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# Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 017**

Thursday, December 4, 2025

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Chair: Patrick Weiler





## Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Thursday, December 4, 2025

• (0815)

[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 17 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans.

[English]

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

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(5) and the order of reference from the House on November 7, the committee is commencing its consideration of the supplementary estimates (B), 2025-26.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room or remotely using the Zoom application.

[English]

Before we continue, I would like to ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the cards on the table to help prevent audio feedback incidents.

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

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

For the purpose of the opening of the discussion of supplementary estimates (B), I now call vote 1b under the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

With that, I would like to welcome the Honourable Joanne Thompson, Minister of Fisheries, as well as Kaili Levesque, interim deputy minister; Patrick Amyot, chief financial officer; and Peter Lambertucci, national chief enforcement officer.

With that, Minister Thompson, we will start with your opening remarks for five minutes.

**Hon. Joanne Thompson (Minister of Fisheries):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It is a pleasure for me to be here at the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans.

Canada has the best seafood in the world. Around the world, when people see the maple leaf on seafood, they know that they're getting a quality product that is ethically harvested. Canada exported fish and seafood to more than 100 countries last year, and it is one of the largest single food commodities that we export.

There is a global demand for Canada's seafood. Our new government is focused on expanding our markets and buying Canadian to grow the industries that support a strong Canadian economy. This is how we will move forward from a state of reliance to a state of resilience and build long-term prosperity for the fishers and regions that rely on this important sector.

For our fisheries, expanding our markets means protecting the tens of thousands of jobs our fisheries support in our rural and coastal communities. Working hand in glove with industry, indigenous peoples and coastal communities, we are building stronger fisheries and creating more economic opportunity for coastal Canadians.

It starts with consultation, and consultation means that I can make sure that the decisions I take protect and support the fisheries and good-paying jobs. I have been on the wharves hearing from harvesters, meeting with industry and hearing from workers in our plants. They are the lifeblood of our industry, and I'm here to support their work.

In terms of Fisheries Act authorizations, our new government is focused on making more efficient decisions to support major projects of national interest so we can get key products to market while still protecting our fish and fishery habitats.

I was proud to more than double the total allowable catch for northern cod this year, so fishers could see the benefits from the stock. However, I want to address some comments that have been made in the media about the northern cod decision, and I'd like to talk about the facts.

First, northern cod has remained stable since 2017. It is at one of the highest levels in decades and is now one of the largest cod stocks in the world. This year, the estimated spawning stock biomass is 524,000 tonnes. I set the commercial TAC at 38,000 tonnes, representing a highly sustainable seven per cent of the biomass.

Assertions made, including that this decision is short-sighted or that the stock is being mismanaged, are absurd. There is something deeply flawed with the thinking that you can't fish seven per cent of northern cod when it's the highest it's been in more than 30 years and is one of the largest cod stocks in the world. To grow our seafood sector, we must have safe and orderly fisheries and enable fishers to fish when the stock allows for it.

I also want to speak briefly about fishing seasons and the enforcement of these seasons. Seasons protect the long-term conservation of stocks and make sure local communities benefit from the fishery. For valuable fisheries like lobster, this principle is critical to the biological conservation of lobster and to our economic success as well. Seasons are in place to protect stocks, first and foremost.

As minister, I fully support enforcement against illegal fishing. We have invested more resources for conservation and protection operations, so they have the tools and support to enforce the Fisheries Act.

Let me be clear. Any unauthorized fishing out of season is illegal. This year in the lobster fishery, conservation and protection officers seized thousands of traps, released tens of thousands of lobsters back into the water and inspected dozens of facilities. Boats were seized, and arrests were made. That enforcement protects the integrity of the fishery and supports the conservation of a stock that is worth billions of dollars to the Canadian economy.

It is my highest priority to make sure that our fishery continues for generations to come. Owner-operator rules make sure that those who fish see the benefit of their hard work. Enforcement protects our stocks and the rule of law. Science-based management opens access to critical foreign markets. There is too much at stake for our coastal communities to risk these foundations of our fishery.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

● (0820)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Minister.

With that, we are going to begin our first round of questions, the six-minute round, starting with Mr. Small.

**Clifford Small (Central Newfoundland, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to welcome the minister and her officials to this meeting here today.

Minister, you spoke of the recovery of northern cod, and a recent study shows that harp seals alone consume 24 times the amount of fish that harvesters take.

Do you agree with that study?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I will tell you that—

**Clifford Small:** Do you agree with that?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** If it's science-based, I believe in science-based research. We have to take our decisions, obviously—

**Clifford Small:** Do you believe the people who wrote that report?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I believe that we have a challenge with seals in the cod fishery, yes.

**Clifford Small:** Thank you.

Okay, so 24 times the amount of fish taken by harvesters are taken by harps. You have various other species of pinnipeds: grey seals, hooded seals, bearded seals, ringed seals and harbour seals, and we have Steller sea lions on the west coast. When you look at the biomass that's being fed, the chances are it's not 24 times; it's probably closer to 50 times.

What's been the biggest impediment? Would you say markets for seal products are the biggest impediment to having a legit seal harvest? Would you agree with that?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** Certainly we have spoken about this before, and yes, markets are a challenge.

**Clifford Small:** Thank you very much.

You agree that seal and sea lion populations need to be reduced in order to bring balance to our ecosystem.

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** Do you support a cull?

**Clifford Small:** The questions aren't for me, Minister.

I support ecosystem balance in our oceans.

Do you agree that by bringing down the number of pinnipeds, we could increase opportunities for our harvesters?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I believe that we have multiple challenges in front of us with seal populations. I am actively having conversations with industry, with indigenous partners and with harvesters. We certainly need to expand our markets. We need to continue to do the work to find creative ways that we can bring seal product to market. I believe we have to be very measured in what we do.

● (0825)

**Clifford Small:** Thank you, Minister.

In the recent budget, \$108 million was committed to finding new markets for seafood and agriproducts. How much of that \$108 million will be committed to developing new markets for pinniped products?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I just want to quickly note that you did vote against that budget. I think there are multiple conversations happening—

**Clifford Small:** Minister, how much of the \$108 million is committed to finding new markets to aid in the rebalancing of our ocean ecosystem?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I'm going to turn to my colleague.

Do you have the specific amount?

**Clifford Small:** Just the number. How many million?

**Patrick Amyot (Chief Financial Officer, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** We don't have that number.

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** We don't have that number. I will get it and certainly get back to you.

**Clifford Small:** Have you asked that a chunk of that \$108 million be committed to finding new markets for seal products?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I am actively engaged in conversations on finding new markets. I am working with industry. We are going back over the work that was in place over the last couple of years to determine what's happened. I can tell you this is a priority for me.

**Clifford Small:** What happened at the summit in June with the EU? Was the trade of seal products on the agenda to be discussed with the European Union in June?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I'm not able to answer that at this time, but I certainly can—

**Clifford Small:** Why not?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I was not at that meeting. I can ask—

**Clifford Small:** If you're pushing for markets for seal products, would you not have pushed to have seal products on the agenda with the Europeans in June?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I think we need to be very mindful that at the moment, Mr. Small, as you know, we are very concerned with some of our export markets. There are significant challenges for the seafood industry with tariffs in both China and the U.S. We need to move forward with caution. I certainly am not.... While I want to support the industry and will continue to support the industry—

**Clifford Small:** We have information from some of our European friends that your boss, Prime Minister Carney, actually removed seal products from the agenda. It was there, and he himself removed that topic of conversation.

Why would he have done that?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** Mr. Small, I can't speak for the Prime Minister. He's well able to speak for himself. I will tell you that I am open to solutions, but solutions that won't further stress our export challenges.

**Clifford Small:** Why didn't you dig in your heels and stop the Prime Minister? Why didn't you stand up for your industry and not let him remove the trade of seal products from that agenda?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** While this makes interesting video for you later, the fact is that I am here to support the industry. I am working to support the industry. We are in a trade challenge. We all need to be very careful. There are complexities at tables, and to simplify something that's very complex is problematic.

**Clifford Small:** The number one priority of the Fisheries Act is conservation. With the massive numbers of fish and shellfish that are consumed by those seals, possibly up to 50 times what harvesters take, the Fisheries Act is failing in its ecosystem approach.

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I want to also stress that I am very aware of the capelin numbers. That's also a stress on the stock. We have to look at the entire ecosystems. It certainly guides us, going forward, and I want to reassure people that this is a priority.

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

Next, we're moving to Mr. Connors for six minutes.

**Paul Connors (Avalon, Lib.):** Thank you, Minister and other officials, for coming out today. It's nice to be able to have a chat with you.

Minister, I want to start off by talking about the northern cod quota, which you spoke about. A lot of residents and constituents in my area are asking about the recreational food fishery and how the increased cod quotas are going to impact their ability to go out and catch some cod.

Recently this department put out a survey to consult with residents and constituents in order to find out which is the best way to go forward. Is there any particular reason you went with an online survey as opposed to an in-person survey?

• (0830)

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I went with the online survey because I am sincerely interested in feedback from the people who I know enjoy the food fishery and know how culturally important it is for us as a province. The survey is intended to dig a bit deeper and get as much information as we possibly can from, again, the Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who hold the food fishery as an important part of our lives.

I will say to you—and I'm very pleased to say this—that it's only been open two weeks and there are over 7,000 people who have participated, so I know we will get rich information from the survey that will certainly guide decisions going forward. That's the intent.

