What is the timeline to publish exploratory lobster findings and a decision framework for any permanent licence?

We're in exploratory. How long and what kind of decision framework will be taken for permanent licences in the future?

[Translation]

**Maryse Lemire:** Every year, we analyze the data we gather. We have to analyze the results annually to determine whether to continue the exploratory phase the following year or adjust the plan.

Usually, the exploratory phase takes several years. That can vary depending on how the resource responds and the information we get about how the fishery is working, fishers' observations and so on. This takes several years. We don't have a specific timeline with a point at which we can say whether the fishery can go commercial or not.

This phase usually takes at least five years.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. d'Entremont.

Next, we'll go to Mr. Cormier for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Serge Cormier:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to move on to another subject. I want to talk about the lobster fishery.

Ms. Lemire, you said earlier that the lobster resource is healthy in this area in particular. Is that true?

**Maryse Lemire:** The latest lobster stock status indicates that the resource is in good health in fishing areas in Quebec.

**Serge Cormier:** What data are you using to determine that the lobster resource is healthy? At virtually all of the small boat harbours, there's no monitoring when boats land their catch. There's monitoring for crab, though. Every time a crab boat comes into port, someone records how many pounds of crab it lands. Nobody does that for lobster, so what data do you have to go on to determine that the lobster resource is so healthy?

I'm a fisherman's son. My father is retired now, but I'm well aware of how lobster catch landing works, so what data is the department using to say that the resource is so healthy when landings are not monitored?

• (1010)

**Maryse Lemire:** I'll let my colleague, Mr. Savaria, our regional director of science, explain how they're assessing the status of the lobster stock.

**Jean-Yves Savaria:** Stock status assessment is based on several factors, including abundance, demographics and fishing pressure. We also have observers aboard vessels to conduct sampling. Since 2011, we've conducted surveys after each fishing season to assess the fishable biomass for the following year.

These are some of the factors—

**Serge Cormier:** Would you agree that we would probably have better scientific data if landings were monitored at all small boat harbours that serve the lobster fishery?

**Jean-Yves Savaria:** In science, it's our job to get the most accurate data possible, so obviously—

**Serge Cormier:** Don't you think counting the number of lobsters every time a fisher comes into port would be a way to get accurate data?

**Jean-Yves Savaria:** Anything that can make our reports more accurate is welcome. We certainly consider all of the available information. That's why, as I said, we've been conducting end-of-season assessments for several years now to estimate the biomass available for the following season.

**Serge Cormier:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I don't have any more questions for today.

I thank the witnesses.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

We'll wrap up today's meeting with Mr. Deschênes for two and a half minutes.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Lemire, I'd like to talk about the pelagic fishers in southern Gaspé. This is a major issue for me.

Initially, the criteria for exploratory licences for area 19 included all Gaspé citizens. Then there was a residency criterion.

Why were pelagic fishers on the south shore not allowed to acquire these licences, including the opportunity to participate in a random draw, when crab fishers, also on the south shore, received exploratory licences?

The indigenous communities of Listuguj and Gespeg, which are also on the south shore, were granted licences in area 19.

Why were pelagic fishers shut out?

**Maryse Lemire:** For certain projects, the department recognizes the concept of adjacency, which means we can use place of residence, historical fishing areas or landing ports as factors to be taken into consideration. That's what was done as part of the data acquisition plan for the lobster fishery. The department also made sure to offer local fisheries as much as possible.

These factors were taken into consideration in the plan.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Why did fishers of other species get north shore permits even though they live on the south shore, when pelagic fishers were completely shut out?

**Maryse Lemire:** I talked to you about historical fishing areas. That's one of the factors that was taken into consideration.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Are you aware that pelagic fishers who fished as far away as Rivière-au-Renard were shut out?

**Maryse Lemire:** As I said, we took residency into account. As much as possible, we tried to offer the most local fisheries available. We also took into account historical fishing areas and landing ports.

All of these factors were taken into account when we prepared the plan.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Let's talk about historical factors. There was tension between the Regroupement des pêcheurs pélagiques professionnels du sud de la Gaspésie and Minister Lebouthillier.

Were pelagic fishers shut out on Ms. Lebouthillier's orders?

**The Chair:** Keep your answer brief, please.

**Maryse Lemire:** Not at all.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Deschênes.

[*English*]

We will continue the study when we get back.

That completes our rounds of questioning.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here and answering questions for a full two hours. I know it's not easy to be on the hot seat. Thank you very much for the information today.

With that, I will adjourn the meeting. I wish everybody a productive National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.

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