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# Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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Chair: Patrick Weiler





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Monday, March 9, 2026

• (1105)

[English]

**The Chair (Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.)):** Good morning, everybody.

I call this meeting to order.

[Translation]

Welcome to meeting number 26 of the 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 by expressing gratitude that we're doing the important work of this committee on lands they have stewarded since time immemorial.

**Ernie Klassen (South Surrey—White Rock, Lib.):** Excuse me, Mr. Chair. Before we start with opening statements and before you proceed, I'd like to ask for unanimous consent to move the following motion:

That, pursuant to the order of reference from the House dated Thursday, February 26, 2026, the committee invite the Minister of Fisheries for one hour and the department officials to appear for the second hour of the meeting regarding the Main Estimates 2026-27, and that this meeting take place no later than March 31, 2026.

This is also being sent to the clerk in both official languages.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Klassen. Just for future reference, please make sure I recognize you by name before speaking.

**Ernie Klassen:** My apologies.

**The Chair:** I understand that a hard copy of the motion has been circulated to members who are here and that the clerk will be circulating it by email in short order as well. It seems fairly self-evident.

With that, I'm happy to open it up to any debate.

We'll start with Mr. Small.

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

I think we should amend the motion to have the minister for two hours. She can have her officials by her side, but I think the minister is quite comfortable sitting in that chair answering our questions. It would be nice to have her for a couple of hours.

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

I'm sorry. I forgot to mention that this will be put on notice, unless there's unanimous consent that we forgo that and debate it right now.

Is there unanimous consent?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** I'm not seeing any disagreement, so we can continue with it.

Would anybody else like to speak to it?

Just to clarify, Mr. Klassen, are you putting this on notice, or would you like to move it at this point?

**Ernie Klassen:** I'd like to move it, if possible.

**The Chair:** Okay.

[Translation]

Mr. Blanchette-Joncas, you have the floor.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas (Rimouski—La Matapédia, BQ):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would just like to understand my colleague's reasoning. When did he decide to invite the minister, specifically? Was it just this morning? Why not table a notice of motion before the committee meeting so that we could review it?

I am a little surprised at how we are operating this morning. I would like my colleague to tell me when he actually decided he wanted to invite the minister.

[English]

**The Chair:** Would anyone like to speak to that?

Mr. Klassen.

**Ernie Klassen:** Chair, we've requested to invite the minister on several occasions. We have invited her, and we officially invited her again, so I just decided over the weekend to put this motion forward.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Before giving the floor to Mr. Blanchette-Joncas, I would like to remind you that on Thursday, February 26, the main estimates were referred to our committee for consideration and report.

Mr. Blanchette-Joncas, you have the floor.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you very much for these clarifications, Mr. Chair.

I will repeat my question to my colleague: When did he decide to invite the minister?

At the opening of the meeting, when we already had an agenda, he tabled a notice of motion. We were not aware of this. You have now clarified the situation. However, I would like to understand my colleague's reasoning. If it is important to invite the minister, why did he not table the motion earlier? That is what I want to understand. Why is he doing this at the beginning of the committee meeting, when we have a pre-established agenda?

[English]

**The Chair:** Would anyone like to speak to that?

**An hon. member:** [*Inaudible—Editor*]

**Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.):** We know we did what we did. It's self-explanatory.

**The Chair:** Unless there's anybody else who'd like to speak to it, Monsieur Blanchette-Joncas, go ahead.

[Translation]

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

No response is a response. Right now, the government doesn't really know how to steer its ship.

My colleague is submitting a motion to the committee. I just want to know when he thought about this and decided he wanted to invite the minister. The three people representing the government here are looking at us and are unable to answer this simple question.

You know, I took improvisation classes in high school. This morning, I took a very good one, but with people who are paid more. So I'm not really impressed. I would say that I am very disappointed to see that the member of the governing party is unable to tell us when he wanted to invite the minister. When asked the question, he has no answer. As you can see, this morning we are witnessing a class in improvisation 101 given by the members of the governing party.