For people who find the survey challenging, maybe there's somebody else who could fill in the information, or I would encourage them to please write to me or email me, and as we move forward, I will find an opportunity that's more general to be in direct contact.

The challenge with individual meetings is that you know we are here in Ottawa. We've been here in Ottawa for a number of weeks. It's just really difficult for me to physically be in all of the places in the province, Labrador included. If I want to reach the maximum number of Newfoundland and Labrador residents, the survey is the most comprehensive way to do that.

Anyone who's filled out the survey knows that it is quite in depth, because that's the information that's going to help me in decision-making.

**Paul Connors:** The data collected from that survey will be used to make a decision on the upcoming....

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** Absolutely. This is a sincere attempt to understand people's concerns and what they would like to see happen, and it will be the backbone of what we do going forward.

I'll be happy to share the survey once it's closed and we've put it together. This is intended to be a process very much based on what we all hold dear: the food fishery.

**Paul Connors:** My next question is around the movement of the Coast Guard to National Defence and how that impacted your budget this year. Will it have any impacts on research, science and the data we collect through the Coast Guard?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I'll turn to my colleague, the acting deputy, in a moment, but I want to reassure people that the day-to-day work of the Coast Guard continues. I remain in touch with them. It's a central part of supports for the industry.

The move to DND was very specifically made to leverage the fact that the Coast Guard is in all of our waterways. As we focus on defence, of course we want to support the ability for surveillance and secure communication, but the work of the Coast Guard remains unchanged.

Deputy, do you have anything you want to add?

**Kaili Levesque (Interim Deputy Minister, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** We have 30 years of collaboration with the Canadian Coast Guard, far beyond its initial transfer to DFO, and those arrangements in relationships and the close work on icebreaking, whether in small craft harbours or looking at scientific activities, will absolutely continue. We continue to work with them day in and day out in a variety of activities, interdepartmental meetings and the deep integration, both in Ottawa and in the regions where the presence is most strongly integrated.

**Paul Connors:** Budget 2025 states that to meet the target of 15% in savings over three years, “[Fisheries and Oceans] will leverage artificial intelligence and other digital tools to modernize Canada’s fisheries management system.” This year we introduced e-logs, electronic logbooks. We did have some fishermen who were concerned about the new technology. What type of artificial intelligence and digital tools are we looking to introduce, and how will they impact the fishery?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I'll start, and then I'll turn to the acting deputy.

Part of the process is modernizing some of the more laborious processes. We are in a digital age, so of course we want to maintain the advantages of that in terms of being able to ensure that we're moving in a much more focused and timely manner.

On the e-logs, which I believe are incredibly important for us, especially as we move to expanded markets, I want to thank the harvesters who participated. I want to thank the harvesters in Newfoundland and Labrador, the FFAW and the unions across Atlantic Canada in particular. Change is difficult, but people really stepped up. The information we're getting from the logs is incredibly helpful. As we move forward, it informs decision-making. I really thank people for participating.

I don't know if the associate deputy has anything to add.

• (0835)

**The Chair:** I'm afraid I have to step in here.

I'm very interested in this answer as well, so please submit that in writing to the committee, if you can. That way, we can have it on record.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Deschênes, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Greetings to all my colleagues.

Good afternoon, Minister. It's good to see you today. Can you hear me all right?

[*English*]

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** Yes.

[*Translation*]

**Alexis Deschênes:** Okay.

You said in your opening remarks that your top priority was to ensure that the fisheries continue. I share that priority.

Over the past few weeks, the committee has heard abundant testimony converging toward the same reality. That testimony has come from British Columbia, the Maritimes and even the Côte-Nord, as we heard the day before yesterday. It seems that illegal fishing is an issue and that some fisheries officers don't have all the necessary means to respond. This could refer to physical resources. However, a witness told us on Tuesday that fisheries officers had been instructed not to respond in cases of illegal fishing involving indigenous persons.

When we speak with fishery stakeholders who are members of first nations, they say that they don't permit illegal fishing. The band council members with whom I've had a chance to speak do not condone violations. Like you and me, they want to preserve the resource.

It now it seems possible that first nations violators and potential members of organized crime are sometimes forming alliances. It appalls me to hear reports from fisheries officers that they've been instructed to back off.

Ms. Thompson, will you commit today to issue a directive to fisheries officers and their supervisors saying that they have to respond and fight illegal fishing, even if first nations fishers are involved?

[English]

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I'm going to be very clear again: Unauthorized fishing is unacceptable, period. I have been very clear since I've come into this role, one that I am privileged to hold, that this is a standard we are working to achieve. Obviously, there are supports that we've put in place to move in this direction. It takes time.

I do want to thank the fisheries officers. I travel the country, from coast to coast to coast. I meet with fisheries officers in every region that I travel to, and I thank them for the work.

I want to turn to my colleague Mr. Lambertucci here.

I want to turn to you, sir, because I think it's really important that we clarify some of the misinformation. I want to thank you for the work you've done over these past few months. I think the work on the ground is very clear. I'll turn it over to you, sir—

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** Minister, I'm sorry, but Mr. Lambertucci will be here longer than you will, and I want to take advantage of your presence because I think you have a role to play in this. Fisheries officers are telling us that they've been instructed not to respond in some cases. You could change things if you sent a message to fisheries officers today telling them that no one is above the law and that the resource has to be protected.

Are you prepared to make that announcement today, to the fishery officers who are listening, to say that everyone must obey by the law and that illegal fishing has to be stopped no matter where it occurs?

[English]

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I don't direct the work on the water with the fishery officers. It's not appropriate for me to do that. I set a direction that we move in, and I work to ensure, from a departmental level, that the supports are in place. We purchased a new vessel in Nova Scotia. We have moved forward with adding more officers.

In the ongoing work of support, certainly Mr. Lambertucci's role is an indication that we need to support the work of fishery officers. That's my priority. It will continue to be my priority. For the actual day-to-day work, when an officer can safely move forward or not, I leave that to the experts on the ground.

• (0840)

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** We completely understand that, Minister, but we've heard here that a directive was sent out to the officers by their directors. It may come from prosecutors warning us of the need to be cautious when certain members of society are involved. However, you have the authority to send fisheries officers and their directors the message that they have to crack down on illegal fishing, regardless of who is involved. You can do that without getting involved in day-to-day investigations.

Are you prepared to make an announcement to fisheries officers and conservation workers that they have to respond in cases of illegal fishing, no matter who is involved?

[English]

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I have been very clear. Unauthorized fishing is unacceptable, period. That's the directive. I leave the work on the ground to the experts. I am not going to sit here and tell someone in a difficult situation what they need to do. That isn't safe and isn't appropriate, but I've sent a clear directive.

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** On Tuesday, a former fisheries officer and a fisher, testifying before our committee, told us that they had seen some unauthorized fishers. They contacted the band council to check whether it had authorized these fishers to catch fish for food, and were told it had not. They contacted fisheries officers to report that people had just been fishing without permission and from boats, which meant that it wasn't simple subsistence fishing, but a fairly substantial fishery. The fisheries officers, however, did not respond.

Do you condone this situation?

[English]

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I will say the same thing again. Unauthorized fishing is unacceptable, period, full stop. I will not and I do not operate in close contact to the work with fishery officers. It's not appropriate. I need to be at arm's length. I trust the teams on the ground. They know what needs to happen, and I certainly encourage further conversations. When the opportunity is appropriate, I recommend that you speak directly to Mr. Lambertucci. He's in the position to speak to what happens on the water.

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** Would it shock you—

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

That concludes the first round.

[English]

We're moving on to the second round here, with Mr. Arnold for five minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister and officials, for being here on the budget estimates.

I noted in your opening remarks—and it will probably be noticed on the west coast—that there was little to no mention of west coast fisheries.

Minister, budget 2025 states that DFO is cutting research and monitoring activities, but you started cancelling stock assessment activities for Pacific salmon well before budget 2025 was announced. This is not good news for Pacific wild salmon, because you cannot manage what you cannot measure. Why have you chosen to cut stock assessments for Pacific salmon?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I'm going to turn to the acting deputy to answer this, but I can tell you that the stock assessment of the B.C. salmon is incredibly important.

Could you clarify that this is probably misinformation?

**Kaili Levesque:** The iconic importance of Pacific salmon cannot be understated, sir. That is why we have the Pacific salmon strategy initiative. There are a variety of methods in place, including scientific ones, as well as habitat restoration on the ground and stock assessments for both modelling and in-season runs in real time to determine the flows.

**Mel Arnold:** The budget has cut the stock assessments.

Minister, if you need to cut frivolous spending at DFO, then so be it, but stock assessments for Pacific salmon are essential. Yesterday, 35 signatories from across B.C. sent you a letter, urging you to revitalize stock assessments of wild Pacific salmon, which is essential for the health of wild salmon stocks and the prosperity of fisheries and communities that depend on them.

Will you listen to the voices of the academics, conservationists and resource users and the people of British Columbia, and prioritize Pacific salmon stock assessments?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I will reassure you that science is incredibly important from coast to coast to coast. It was actually the Harper government that cut science. We are not cutting science.

Deputy, could you—

**Mel Arnold:** No, we are talking about stock assessments that you are cutting in the budget. If you won't listen to these organizations, a large group of organizations, to whom will you listen?

• (0845)

**Kaili Levesque:** Thank you, Minister.

I haven't seen the letter in question, sir, about the specific points raised, but we maintain the stock assessment in the Pacific region for Pacific salmon.

**Mel Arnold:** On July 3, I wrote to you to raise my concerns that DFO's failures to finalize contracts for stock assessments caused the cancellation of valuable sockeye stock assessments on the Fraser.

On October 8, three months later, you wrote back, stating, "Pacific salmon stock assessment...projects were reassigned with the implementation of more cost-efficient stock assessment methods". However, the next day, your deputy minister told this committee that DFO did, in fact, fail to have stock assessment contracts signed on time, and she said:

It had to do with the hiring processes, but we did fix the problem.

Minister, what was the true reason that salmon stock assessments in B.C. were cancelled this year?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** It's just been confirmed that they were not cancelled. There was no cut to the stock assessments.

**Mel Arnold:** There were stock assessments that were not done. We heard that from the people who were supposed to be doing that. The contracts were not signed in time.

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** To the acting deputy—

**Mel Arnold:** No. The questions are for you, Minister. Thank you.

This is in regard to the 2025 sockeye limitations. After 40 years of dedicated service to Pacific salmon fisheries management, Mike Griswold resigned from the Pacific Salmon Commission's Fraser panel in August because he could "no longer support the Canadian government's [mismanagement of] Fraser River sockeye". Griswold stated his belief "that the decision-making control of the panel [is being taken away] by a less representative, inadequately equipped group [and] that the directional control of this group has led directly to DFO neglecting one of its key mandates: controlling and managing sockeye spawning escapements."

Minister, you stated that you are responsible for managing Canada's fisheries resources. Why is Pacific salmon management so failed that trusted veteran experts are resigning in protest?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I can reassure you that we rely on science, the knowledge of harvesters and the work that happens in areas throughout B.C. to inform decisions. That is a priority. It will continue to be a priority.

If you'd like to hear from the acting deputy, I'm happy to have her speak to this. I can't and won't speak to that specific instance, but I will tell you that we are committed to science-based decisions.

**Mel Arnold:** You are the minister. You should be able to speak to this.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, but I have to cut this off here. We are over time, but if there's any more information on this matter, it could be submitted in writing, and that would be appreciated.

Next, we go to Mr. Morrissey for five minutes.

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

Minister, you've been listening to a number of questions in this committee. You posed a very important question to the official opposition member, a Conservative member, on the issue of a seal cull. He failed to answer that question. It's important that fishers understand that he would not endorse a seal cull because of the disastrous implications it would have on the marketplace in Europe and the U.S. that would devastate the east coast fishery. We have to approach it in a pragmatic and practical way.

Everybody knows that the seal herd is growing too large and measures have to be put in place. Rhetoric is easy on the wharf. Dealing with the reality of the intricacies of the fisheries is important.

Madam Minister, I respect your decision to manage this effectively and to protect our key markets in Europe and the U.S. on that particular point.

The other point that I would like you to respond to is that we've had a lot of questioning on demanding more and more from the department in a host of areas, such as protection, infrastructure and research. However, the Conservative opposition voted against every line in the key budget. It voted against small craft harbours. It voted against protection, and it voted against science. The Conservative opposition voted against every line item in the budget of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. It's important for fishers to understand who has their back and who is standing with them.

Would you give a quick opinion on that?

• (0850)

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** Thank you for the comment and the question.

I will say that my role is to ensure that we have a sustainable fishery for future generations, and I take that very seriously. To achieve that, we need to balance science, we need to balance the need for conservation and for sustainability, and we need to clearly understand the importance of the fishery to coastal communities, rural communities and indigenous communities.

It is in that balanced space that we will move forward. In no way would I compromise science, and in no way would I remove the voice of harvesters—the people who are on the water and know what they see every day. That information and important knowledge needs to be incorporated into decision-making.

**Robert Morrissey:** Thank you, Minister.

One of the areas that, as a parliamentarian, I'm most proud of our government for is the investments our government has made in the department that you are now responsible for, especially in the area of protection.

Could you give to this committee an overview of where we are today, where we've come from over the last number of years and why, in the past, we've seen limited enforcement in coastal communities as it relates to fishery?

Quite frankly, we had a department that was almost gutted when it came to protection.

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I believe in a measured approach, but at the same time, we can't be afraid to take decisions. There are core pillars that need to remain in place. Science is one. For engagement with stakeholders and with those who are closest to this sector, we have to remain in conversation. We don't have to agree with each other, but we must remain in conversation.

We also need to understand that in order to preserve this important sector for future generations, we have to ensure that we respect authorized fishing. For anything outside of that, there is a consequence, and it will not be tolerated.

**Robert Morrissey:** Expand on the measures taken in the protection section of the department, the personnel we now have and the boots that are now on the ground. If you want to ask one of your officials to give us clear numbers, that would be fine.

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I'll turn to Mr. Lambertucci. I really want to thank him for the work he has done over the last number of months. We are seeing those results in real time, and I want to thank the officers. I know it's not always easy for them.

It's over to you, sir.

**Peter Lambertucci (National Chief Enforcement Officer, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** The investments in capacity are ongoing and constant. That starts with augmentation of boots on the ground by amplifying our impact on the ground. That's through either how we adjust our core priorities or surge resourcing those priorities.

There's also a data investment plan going on, because data is at the base of how we enable those core capacities. Those are things like growing out our body-worn cameras pilot program and the drones, as well as initiatives in terms of overall strategic assignment of where we focus on those capacities to the highest need.

**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 very much, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I'd like to speak with you about the Quebec fisheries fund.

On November 22, we easily formed a united front on this issue in the Gaspésie. The Leader of the Bloc Québécois was with us. The gathering included a fishery industrialist, members of three fishermen's associations and members of first nations engaged in the fisheries. I had the opportunity to speak with them, and they wanted to see the Quebec fisheries fund renewed as well. Its non-renewal was one of the biggest disappointments in the latest budget.

When we talk to people about the importance of the fisheries fund, they tell us that they have lots of plans and all of them are going to improve our fisheries' productivity. They're involved in innovation and scientific partnerships.

When we talked about this the last time, Minister, you asked me to write to the Minister of Finance to try to win him over. I did exactly that. Unfortunately, we realized that the budget hadn't provided any money for the fisheries fund.

Have you taken steps with the Minister of Finance yourself about renewing the fisheries fund?

[*English*]

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** The fund is still ongoing into 2026, but I will say with great respect that you voted against the many supports that were in the budget for your area: the runway, the shipyard, 22 small craft harbours—

• (0855)

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** I'm sure that you probably wanted to vote against the budget, since it contained nothing for the fisheries fund.

Do you believe in the fisheries fund?

[English]

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** The fisheries fund is still running until 2026, but I will also say that small craft harbour supports are very significant. There is funding for the shark pavilion you spoke with me about.

I'm here to work with all members of the House, and I won't politicize the work. Supports for the industry are incredibly important, and I continue to advocate for all of it. When the time comes, it is important that we get a budget across that has these supports in place.

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** The \$1 million appropriation for the Quebec fisheries fund is what's leftover from the previously allocated funding, scheduled to expire in March 2026. After that, there's nothing.

So what lies ahead? What steps are you taking to convince the Minister of Finance to replenish the Quebec fisheries fund?

[English]

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I continue to and will always advocate for support for the industry. I think it's actually an opportunity to have conversations around what worked incredibly well with the fisheries fund, regardless of the label in the country: what worked well, what it is that we have achieved, and what other objectives and emerging objectives we need to look at. Our stresses are different from what they were two or three years ago. I think it's a real opportunity to evaluate.

I have been having active conversations with my counterparts across provinces and territories. I am having conversations with harvesters within the industry, because I think it's an opportunity for us to look at what we need as we go forward. Therefore, I don't see this as a loss. I see it as a chance for us to pause and really do an evaluation.

[Translation]

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

[English]

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

**Aaron Gunn (North Island—Powell River, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Minister, last week officials from your department admitted to this committee that under your government's plan or crusade to meet these UN 30 by 30 targets of closing 30% of Canada's coastal waters to various economic activities, work is currently being undertaken and pursued without any socio-economic analysis having been conducted whatsoever, and before any study of how many jobs will be lost and how many fishermen will be put out of work and how coastal communities across this country will be affected. Is that true?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I will tell you that the consultations are still active. It is a process, and I invite you and harvesters in your area to participate. It is important that we have consultations. Decisions have not been made, but we need to continue to speak.

**Aaron Gunn:** Okay, so no, because the closures are already being.... This has been going on for years. Do you believe that the government and DFO have done a good job so far of listening and accommodating fishermen?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I can speak to DFO or my department, and I can speak to the work I'm doing actively with DFO, and we do consult. The work towards conservation areas involves other departments. It is a process. The process is intended to encourage engagement, and I absolutely support that. I have been very clear at this table and at every meeting I've been to since I've come into this role. We need to dialogue, and we need to understand each other, and we need to stay at those tables.

**Aaron Gunn:** This 30 by 30 commitment was mentioned in the throne speech, I believe, so it's clearly a key priority of your government. I don't think you would deny that.

Is it true you're pushing ahead with this 30 by 30 plan to close 30% of Canada's coastal waters to various economic activities, and you have no idea how many jobs that will cost fishermen in coastal communities and how much economic activity that will cost our country at a time when we're obviously in very challenging economic conditions?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** Conservation and sustainability are critical for all of us. It's part of being able to ensure we have a sector that's viable going forward.