**The Chair:** Mr. Cormier, you have the floor.

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

I would just like to provide my colleague with some information. I know that he is not a permanent member of this committee and that he is replacing his colleague today.

If I am not mistaken, motions can be moved and notices of motion can be submitted at any time during a committee meeting. That is what my colleague has just done today: he has just moved a motion to invite the minister to appear before the committee by March 31. That is what we do, just as his colleague, whom he is replacing, sometimes does; he proposes certain motions or studies when it is his turn to speak. That is exactly what my colleague did today.

I don't see what's wrong with that. If there is something wrong, the clerk or you, Mr. Chair, can tell us. To my knowledge, my colleague was fully entitled to move this motion today. Our committee has discussed inviting the minister several times. I think we have

invited her three or four times. We want her to appear before our committee. To add to that, I would say that since taking office, the minister has already appeared before our committee three or four times, unlike other ministers in other governments, who have repeatedly declined invitations to appear before this committee.

So, we are inviting the minister. My colleague has the right to move this motion. Whether it is adopted or rejected, we must move forward by following the established process.

• (1110)

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

[English]

Next we're going to Mr. Arnold.

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

I want to provide some clarity. We've invited the minister multiple times to appear before the committee on the marine protections study we're doing. Now that she can appear on the estimates, don't confuse that with asking the minister three or four times to appear and consider that covered off. We still want the minister to appear before this committee on the coastal marine protections study that this committee has been doing.

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

Monsieur Blanchette-Joncas.

[Translation]

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank my colleague Mr. Cormier for informing me about how the committee operates. Obviously, I never said that my colleague in question was acting illegally or not following the Standing Orders.

I will repeat my question, if my colleague Mr. Cormier is able to answer it: When did the members of his party decide to invite the minister? That is my question. Can anyone answer it? I have already asked the question and I am asking it again. It is as simple as that. Can my colleagues answer it?

It seems important to invite the minister, since they are moving a motion. I would like to know when the decision was made and why the motion was not distributed earlier. Is that clear?

**The Chair:** Mr. Cormier, you have the floor.

**Serge Cormier:** I still don't understand the question. You could clarify the situation, Mr. Chair, just to make sure, but based on all my years in committee, I don't think we needed to table a notice of motion. Anyone can move a motion at any time at the committee. If my colleague's question is about that, I think you might explain to him how it works.

I repeat that we are inviting the minister to appear before the committee after already having asked her to come here four times. We know she has a very busy schedule, but we want the minister here.

To answer my Conservative colleague, I would say that, when the minister appears before the committee to answer questions on the main estimates, in particular, we will be allowed to ask her any questions. The issue of marine protected areas could be part of the questions, just as we can ask the minister questions on any subject when she appears on other occasions. I think my colleagues will have plenty of time to ask her all the questions they want about marine protected areas when she appears, which should be no later than March 31.

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

[*English*]

Mr. Small.

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

I'd like to amend my colleague's motion so that the minister would appear for two hours instead of one, and then, in the second hour, she could discuss conservation areas. That would take care of all the requests she's turned down so far to show up to the study we have almost completed.

**The Chair:** I understand you're moving an amendment to the motion that Mr. Klassen has tabled to invite the minister to appear for two hours rather than one hour. I guess that's the amendment that has been moved.

Would anyone like to speak to that amendment?

Mr. Klassen.

**Ernie Klassen:** Just for clarification, the minister can be asked to attend for two hours; that's not a problem. She may or may not be able to do that depending on her schedule. We can put in that request without any issues.

**The Chair:** Are there others who would like to speak to it?

Mr. Arnold.

**Mel Arnold:** I'd like to clarify that this committee has agreed to ask the minister multiple times to appear for two hours on the coastal and marine protections study the committee is undertaking. She has not responded. We've asked the parliamentary secretary, who should be the direct liaison between this committee and the minister on her appearances here, and we've heard no response.

To use the estimates as an excuse for the minister to be here to cover off the estimates and multiple other topics is not acceptable. She should be here for the two hours to cover the estimates, because we see there are significant cuts to the department's budgets this year. There will be, I'm sure, a full two hours of questions just on the estimates.