**Aaron Gunn:** It's safe to say, Minister, that you will push ahead with this 30 by 30 plan regardless of the economic consequences and how many jobs will be lost. Is that fair?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I didn't say that. I said we can do multiple things at once, and I have great faith in our ability.

**Aaron Gunn:** You're willing to back away from the 30 by 30 commitment if the economic consequences are too severe. Is that fair? It has to be one or the other, as you know.

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I don't believe anything has to be one or the other. I think we can find balance, and I think there's a tremendous amount of misinformation connected with conservation areas that are not intended to stop the use and fishing in the area. Let's stay in dialogue. That's how we find a way forward.

• (0900)

**Aaron Gunn:** There's a lot of ambiguity right now, but it's that ambiguity and uncertainty that are obviously hurting fishermen and their families quite a bit, so I hope you will try to push the department to provide clarity as quickly as possible.

The other thing I wanted to ask you about is that for some time now your government has claimed, in contradiction to your own science, I might add, that you would terminate the open-net salmon farming in British Columbia with some sort of vague transition. That supposed plan was supposed to arrive months ago, but it never did, and now you have Liberal MPs, including on this committee, contradicting each other in public about whether you intend to follow through on those closures of open-net salmon farming in B.C.

Thousands of British Columbians, as I'm sure you can appreciate, especially in my riding, rely on this industry for work to meet mortgage payments and put food on the table to feed their families. I honestly don't mean to be political; I just want to know what your government is planning to do. Do you have a plan? What do you want me to tell these constituents who are working in this industry right now about what their future holds?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I don't have an update at this moment, but I'm actively engaged, and I have also been actively engaged in dialogue with the sector in British Columbia. I understand the want for clarity, and I will inform in due course.

**Aaron Gunn:** Do you have a timeline?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I understand that the timelines are sensitive, and I will get back to you when I have a decision.

**Aaron Gunn:** Is there still no timeline now?

I'm going to be meeting with a first nations chief later today whose entire community completely depends on this industry up in Port Hardy, and it's very confusing.

Is this government still planning to pursue a policy of two different policies for two separate coasts? If so, is there something special in the waters off the Pacific that means you have to ban aquaculture on the Pacific coast but not the Atlantic?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I will say to you that I was in Port Hardy this summer and met with indigenous groups. I'm very sensitive to the challenges, and I'm sensitive to the need for clarity. I am not able to provide that at this moment, but I am actively working on this.

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

Next we're going to Mr. d'Entremont for five minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister and staff, for being here today.

I want to pick up where Mr. Deschênes and Mr. Morrissey were earlier talking about rules and trying to set a real direction in the rules that we're supposed to be following and the set of seasons that we're doing.

Minister, can you, maybe with a little support, talk about the enforcement position, especially when it comes to LFAs 33 and 34 right now, through the whole season—not just the commercial season but the summer season we've been experiencing over the last number of months?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I'm going to turn it over for more specifics, because I obviously stay at arm's length from what happens on the water, but I will say that there is a need for clarity in

terms of the unauthorized fishing, which is unacceptable. We need to start at that point and determine how we move forward.

It's often education as well, but I'll turn to Mr. Lambertucci to speak to that.

Harvesters have the right to feel safe when they're on the water, and certainly I take responsibility for giving the directive that we need to move forward to help ensure that that happens.

Sir, if you'd like to, please add detail on what's happening in the region.

**Peter Lambertucci:** Thank you, Minister.

The seasonal enforcement is the same from season to season and is unauthorized. We take a very progressive approach to that as we are enforcing. We do have, and we often do perform, education throughout the continuum of enforcement activities, but if it's unauthorized, we do move to an enforcement position.

We have the right to protect the rights-based fisheries, and we do so. They have to have an orderly and safe season, as do all commercial harvesters. That is the very basis of our approach. When we take the enforcement continuum approach, it's evidence-based; it's based on ground truth, and we move forward based on that being intelligence-supported as we approach these enforcement initiatives. Whether it's a rights-based approach or a commercial harvest approach, unauthorized is unauthorized, and we follow that at every season, regardless of open or out-of-season fishing.

• (0905)

**Chris d'Entremont:** LFAs 33 and 34 are fishing right now. I don't know about the weather today, but they got started last week. I'm already hearing of challenges within that fishery. There are some low catches, but their biggest challenge at this point is prices. They're being affected by a number of issues. Low catches are one, but the Chinese tariffs are really putting a damper on things. They are coming in at around \$8 a pound.

I'm just wondering, on the total data catch here, how the fishery is doing and how the department is going to be responding to understand what the whole package looks like. What does lobster in southwest Nova Scotia actually look like, and what is that future?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** That's a very good question.

In terms of tariffs, I can certainly say that we continue to work with Chinese officials to try to work beyond the tariffs, which are creating a very real challenge for harvesters across the country. We know that the U.S. market is very challenging as well. That is something we continue to work on.

We have to look at climate change and water temperatures, and what impact that's having on lobsters. We need to be guided by science. At no time can we not be very mindful of what we are seeing from science, what we're hearing from harvesters. They are on the water, and they know what a day's catch looks like. It really speaks to the need for measured approaches. This is an important industry. It is a livelihood, so we have to balance that reality for families and harvesters with sustainability.

I don't know if the acting deputy has anything she would like to add to that, but I can certainly reassure members that, in all of the conversations, I will always add the need to ensure that the economic realities are held...and become part of the principles as we make changes going forward.

**Chris d'Entremont:** We have five seconds left here. Maybe an answer in writing would be better.

**Kaili Levesque:** I'm happy to provide some statistics about the value of the lobster sector, the work we're doing at the highest level, the catches themselves and the increases we've seen. We're also watching closely the health of the overall stock, sir.

**The Chair:** Thank you. That completes our second round.

We're going to do an abridged third round here. We'll do three-and-a-half minutes for the Conservatives and the Liberals, and then two minutes for the Bloc.

Mr. Dawson, you have the floor for three-and-a-half minutes.

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

Minister, is there a priority list with the small craft harbours that need the most repairs? Does the government follow that list with the harbours that are the most in need of repairs first, or are they picked in a political fashion?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I smile because, again, you voted against this.

Small craft harbours are critical to this industry. They are the backbone of the industry, and they are so important to rural, coastal and indigenous communities. What I will say to you—

**Mike Dawson:** Okay. I have three and a half minutes. I don't need any filibustering, so I'm going to get to the point.

Is there a list, yes or no?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** It is not a political process. Yes, there is a list, and it's—

**Mike Dawson:** Can you provide the list?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** —engagement with harvesters at the wharf. I can tell you from my own riding that the users of the wharf are actively engaged with the experts and the teams on the ground. This really happens at regional levels. I become involved only for the final decision.

**Mike Dawson:** The reason I'm asking is that when we look at the expenditures for 2024-25, which was \$29 million for the whole budget, 13 projects were announced in my neighbouring ridings, Beauséjour and Acadie—Bathurst. Meanwhile, in 2021, nine projects were made for Beauséjour and none for Miramichi—Grand Lake and none for Acadie—Bathurst. That's 100% of the projects in 2021 and 60% in 2024 that were in the riding of a senior Liberal cabinet minister.

Is it reasonable to say that these announcements were made based on politics?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** Decisions are made at the community level. They are made based on a series of criteria.

I don't know if the acting deputy would like to speak to the process.

**Mike Dawson:** I'm not asking the deputy minister. I'm asking you.

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I don't make political decisions.

**Mike Dawson:** Well, we found these numbers in the budget.

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I don't make political decisions.

**Mike Dawson:** Can you give me a list?

• (0910)

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I don't make political decisions.

**Mike Dawson:** Can you give me a list of how they were prioritized?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I will certainly be pleased to pass them on. We can provide the operational plan for small craft harbours and how the whole engagement happens. I'm pleased to do it.

**Mike Dawson:** How much money in this year's budget was allocated to repairs for small craft harbours that were devastated by hurricane Fiona? That's something that supposedly should have been done years ago.

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I know it's ongoing work. I know that from my own province. I'm happy to provide that number for you. We will follow up in writing.

**Mike Dawson:** Can the minister give the committee an update on the creation of the Arctic fisheries fund and the Atlantic and Quebec fisheries funds, considering that your party promised to “help our fisheries respond to tariffs and reduce the risk involved in expanding to new markets” through these funds?

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** There are multiple supports available, certainly for new markets. I can provide, for your region, the exact amount and how to access it.

In terms of the fishery funds, I encourage you to have a conversation with my team in your area about what worked incredibly well and what you'd like to see going forward. Please know that the current funds continue into 2026.

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

Next, we're going to go to Mr. Cormier for three and a half minutes.

[Translation]

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

Minister, thank you for joining us.

First, I'd like to provide a bit of context for my colleague who just asked questions about small craft harbour projects. His colleague, Jake Stewart, the member for his riding before him, spent hardly any time in the region during his entire term in the Parliament of Canada. He never met with the region's fishers. Last week, my colleague showed up in Tabusintac with Pierre Poilievre to say that they were going to fix the problems and build these harbours, even though they voted against the budget. I'd just like to explain to the fishers of Tabusintac that when people make visits like these to the ridings, they should come with numbers and data, ready to explain to fishers how their problems are going to be fixed.

I know that small craft harbours are vitally important in our regions. Since we Liberals took power, we've invested nearly \$1 billion in small craft harbours. This infrastructure needed additional funding because it had been neglected for the 10 previous years.

I just wanted to clarify things a little.

Now, the fisheries fund has led to investments of nearly \$56 million in my riding since it was created in 2017. It's also led to huge investments in the riding of my colleague, Mr. Deschênes. I understand that the industry considers it a priority. This funding will continue until 2026. It's also a priority for the Atlantic caucus, and I'm confident that we'll be able to secure additional funds.

That said, my region has another major concern that I've been talking about for years. I'm referring to the snow crab licences being lost in my region and sold to fishers in other provinces, like Quebec, Nova Scotia or Prince Edward Island. Our regions are losing these licences because of requirements set out in regulations that need to be changed, including residency requirements. In New Brunswick, for example, a fisher has to have resided in the region for six months, but in Quebec, it's two years. Other regulations related to the Fisheries Act, or other regulations on funding, also play a part. These licences currently go for \$10 million, \$15 million or even \$20 million. It's practically impossible to get one. My region runs the risk of losing another three of these licences.

Minister, would you be prepared today to ask your officials to halt the sale of these licences, study the situation to figure out how things have reached this point and find solutions to keep these licences close to our communities?

[English]

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** Thank you for the question. It's very important, and I certainly appreciate the time that I spent in your riding this summer, where I heard this loud and clear.

It speaks to the need for us to continue to dialogue and for you and me to continue to speak about this. I know it's important.

I want to reference not only the need to ensure we have the conservation measures in place that ensure a sustainable fishery into the future but that it's also very important we have the young harvesters who really need to come on board immediately so we have the harvesters on the water in these communities as we go forward.

We need to have very specific conversations about the things we need to do to ensure that the coastal, rural and indigenous communities are still connected to the fisheries in a very tangible way. It's

the economic benefit for the larger region, apart from the direct funds to the harvester.

I'm absolutely open to continuing this conversation with you.

• (0915)

[Translation]

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

Mr. Deschênes, you have the floor for two minutes.

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

Minister, thank you for the answers you gave to my colleague, Mr. d'Entremont. I thought they contained a lot of information.

You say that what's needed is clarity on the matter of unauthorized fisheries, that harvesters are entitled to safety and that you take responsibility for that.

Based on all the testimony given, you agree that we have a problem that needs to be fixed, right?

[English]

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I recognize that we have a challenge, and I've been very clear that we need to move forward to, yes, ensure that we have authorized fishing and, second to that, in all ways to ensure safety for harvesters, of course.

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** How do you intend to change things?

[English]

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I will continue to do what I'm doing in working with my colleague Mr. Lambertucci to support what happens on the water with fisheries officers.

We also have a role to play in education. We have, all of us, a role to play in leadership to provide information to harvesters on what is expected per the rules and regulations.

I certainly want to thank the fisheries officers. They have stepped up in a very real way. We've made tremendous strides in a short period of time, and that's never easy. I want to thank them for that work.

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** Earlier, you said that they had to respond, whether indigenous rights were involved or not. Is that right?

[English]

**Hon. Joanne Thompson:** I don't direct what happens on the water. I'm happy to turn it over to Mr. Lambertucci for that question.

**The Chair:** We're at time. It might be better to deliver that in writing, if possible.

[Translation]

Thank you very much, Mr. Deschênes.

[English]

That completes our first panel.

I want to thank the minister and the department officials for taking the time to be with us today to speak to the estimates and otherwise.

We are going to suspend for a few minutes to allow the minister to depart, and then we'll continue with questions with the officials for the remainder of the time.

• (0915) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (0920)

**The Chair:** Welcome back, everyone.

I want to welcome some new witnesses to the table, including Niall O'Dea, senior assistant deputy minister, strategic policy; Adam Burns, assistant deputy minister, fisheries and harbour management; and Jennifer Saxe, assistant deputy minister, aquatic ecosystems.

Before we continue, I want to inform members that we are going to dismiss the officials at around 10:10 so we can take care of voting on the supplementary estimates.

With that, we're going to jump into the first round of questions for the second panel, starting with Mr. Small for six minutes.

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

My question is for Ms. Levesque.

After my bill to manage pinnipeds and balance ecosystems was tabled in 2022, this Liberal government was all over developing markets and expanding harvests.

A healthy harvest of harp seals would be north of 300,000, for sure. In 2023, it was 40,000; in 2024, it was 32,000; and this year it was somewhere around 25,000. In the last three years, after the commitment was made to bring down seal numbers by having a healthy harvest, it's been failure upon failure, and we just heard the minister say she believes in having a healthy seal harvest.

Do you know why the Prime Minister removed the trade of seal products from the agenda in June when the meeting was had with Europeans for a trade summit?

**Kaili Levesque:** Unfortunately, I don't know the specific circumstances under which the agendas are set at the leader-to-leader level in that regard. However, we have engaged and continue to engage with the European Union officials at the highest level to explore repealing the ban on the trade in seals, including a ministerial letter submitted in August 2024. We do continue to manage several seal harvests, as you note, but the harvest is lower than the allowable rates.

Thank you, sir.

**Clifford Small:** Thank you.

Ms. Saxe, I've had a number of salmon anglers throughout Atlantic Canada approach me over the last few weeks, since the budget came out with the 15% reduction planned in the DFO's budget. Is the fishery guardian program in Atlantic Canada in danger of being cut, yes or no?

**Jennifer Saxe (Assistant Deputy Minister, Aquatic Ecosystems, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** I'll have to follow up with you on that. At this point, we continue to support Atlantic salmon. Atlantic salmon is absolutely a priority for us to continue to—

**Clifford Small:** There are talks of cuts in programs and the science and whatnot. Are there plans to reduce the fishery guardian program, which is already way too small? Are there plans to reduce it?

**Jennifer Saxe:** I'm not aware of plans at this point in time. I would have to follow up with information on that.

**Clifford Small:** Thank you.

Mr. Chair, you know, we have a number of witnesses.... I'm expecting some witnesses next week from C and P and from the department's investigating team and whatnot.

I'm going to read a quote from Mr. Lambertucci, from his last meeting here. He said, "As I stated earlier, if the committee is inviting fishery officers to present for various in camera sessions, that testimony would be welcome."

Why in camera, Mr. Lambertucci?

• (0925)

**Peter Lambertucci:** The in camera aspect is as much to protect the officer as it is to protect potential sensitivities for the department. There are a number of things we do and a number of processes we have that aren't best suited for a public forum.

**Clifford Small:** Thank you.

It's to protect the officer from whom?

**Peter Lambertucci:** The officers follow.... There's a duty of loyalty that they pursue. They exercise their judgment every day, and I have full trust in their judgment. However, the event—

**Clifford Small:** Is it to protect them from themselves?

**Peter Lambertucci:** I think that's probably an overstatement. There are things that happen in the course of a committee and conversation that flows from committee that—

**Clifford Small:** Do you trust them? Do you trust them to not expose aspects of ongoing investigations? Do you have faith in them that they could do the right thing in that respect?

**Peter Lambertucci:** I've had the privilege of travelling this country and meeting with my officers. I have trust and confidence in my officers.

**Clifford Small:** Then why would you not trust them to speak in public?

**Peter Lambertucci:** It's not a question of trust, Mr. Small. It is a question of just preserving some of the sensitivities that may be discussed at this committee.

**Clifford Small:** You're going to stick with forcing witnesses in the future who are in your employ to witness in camera only.

For those who are watching out there, in camera means that the testimony is confidential inside these four walls.

I've had it come to my attention that a lot of people who'd like to testify to expose what's going on inside the DFO are uncomfortable about testifying in camera because they feel that the best protection is from the public knowing what they've actually said. If retributions come their way, there's sunlight on it; it's transparent. You mentioned transparency in your last meeting here, so you believe in transparency.

**The Chair:** I'm afraid we're well past time here.

It's an important question. If the witness could provide that answer in writing, it would be much appreciated.

We're going to go to Mr. Cormier for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

In recent weeks, we've heard a great deal of testimony from fisheries officers, fishers and even people from public prosecutions informing us that directives had been issued to refrain from arresting certain groups of people. I'm going to name them, since the witnesses named them: They primarily consisted of indigenous groups involved in illegal fishing and things going on within the industry.

My first question is this: Do you know if these orders reported to have been received, or other orders, were issued by the Department of Indigenous Services, yes or no? The question is for any of the witnesses.

**Kaili Levesque:** No.

**Serge Cormier:** Do you know if the Department of Justice issued any instructions or orders not to arrest these groups for criminal offences, for example?

**Kaili Levesque:** The resource conservation and protection program is independent. It's based on activities on the ground and the judgment of fisheries officers.

**Serge Cormier:** Do you know whether the office of the former prime minister, Justin Trudeau, or his chief of staff, Katie Telford, gave any orders to refrain from arresting these groups of people for fisheries offences?

**Kaili Levesque:** Our fisheries officers also deal with violations of the Fisheries Act committed in harbours and on the water.

**Serge Cormier:** Did your office, the deputy minister's office or the office of the Minister of Fisheries issue any instructions or orders to refrain from arresting these groups?

**Kaili Levesque:** No, it was to take action on the ground against people engaged in illegal or unauthorized fishing.

• (0930)

**Serge Cormier:** You understand that public trust in the justice system is important. It's also important to our reconciliation objectives with indigenous peoples. It's important for people to know that no matter who they are or what group they belong to, they'll be punished if they commit an offence.

You're saying that no one, of all the people I named, not even your office or the minister's office, issued any instructions or orders.

Why, then, did everyone who came to give evidence before the committee say the opposite?