We will repeat the request for the minister to appear on the coastal and marine protections study the committee is undertaking.

• (1115)

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Blanchette-Joncas, you have the floor.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

In the end, I don't think I'll ever get an answer to my simple question about when my colleagues made the decision to invite the minister, but anyway—

**Serge Cormier:** It's irrelevant.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Mr. Chair, you can see that the government member is unable to answer us, and while I am speaking—

**Serge Cormier:** We can table a motion at any time.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** —he feels entitled to cut me off and talk over me. I would ask you, Mr. Chair, to simply remind my colleague that I have the floor.

You know, this isn't the first time I've seen this government make it up as it goes along. This morning, there's further confirmation. It's unable to answer a simple question about when it made the decision to invite the minister. We previously asked for that, and it was important, but this morning, March 9, the government members woke up and decided that they were going to table a motion. However, when we ask them when it was decided that the motion would be tabled, they don't know. It's important to invite the minister, but we don't know when the decision was made. Mr. Chair, it's quite unusual, quite strange even, that people see something as important, but don't know when they made the decision to act on this important thing.

I don't think it's worth extending the debate for several hours. We already have an agenda right now. I will be pleased to accept the motion to have the minister testify here for two hours, as has already been discussed.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Blanchette-Joncas.

I don't see any other speakers. Therefore, we can go to a vote.

[*English*]

Shall the motion be amended accordingly?

**Mel Arnold:** Could you read how the motion would be worded?

**The Chair:** Mr. Clerk, do you want to read it?

**The Clerk of the Committee (Maxime Ricard):** We'll have to work the amendment of Mr. Small into the main motion later. To the text that you've received, if my understanding is correct, Mr. Small is proposing to add that the minister appear for a total of two hours and that the second hour be on the topic of our study on coastal and marine protections.

**Clifford Small:** I'd like to revise that to two hours. Just take out the coastal and marine protections part of it.

**Robert Morrissey:** You can't amend your own amendment—

**Clifford Small:** No, you can amend it.

**Robert Morrissey:** —but we're okay with it.

**Clifford Small:** Are you okay with it?

**Robert Morrissey:** Yes.

**Clifford Small:** Oh, Bobby, you're so kind. I'm going to have to bring you a pack of Jam Jams.

**The Chair:** Are we all in agreement with the amendment to the motion?

(Amendment agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

(Motion as amended agreed to)

**The Chair:** Great. We will have an invitation go out to the minister in due course.

Mr. Arnold.

**Mel Arnold:** Mr. Chair, while we're on the topic of motions, I put a motion on notice on Friday. This committee, the entire committee, has asked the minister no fewer than three times to appear before this committee on the study on marine and coastal protections. The request initially went out, or was moved at the committee, on November 12, and went out again on February 3 and again on February 23. The committee, the entire committee, agreed to request the minister to appear.

When she appeared on February 2 to discuss sections of Bill C-15, which she could speak nothing of at the time, by the way, she said, "I make myself available to this committee when asked." That was her quote. She also said, "I am always open to appearing at committee."

For six months, the minister should have known that the committee requested her to appear to discuss marine and coastal protections, a study in which we've received testimony detailing how the government has steamrolled the livelihoods of Canadians who depend on marine resources. Three times now the committee has unanimously agreed to call the minister, yet the minister has not even responded.

Ministerial accountability is a well-established convention of Parliament. I hope that all members will agree that we have a responsibility to Canadians, like those who have testified in the marine and coastal protection study, to carry the concerns and grievances of Canadians to the minister.

As such, I will move the motion that I put on notice on Friday:

That the committee report to the House its deep disappointment that the Minister of Fisheries has failed to appear before the committee as requested for its study on Marine and Coastal Protections; that despite the committee's request being transmitted on four separate occasions, the Minister has declined to make herself available prior to the completion of the study; and that the committee express its serious concern regarding the Minister's failure to respect the will of the committee and its request for her to appear.

• (1120)

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

As Mr. Arnold mentioned, this was put on notice on Friday. All members should have a copy of it in their inbox.

Would anybody like to speak to this motion?

Monsieur Cormier.

**Serge Cormier:** Mr. Chair, look, I hope the people watching at home saw that we just passed a motion to invite the minister before March 31. We just did that. The Conservatives amended this motion so the minister is coming for two hours instead of one. We all agreed to that. They're putting a motion on the floor right now to invite the minister again, or report that to the House. The minister will come.

Since she took office—I'm not trying to defend the minister; I'm just putting the facts on the table—she has come to this committee three times already. I hope the people watching at home can look back to the Conservative years to see how many times a fisheries minister came to this committee. Compare that with all fisheries ministers and with how many times the Liberal fisheries ministers have come to this committee.

This is just some theatrical politics we're seeing right now. We want to study mackerel right now. We just passed a motion to invite the minister. We all agreed. For me, this motion by Mr. Arnold is irrelevant right now. It's totally irrelevant. I'm not sure why they're trying to do this. The minister will come. She has come many times already, as I said.

Please, can we just move on and get to the mackerel study? I'm sure my colleague Clifford Small, who talked a lot about the situation with mackerel, certainly also wants to study that, as does my colleague from the Bloc.

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

Mr. Arnold, I saw that you had your hand up, and then we'll have Mr. Small.

**Mel Arnold:** As Mr. Cormier just said, I hope people at home are watching so they see that he just declared the testimony we've heard from Canadians who are reliant on the fisheries and are being ignored by this fisheries minister, and the more than three requests for the minister to appear on the study of coastal and marine protections.... How dare he call that irrelevant. How dare he say that those fishermen, those recreational harvesters and all the people in those coastal communities are considered irrelevant.

The request for the minister to appear first went out in November. To think they can come in, have the minister appear on the estimates, which she is required to do regardless, and supplant a motion passed by all members of this committee for her to appear on the marine and coastal protections study... For him to say that this is irrelevant is an absolute insult, not just to the members at this committee but to people across this country. For the fishermen and the communities that rely on those fishermen to be called irrelevant is an absolute insult.

I move that we pass this motion today saying that the minister has failed to appear and that it be reported to the House.

• (1125)

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

Next I have Mr. Small, who'd like to speak to this.

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

I'm just responding to Mr. Cormier's remarks when he said that the minister didn't appear very much at this committee prior to 2015. I think Mr. Cormier, since he comes from a fishing riding, understands and recognizes where the fisheries went from 2015 until now.

With a moratorium on mackerel, the decisions that have been made, the increase in protection areas and all of the concerns the fishing industry has accumulated, it's more important than ever to have the minister come to this committee and answer for what's happened during the last 11 years. Prior to the last 11 years, fishermen, processors and those who work in processing were much happier with the way the fishery was run, and they just want to go back to that. They'd like to hear from the minister, and we'll continue to press for the minister to appear here.

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

I'm not seeing anybody else with their hand up.

Mr. Klassen.

**Ernie Klassen:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I beg to differ with Mr. Arnold. I don't believe my colleague Mr. Cormier said that what fishermen were saying was irrelevant. That's a bit of a stretch from what he was saying.

Furthermore, the minister has been informed of what is going on at this committee. I do consult, as the parliamentary secretary, with the minister.

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

With that, let's move to a vote on this.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 5; nays 4 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

**The Chair** The motion is agreed to. We'll transmit that to the House in due course.

There are a couple of things related to this motion that we need to quickly discuss before moving on.

**The Clerk:** These are the usual motions for when FOPO reports to the House.

The first one would be that the chair, clerk and analysts be authorized to make grammatical and editorial changes as may be necessary.

Unless members want to add a supplementary opinion to that, the only other motion would be that the chair present the report to the House.

• (1130)

**The Chair:** Are there any questions on that? It's pretty straightforward stuff. Is it agreed?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee is meeting today—now at 11:30—to commence its study of Atlantic mackerel and Atlantic herring fisheries.