**Kaili Levesque:** That's an excellent question.

We also looked at the testimony, including the *Enquête* program, and we heard the same things.

I don't want to mislead the committee in any way by claiming that I'm aware of every conversation that's taken place, but based on what I've heard for years now, fisheries officers do indeed have a range of tools at their disposal, such as educational resources or referrals to the public prosecution service as a last resort. Sometimes that means that fisheries officers carry out their work, particularly education work, away from the spotlight.

**Serge Cormier:** Okay, thank you.

Mr. Lambertucci, I will now turn to you.

[*English*]

I know that your fishery officers are doing a tremendous job on the ground. I know a lot of them in my area, but let's get the two sides of the medal here, both sides of the medal. Yes, we saw a thing. We saw a report on the news lately, two reports, on *The Fifth Estate* and Radio-Canada, that there were some illegal fisheries going on, and this is not only on first nations. We all know that in commercial fisheries also, some things like that happen, like illegal landing, for example—catches that are not reported.

If I understood you right at the beginning, or maybe it was the minister, a lot more arrests were done in the past couple of months. Can you just tell us what kinds of arrests were done, and whether it was first nations only? Was it commercial fishers also? Can you give us a couple of examples of some arrests that were made?

**Peter Lambertucci:** Yes, it's been an active last several months, during both the off-season and the commercial season. There have been a number of arrests and interceptions of unauthorized sale, both in the Gulf region and in the Maritimes. I believe we have five active investigations that have gone forward for charge approval with the Public Prosecution Service of Canada. Through the open commercial harvest season that is taking place right now in some of the LFAs, there have been a number of inspections and enforcement activities around non-licensed personnel who are fishing, poorly tagged traps or untagged traps. It occurs in both fisheries, and it is active.

[*Translation*]

**Serge Cormier:** That's fine, thank you.

Ms. Levesque, I'm going to come back to you.

First of all, congratulations on your new role as deputy minister.

Earlier, I asked the minister a question about something I've spent the past six or so years fighting. I'm talking about the sale of fishing licences, especially for snow crab, which entails a dual penalty for my region because of regulations that could very easily be amended.

Licences are being sold to people outside our regions. I understand, I'm told that these snow crab licences can be sold to anyone in zone 12. However, the spirit of the Fisheries Act is to keep licences near our communities. But that's not what's happening in this situation.

We currently have three licences waiting to be sold. What I'd like is a pause or a moratorium, whatever you want to call it, to be put in place until we can find a way to stop these licences from being sold. Each of these fishing licences provides direct employment to about five people. Multiply that by three.

Are you willing to look into this issue and stop the sale of these licences, which is decimating our small communities?

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

We would be grateful if the witnesses would send us their answers in writing.

**Kaili Levesque:** Certainly, I'll send you and the committee members my answer.

**The Chair:** I now give the floor to Mr. Deschênes for six minutes.

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

Mr. Lambertucci, I have a few questions for you.

First, I'd like to know your take on unauthorized fishing, which you briefly mentioned earlier. If I understand you correctly, your fisheries officers have to respond whenever unauthorized fishing is reported. Is that correct?

• (0935)

[English]

**Peter Lambertucci:** Yes, that is correct. Unauthorized is unauthorized in our enforcement approach.

There is an enforcement continuum on which we deal with that enforcement approach. Along that continuum is where the fishery officers enjoy judgment and implement that judgment in terms of whether they educate, ticket, fine or pursue larger investigative pathways where it could lead to recommendations for charges with PPSC.

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** You often mention this continuum, and I gather that it includes awareness.

The last time you were here, I asked you questions about the fact that some officers are handing out promotional items. You told me back then that you would investigate to see if this was the case. Were you able to do that?

As I understand it, this is what fisheries officers are advised to do, as a first step, when they encounter someone who's fishing without authorization. Is that right?

[English]

**Peter Lambertucci:** I have had the opportunity to follow up on that question. I have gone from coast to coast, in all our regions, asking for that information. There are, in fact, promotional materials that fishery officers have available to them. That is part of our pillar of education. If you look at our three pillars, it's an education continuum leading to an enforcement continuum, with monitoring and investigation as the middle pillar of that continuum.

The educational products provided, coast to coast, by fishery officers are for that educational continuum. It's for all persons in all locations, on the water and off the water. It's really just a way for us to enhance situational awareness and to educate people about numbers to call, rights to fish and requirements around licensing. There's a whole assortment of educational products that we have.

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** The promotional products that I'm familiar with include things like caps and waterproof bags with indigenous writing on them. The officers were told that when they're dealing with an indigenous fisher who didn't receive authorization to fish from his or her band council, they should begin by offering that person a promotional item. Can you confirm that this is so?

[English]

**Peter Lambertucci:** From the education piece of our pillar, the reason for writing in traditional languages is that it's part of our reconciliation to respect those rights. If there was a straightforward, unauthorized activity, and if it was a recidivist type of activity, there would be an enforcement continuum.

On first contact, though, as we are educating the communities, we do sometimes provide educational materials. There are no educational materials provided if, in fact, it's investigative or part of an arrest towards a prosecution.

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** So, if a fisheries officer stops a member of a first nation engaged in subsistence fishing, but that person has caught a female with eggs and it's a first offence, the officer will give that person a cap or a waterproof bag instead of issuing a ticket. Is that right?

[English]

**Peter Lambertucci:** No, I wouldn't phrase it in that perspective. A female with eggs could be seen as a little bit more of an egregious offence if you are illegally fishing out of season for that product. That lobster would definitely be returned to the water, and there would be discussion on how we would pursue that. That may not just lead from an educational product.

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** When is it appropriate for a fisheries officer to give people promotional items like caps and bags after detecting a Fisheries Act violation?

[English]

**Peter Lambertucci:** As I said earlier, the promotional products could be on land, on water, in schools or at community centres as part of our pre-season education plan.

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** Yes, when it's for educational purposes, that's fine, but that wasn't my question.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but, according to my information, fisheries officers have these promotional items. They're part of the continuum of tools you were talking about. When they come across situations where they've identified unauthorized fishing, they hand out promotional products instead of issuing a ticket.

[English]

**Peter Lambertucci:** There could be instances, if it's a new entrant to the fishery, someone we are unfamiliar with or someone who is not fishing with intent to commit illegality. That is part of the judgment that the officers have an opportunity to apply. There is the reconciliation piece in terms of how we exercise that judgment, both in first nations and non-first nations types of fisheries.

• (0940)

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** I wanted to ask you precisely that question. Do fishery officers also hand out promotional items to white people stopped for violating the act?

[English]

**Peter Lambertucci:** There are promotional items provided to both indigenous and non-indigenous communities. I want to just use unauthorized as unauthorized, and there are various spectrums of that as well.

At times, during the education phase, with new entrants or new participants in the fisheries, accidents can happen. If they are non-malicious, and if there is no *mens rea* or intent behind it to be malicious, this is where the intent of the officer and the judgment of the officer comes into existence.

[Translation]

**Alexis Deschênes:** I, in—

**The Chair:** Pardon me for interrupting, Mr. Deschênes, but your time is up.

We've finished the first round of questions.

[English]

We'll start the second round with Mr. Arnold for five minutes.

**Mel Arnold:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses from the department for being here.

There's some corporate history in the room here, and then there are some new members. Mr. Morrissey from the other side and I have been on this committee for.... Next month, it will be 10 years. We've seen seven different ministers, changes of staff constantly revolving, including changes of mandates from the prime ministers, and changing of directives. Who in the department is responsible for briefings to the minister regarding budget allocations and producing the estimates?

**Kaili Levesque:** In the department, the chief financial officer is responsible for the ultimate preparation of the financial statements, the materials and so on. Other assistant deputy ministers also do prepare recommendations or advice, say, for example, in the development of a new program or approach and what the parameters might look like, or in the case of science for expenditures in that space, but they are always working with the chief financial officer to bring those attested proposals forward to the minister for consideration.

**Mel Arnold:** It's all brought up to the minister to make the final decision. Is that correct?

**Kaili Levesque:** Indeed, once budgetary levels are set, then we have rules to follow as public servants in terms of the expenditures against those broad priorities, but absolutely, yes. Then we are governed by the policy cover as established by cabinet and the terms and conditions of programs as set out by the Treasury Board.

**Mel Arnold:** As acting deputy minister, where does your role, or where does your predecessor's role, fit into that?

**Kaili Levesque:** [*Inaudible—Editor*] is responsible as the ultimate financial officer for the department. There's the chief financial officer, and then the chief accounting officer role, which is occupied by the deputy minister of every department—that's not unique to DFO—but also in terms of working to make sure that the department's proposals are aligned in advising the minister—signing off on a policy note, for example, or a memorandum going across.

**Mel Arnold:** How long have you been in this role?

**Kaili Levesque:** My predecessor retired two weeks ago, and I'm here in an interim capacity, but I have been the associate deputy minister at Fisheries and Oceans since October 21, 2024.

**Mel Arnold:** You have some history there.

**Kaili Levesque:** Yes, indeed.

**Mel Arnold:** Thank you.

That'll lead to this question. We never get enough time to ask the ministers, so I have to ask you now.

DFO has already allocated over \$901 million for grants and contributions in this fiscal period, and the supplementary estimates (B) seek another \$140 million for grants and contributions, for a total of just over \$1 billion. Do you have specific details on why this increase was necessary?

**Kaili Levesque:** Those specific increases in grants and contributions are to advance the negotiation and implementation of fisheries reconciliation agreements in British Columbia. They're all under negotiation at this point, so I can't speak about specific nations, but they are for the advancement therein.