As agreed to in committee, we are starting this study with an update from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans on the actions taken in response to the 28 recommendations the committee sent to the minister in February 2023.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

There is one other thing we need to dispose of before we get into the study.

Three proposed budgets were distributed to members in the last week for our new studies. Is it the will of the committee to adopt these three budgets?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**The Chair:** With that, I'd like to ask all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio and feedback incidents and to protect the health and safety of all participants, including the interpreters.

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

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. Those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic. Please mute yourself when you're not speaking.

[*Translation*]

For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: either floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

[*English*]

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

With that, I'd like to welcome our witnesses from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. I appreciate your patience.

By video conference, we have Céline Gaudet, regional director general, gulf region. In person, we have Bernard Vigneault, director general, ecosystem sciences directorate; and Todd Williams, senior director, resource management, operations. Also by video conference, we have Mario Gaudet, director, fisheries and harbour management, gulf region.

We are going to start with a five-minute opening statement from Madame Gaudet.

[Translation]

**Céline Gaudet (Regional Director General, Gulf Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the management of Atlantic mackerel and to update the committee on actions taken by Fisheries and Oceans Canada since 2023.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge that I am joining you today from Moncton, New Brunswick, the traditional and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq people. I want to honour and respect the Mi'kmaq nation, whose deep connection to this land continues to guide our efforts toward reconciliation and meaningful collaboration.

[Translation]

We are here today to speak to the department's 2022 decision to close the Atlantic mackerel commercial fishery, and to provide an update on stock status, the supporting scientific advice and our ongoing management approach, including how we have responded to the committee's recommendations.

Atlantic mackerel is a species of long-standing economic, cultural and ecological importance throughout Atlantic Canada and Quebec. It supports livelihoods in many coastal communities and plays a key role in marine food webs as both predator and prey.

[English]

In 2022, the department took the difficult but necessary step of closing the directed commercial and bait fisheries to promote the rebuilding of the stock. This decision was not taken lightly, and I want to acknowledge the hardship faced by some harvesters who rely on mackerel for income.

Recreational fisheries and food, social and ceremonial fisheries remained open, and quotas were accorded for necessary bycatch in other fisheries, for bluefin tuna bait and for science purposes. However, the scientific advice made clear that continued removals at levels required for even a modest commercial fishery were not consistent with rebuilding and that strong action was required to give the stock the best possible opportunity to recover.

• (1135)

[Translation]

Harvester involvement remains central to our science. Following the closure, harvesters continue to support the assessment through scientific sampling across mackerel's Canadian range, replacing samples formerly collected in the commercial fishery. Harvesters also regularly provide observations and clarifications that strengthen scientific advice.

[English]

Given the importance of mackerel as bait for other commercial fisheries, the department reopened a small, closely managed bait fishery in 2024. This approach aims to balance rebuilding objectives with the operational needs of harvesters. The department has also taken steps to inform the industry of alternative baits and av-

enues to explore new options, and it continues to engage with key players to explore options to access bait in other fisheries.

[Translation]

Despite rebuilding efforts, the 2025 scientific assessment continues to present a challenging outlook. The stock remains in the critical zone under the precautionary approach framework, and spawning stock biomass continues to be low. Recruitment remains weak, and no sustained improvement has yet been observed.

[English]

Atlantic mackerel is a transboundary stock shared with the United States. Total fishing pressure is influenced not only by Canadian decisions but also by U.S. management measures.

DFO continues to closely monitor U.S. science and related fisheries management decisions. Recent interim increases in the U.S. assessment appear driven by improvements in the southern contingent of the stock. These changes are not being observed in the northern contingent that contributes to the Canadian fishery.

In light of these differences and in recognition of observations from Canadian harvesters on the water, the department has advanced the next Canadian stock assessment from 2027 to 2026.

[Translation]

Small pelagic fish, such as Atlantic mackerel, are good candidates for rebuilding. The department is optimistic that this stock can rebuild with the continuation of strong management measures.