**Mel Arnold:** Has your office already identified the recipients of the proposed grants and contributions?

**Kaili Levesque:** The grants and contributions funding is provided after the process to establish a fisheries reconciliation agreement, which is done through cabinet authorities. It's not exclusively a deputy minister level of authority or a ministerial one.

**Mel Arnold:** Have those recipients been assigned or allocated at this point?

**Kaili Levesque:** We receive authorities before we engage in those types of discussions to not commit the Crown to any negotiations to which we are not party. Ultimately, before finalization of any agreements, we do have to confirm those. That's where these grants and contributions would advance.

**Mel Arnold:** Can you describe how the amount of \$140 million proposed in the supplementary estimates (B) was determined?

**Kaili Levesque:** It is determined through the existing negotiation tables that are in place with each of these fisheries reconciliation agreements for a variety of eligible activities under the reconciliation agreements framework, which then will be formed into publicly disclosed fisheries reconciliation agreements, as with others.

• (0945)

**Mel Arnold:** Thank you. Let's switch topics now.

For the past decade, this Liberal government and every one of the minister's predecessors have recognized the threats of aquatic invasive species in British Columbia. Specifically, I have pleaded for B.C. just to get an allocated fair share of the federal resources for fighting AIS in Canada.

On November 27, the Okanagan Basin Water Board sent a letter expressing growing concern over critical infrastructure costs. When will this department finally fulfill the mandate and the commitment to biodiversity that are required on the risks that aquatic invasive species pose in British Columbia?

**The Chair:** I hate to jump in again, but we are over time.

It's an important question. Deputy Minister, if you could respond in writing to that question, it would be much appreciated.

**Kaili Levesque:** I'd be pleased to do that, sir.

**The Chair:** Next, we're going to go to Mr. Klassen for five minutes.

**Ernie Klassen (South Surrey—White Rock, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair, and thanks to all our witnesses here for attending.

I was very happy to hear the minister say that any unauthorized fishing is illegal and that we fully support enforcement.

Mr. Lambertucci, I have a question.

We hear so much about illegal fishing on the east coast. I was wondering if you could talk a bit about enforcement in recreational fisheries, given that we saw quite an incident in British Columbia this year with the salmon fishing in Chilliwack, along the Fraser River. How does the enforcement happen with recreational fishers?

**Peter Lambertucci:** I've had the privilege of joining my officers on the west coast for some of that enforcement. The same stands—illegal is illegal and unauthorized is unauthorized. We do that enforcement through a very graduated approach that's intelligence-supported in how we deploy to the core problematic areas. We surge our resources to those problematic areas.

There are a number of enforcement tools that we utilize on the Pacific side, including helicopters, boats and vehicles, often all working in tandem, one with the other. That enforcement continuum is the same on the east coast as it is on the west coast.

We have stakeholder engagement. We have education. We have ticketing. We have fines. Then we have investigations, particularly as they concern the more egregious matters, which we submit to PPSC for charge approval to move to the court process.

**Ernie Klassen:** Thank you very much.

We have a large number of first nations groups up and down the Fraser River. What would be their relationship with enforcement with the indigenous communities on the west coast?

**Peter Lambertucci:** We do have indigenous engagement teams on both coasts, east and west, and in the Arctic regions. Those indigenous engagement teams work on various policies, building trust in the community. They work in, on and with the communities.

I could use Haida Gwaii as a great example of what that kind of collaboration looks like. We have guardians and fishery officers embedded in Haida Gwaii, working on the respective elements that protect indigenous rights and allow us also to enforce whatever could be unauthorized, both recreational and commercial, in those areas. It's a very successful program.

**Ernie Klassen:** Thank you very much.

Ms. Levesque, the Fraser River panel that was talked about before.... I know that there was one member who resigned from that panel. I've met with a number of first nations groups, and I believe that the panel works on a consensus model.

I'm wondering if you could give us a bit of a background on how exactly that consensus model is working and how it actually functions. How is it working or not working?

• (0950)

**Kaili Levesque:** The panel is a very important binational mechanism that recognizes the consensus-based approach both to trying to understand the flows, predicting the runs as they arrive in pre-season and in season, and also around the management measures therein.

The panel has senior representation. We have two commissioners who are from the DFO, but it is a mix of experts from outside, as well as our two representatives. It is a crucial forum for the discussion and management of these. However, it is on a consensus basis, and we could not advance this work without the incredible contributions of those who give their time to this commission.

**Ernie Klassen:** Thank you very much.

The salmon have been a point of controversy on the west coast, obviously, and we also have to deal with conservation issues. A large amount of what we hear is around the southern resident killer whales.

I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about the impact of the harvest of the salmon fisheries and what is being done to protect the southern resident killer whales.

**The Chair:** I'm afraid I have to jump in again, because we're out of time.

Deputy Minister, if you could provide that answer in writing, it would be much appreciated.

**Kaili Levesque:** I would love to.

**Ernie Klassen:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** I yield the floor to Mr. Deschênes for two and a half minutes.

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

Mr. Lambertucci, I'm going to pick up on my discussion with you.

I was reassured to hear you say that unauthorized fishing is unauthorized fishing, period, and that we have to make sure that the Fisheries Act is enforced consistently to ultimately protect the resource.

Questions have been raised concerning where directives that appear to contradict this approach might have originated. Based on what we've heard, fishery officers have been told not to respond in certain situations.

How are you going to ensure that the approach you endorse will reach the fishery officers?

We heard testimony along those lines on Tuesday as well. One fisher contacted fishery officers to report a situation involving other fishers. After checking with the band council, the officers determined that the fishers in question were unauthorized. However, no action was taken and no report was made.

What are you going to do to make sure that your vision reaches the people on the ground?

[*English*]

**Peter Lambertucci:** There are a few items in your question. I'll try to deal with them one at a time.

The first issue is, of course, that there was—in my research since our last appearance—no direction that fishery officers are not to enforce the law. That directive was never located, and it does not exist.

In my time since assuming the chair, I have travelled across the country and done a number of town halls with our fishery officers to try to remedy any misinformation and to provide extra clarity and accountability about roles and responsibilities. It is that the mandate of a fishery officer, and my strategic direction, that “unauthorized is unauthorized”.

I very much respect the enforcement continuum that we implement. It's essential that we do the education piece properly, and it's essential that we consult with our communities and our stakeholders as we do that job.

Moving forward and looking forward, we have a strategic plan whereby we are intelligence-supported to focus on our highest priority and core areas. We have plans for unauthorized fishing seasons and authorized fishing seasons. We do our patrols on land, sea and air, so it is a multiplicity of approaches. Then there are enabling elements, whereby we work with our partners—provincial, federal and municipal—as we take our enforcement approach for the unauthorized and authorized activities.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

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

**Aaron Gunn:** Thank you, Chair, and I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Deschênes and Mr. Cormier for some of their thoughtful questions over the last couple of meetings.

To Mr. Lambertucci, which department or government decides which areas in Canada are open for fishing?

**Peter Lambertucci:** It's our department.

**Aaron Gunn:** It's interesting that you say that, because I have heard repeated stories from fishermen about indigenous bands unilaterally declaring an area closed, and then when the fishermen go to these areas, even though DFO says they're open, they are intimidated. Their traps are cut, in some cases, and they are chased out of these areas.

DFO is informed, but nothing is done. Why is nothing being done?

• (0955)

**Peter Lambertucci:** Thank you for the question, Mr. Gunn.

Similar to Mr. Deschênes, the same answer applies to the questions from both of you about law enforcement capacity on the water. We govern and oversee approximately 400,000-plus kilometres of shoreline. Within our capacities, we allocate to the highest priorities. We do see a high number of calls for service, and we have peak seasons and off-seasons—

**Aaron Gunn:** I appreciate that answer. With all due respect, are you saying that the federal government of a G7 country is not able to enforce the law and the consistent application of the law along B.C.'s coast?

I'm talking about some of these indigenous bands of fewer than 100 people. We're a G7 country. To me, it's quite obvious that a political decision is made not to enforce the law in these areas.

**Peter Lambertucci:** The actual openings and closings and the legislation are not C and P's to generate. I would turn to my colleagues to speak to how the openings and closings of the seasons happen. We enforce those openings and closings and the conditions of licence.

In terms of not being able to enforce, we take all calls for service. They are all triaged, and we deploy with the capacity we have to the highest priorities at the time those calls are received.

**Aaron Gunn:** I find it, quite frankly, impossible to believe that this is not.... Maybe some of the other officials can respond to these unilateral declarations by indigenous groups, but clearly DFO is making a decision not to enforce the law, even though these areas remain open to fishing, notionally, for DFO.

Do we need the Coast Guard? Do you need the navy's help to enforce these areas on the Kingcome Inlet or Kitasu Bay? Can you not enforce these areas with the \$1-billion budget that you have?

**Peter Lambertucci:** I wouldn't characterize it as you're stating it. We do enforce and we are as present as our capacity allows, based on the priorities for those responses.

**Aaron Gunn:** There's another thing I want to point out. I talked to a recently retired fisheries officer who explained this to me in some detail, and they're going to be testifying next week.

What is happening is something that I've seen happen with police in this country as well, and I want you to be blunt and be very specific and not run cover for anybody. I was told, very explicitly, that the Department of Justice would not approve charges against illegal fishing or illegal trafficking of fish or fishing out of season for indigenous individuals if they didn't have the first nations band's approval. Is that true?

**Peter Lambertucci:** I can't speak for the Department of Justice and their decision-making—

**Aaron Gunn:** You're travelling the country talking to your DFO officials, and you seem like a very genuine person, so I'm guessing this would have made its way back to you if that was the case. I know that police in this country, like fishery officers, will stop enforcing the law if they know all of their work and paperwork is going to come to nothing because charges aren't going to be approved.

Is that happening?

**Peter Lambertucci:** C and P enforces based on the rules, regulations and laws that we have to enforce. Who decides to charge and what that assessment process looks like, as we've heard from prior testimony at this committee, rests with the Public Prosecution Service of Canada.

**Aaron Gunn:** Can you appreciate the fact that if your fishery officers know that charges won't be approved by the justice department if they enforce the letter of the law, they aren't going to bother enforcing the law? Can you see how that would happen?

**Peter Lambertucci:** Again, I wouldn't characterize it in that way. Fishery officers exercise their judgment, and they will move forward with investigations through the enforcement—

**Aaron Gunn:** But they're not. That's what I'm telling you. I've travelled the ride. I have tons of supporters in the recreational and commercial fishing industries, and they're telling me and giving me first-hand accounts that the law is not being enforced. That's what I'm telling you, and that's what I was elected to do here. There are other members of all parties saying the exact same thing. I hope that you take that feedback and report back accordingly.

My understanding is that it's not the fisheries officers. It's the Department of Justice. I would encourage you to throw the Department of Justice under the bus if that is in fact the case.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Gunn. That completes the time.

We're going to go to Mr. Connors for five minutes.

**Paul Connors:** Thank you for coming out.

I want to go back to something that I was asking the minister about: leveraging artificial intelligence and the digital tools.

We all know that the larger offshore vessels have sophisticated technology and can track quotas of fish in the bays. Our smaller fishers don't have that technology. A number of them, especially some lobster fishermen and some other boats, say that the e-logs are causing them concern.

How much farther are we going to go with the e-logs, and what's the importance of getting the data on the water, as opposed to a fisher coming in and inputting it to a computer afterward?

• (1000)

**Kaili Levesque:** With regard to e-logs, the timely provision of data in real time helps us not only from an enforcement perspective: A scientific perspective from getting intelligence and data collecting is integral in that partnership.

It also helps for export market development and catch certification, whether through the MSC certification process or other certification processes that our industries are seeking to achieve to maximize the export value of high-quality products and to demonstrate that the practice is in place.

With regard to your specific question about artificial intelligence, it is an intent from the departmental perspective to look at how we can streamline our own operations with the introduction of AI, looking at how we can reprioritize putting people into higher-risk areas of work and action and streamlining it. For example, we have a highly paper-based process in enforcement, whereby the officers write the reports by hand in their vehicles. Can we look at the ability to use a technological solution to advance that? Can we look at how we use our high...?

We collect a ton of data, whether through science or through industry, as I noted, in real time. How do we aggregate that data to do modelling and predictive work and make sure that we're getting the best possible results?

It's also about some of our own internal operations, the back office of DFO, and how we streamline in those spaces as well.

Thank you very much for the follow-up.

**Paul Connors:** From an enforcement perspective, will this speed up the enforcement processing perspective? How will it impact the enforcement perspective?

**Peter Lambertucci:** We're very excited about the introduction of our digital modernization strategy, and we see tremendous efficiencies coming out of that digital modernization.

AI tools can absolutely help us advance in any number of areas of enforcement that are largely human-led right now, saving officers time in terms of level of effort and increasing our time for boots on the ground and boats in the water. That's really where the focus is going with our digital modernization right now. Those AI tools can be put on wharves, on vessels, in the air with drones and on body-worn cameras. All of those things are enabling factors in finding efficiencies.

**Paul Connors:** As we move toward introducing AI—which is very important to the industry for data collection, enforcement and everything—are there going to be any additional costs to individual smaller fishers and their boats in adding equipment or anything like that?

**Kaili Levesque:** No, that is not the intention, sir.

As you know, licence-holders are all required to report on catch, regardless of vessel size, but we work directly with the licence-holders and the associations to minimize the reporting burden and make sure that, as you noted, the technology transition for even just reporting is as simple and seamless as possible.

**Paul Connors:** I'll just follow up on that. We only have a little while.

How will concerns from fishers, especially the smaller fishers, be addressed?

**Kaili Levesque:** There are a few ways that we address them. It can be through direct engagement with DFO or through engagement that has taken place with the various federations of small independent harvesters. Sometimes the associations work with us to help provide education, supporting the licence-holders themselves to better adapt and adopt technology as they're using it in real time. Also, they do directly engage DFO for support as needed, and we do have an active dialogue in that space and different support tools to help them without increasing the burden.

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

I'm just looking at the time here. We finished the second round. We don't have enough time to go into a proper third round. I'm just going to give each party the opportunity to ask one question before we need to get into our votes on the supplementary estimates.

We're going to go next to Mr. Arnold.

• (1005)

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

Madam Levesque, I want to go back to the aquatic invasive species issue. Under the Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity framework, Canada committed to fight invasive species, but the government is short-changing the fight in British Columbia.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board has committed \$200,000 to work with UBC Okanagan to develop a rapid eDNA detection tool for invasive mussel biosecurity. Is it possible to find a matching \$200,000 in the \$4.7 billion funding the DFO has to match the Okanagan Basin Water Board funding?

**Kaili Levesque:** Thank you for the question and for your efforts on an aquatic invasive species.

We haven't seen the correspondence yet from the Okanagan water basin, but I commit to reviewing that correspondence with folks in the region following this conversation, sir.

**Mel Arnold:** Thank you.

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

[*Translation*]

I give the floor to Mr. Cormier.

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

We've been talking about arrests a lot since we started. I think that what we're trying to say is that we want these fisheries to be sustainable. We want future generations to have the opportunity to fish. I'm the son of a fisherman. I didn't follow in my father's footsteps, but it still means a lot to me.

A lot of people have appeared before the committee. Many of them represented the industry, but others came from other sectors as well, such as the recent appearance by a Crown prosecutor. Fines handed out to violators sometimes amount to \$250 or \$500. Yet even after being fined, some people go poaching again the very next day.

Do you think that fines should be a lot higher?

Fines are not all there is. Of course, as we said earlier, we're not going to throw a 14-year-old in jail for stealing a candy bar one time from a convenience store, for example. However, a person who commits the same offence five times has to be penalized.

First, should higher fines be introduced?

Second, should we consider revoking licences, regardless of group membership, if people commit repeated poaching or other violations?

Do you think that would help deter these people from committing offences?

**Kaili Levesque:** You're quite right about the fines. We often hear that as well.

To add another tool to the tool box, the department is exploring financial and administrative penalties. These would go beyond mere fines for a violation. They would consist of harsher penalties designed to hurt the wallets of recidivist-type violators, as my colleague said, a little harder. That's what we're aiming for. Things are still in the exploratory stages, but that's also part of our review of our inshore fishery policy and, more broadly, our approach to managing the conditions of licence, as you said. We're taking a careful look at that.

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

To conclude, I give the floor to Mr. Deschênes.

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

I have a question for the chief financial officer, Patrick Amyot.

After analyzing the supplementary estimates tabled, we see that the budget has increased by about \$150 million. Of that amount, just over \$146 million relates not to transfers to other departments, but to expenditures. Of that \$146 million, \$142 million is really earmarked for things like reconciliation on issues related to indigenous rights and the fisheries, recognition and gradual implementation of self-government agreements and implementation of reconciliation agreements on British Columbia fisheries.

Can you explain to me, Mr. Amyot, how that money is being spent?

**Patrick Amyot:** These amounts are part of vote 10b, with respect to contribution agreements. As the deputy minister, Kaili Levesque, explained, procedures regarding our contribution agreements are in place to assess requests and provide the money. Right now, we're on the process for money under supplementary estimates (B). The money hasn't been received yet. The supplementary estimates have to be passed first. Once that happens, the negotiations will resume.

• (1010)

**Alexis Deschênes:** Okay, but who gets that money?

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

If you could provide that to us in writing, Mr. Amyot, we would appreciate it.

[*English*]

That's going to finish our panel here today. We need to get to voting on the supplementary estimates at this point.

In all, there are three votes in the supplementary estimates (B), 2025-26. I will seek the unanimous consent of the committee to

group the votes together for a decision. Is there unanimous consent to do so?

[*Translation*]

**Alexis Deschênes:** Mr. Chair, are you asking for unanimous consent for the vote only, or for everything else too?

**The Chair:** It's to bundle all the votes together into a single vote.

**Alexis Deschênes:** Okay, that's fine.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Shall all votes referred to the committee in the supplementary estimates (B) for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2026, carry?

DEPARTMENT OF FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Vote 1b—Operating expenditures.....\$5,483,487

Vote 5b—Capital expenditures.....\$131,250

Vote 10b—Grants and contributions.....\$140,808,125

(Votes 1b, 5b and 10b agreed to on division)

**The Chair:** Shall I report the votes back to the House?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** I'm going to do that very quickly, because we have Routine Proceedings happening right now.

[*Translation*]

Our next meeting will be held on Tuesday, when we'll hear from the final witnesses under our review of the Fisheries Act.

[*English*]

We're also going to spend time on drafting instructions after the two panels on that day, as this will likely be our last meeting of 2025.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.







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