[English]

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the committee's 2023 letter, which included 28 recommendations to the minister. I am pleased to report that the department has acted on many of these recommendations, and we remain committed to ongoing improvements in science, management and engagement.

We are now pleased to answer your questions.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Gaudet.

[English]

With that, we'll go to our first round of questions, the six-minute round, starting with Mr. Small.

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

I heard Ms. Gaudet, the regional director general for the gulf region, mention that the best opportunity for the recovery of Atlantic mackerel is keeping the commercial Canadian mackerel fishery closed.

I just reviewed the decision by the Americans to have a quota increase this year of close to 10,000 metric tons. In one part of their rationale for doing so, they mention that they could have set it 500 metric tons higher had it not been for the bait fishery in Atlantic Canada.

Mr. Vigneault, how much of the American increase in the mackerel quota is attributed to the lack of fishing in Atlantic Canada?

**Bernard Vigneault (Director General, Ecosystem Science Directorate, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** I would say none. The increase seen by the U.S. is mainly in the southern contingent, which is not fished in Canada. They see it from a number of measures, including a sustained increase in the eggs from their survey, which we haven't yet seen to a similar extent for the northern contingent.

**Clifford Small:** One of the 28 recommendations from the study we carried out in 2022 was that we re-establish a commercial fishery for Atlantic mackerel to match that of the United States.

It's quite clear, if you dig into and check out the rationale the Americans are using in setting their quota, that in setting their quota, they're taking into consideration the fact that we're not fishing. It's clear. I can provide to this committee the rationale the Americans are using to increase their quota.

Monsieur Vigneault, would you consider the increase in the American quota significant or insignificant for 2026?

• (1140)

**Bernard Vigneault:** We consider it significant. That's why we have decided to rerun the model to do our stock assessment for mackerel. It was done on a two-year basis and was last done in 2025. We've decided to accelerate the analysis of the egg and larvae that were collected in the summer of 2025 and advance by a year the stock assessment, because as the member is rightly stating, the U.S. accounts for Canadian catch in their stock assessment. The reverse is also true: We account for U.S. catch in our stock assessment.

We have been collaborating with the U.S. on the science side. We contribute to the stock assessment they do for both the southern contingent, where we have seen a recent increase, and the northern contingent. They could collaborate with our stock assessment for the northern contingent that is fished in Canada.

**Clifford Small:** You're saying that there's a southern contingent and a northern contingent in Atlantic mackerel. How certain are you that some of the northeastern Atlantic mackerel haven't migrated into our waters and blended with our stock? What do you know of the DNA of European versus American mackerel?

**Bernard Vigneault:** There is ongoing work on that. We are part of a working group with the United States, but also with European countries, to study mackerel in the North Atlantic. We've done ongoing research to look at the genetics of the stock to differentiate, as you mentioned, the northeast versus northwest, but primarily in our case it is to differentiate the northern and southern contingents so we can quantify more precisely how much of the northern contingent is fished in the U.S. during winter.

**Clifford Small:** What has the budget been that you've dipped into to complete the work you've just described to us? How many

thousands or millions? How many scientists do you have working on that project?

**Bernard Vigneault:** We have one research scientist and one full-time employee working on mackerel science based in the Quebec region at the MLI. We also have support technicians.

I don't have the exact figure for the science budget, but it is significant, and it was stepped up to address the concerns and questions that were identified by the industry in our Atlantic mackerel science working group. There's a range of science activities. There's not just the stock assessment, but also research to refine the assessment that is ongoing.

The budget is in the order of several hundreds of thousands of dollars. I don't have the exact figure with me today.

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

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

**Robert Morrissey:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Either Madame Gaudet or Mr. Vigneault can answer my question.

When the decision was made in 2022 on mackerel in the North Atlantic, what were the catch rates in the preceding year and a number of years before that? What led you to that? Were fishers experiencing a decline in their catches?

**Bernard Vigneault:** The decision to list the stock was made because it had been deep in the critical zone since 2011 despite a reduction in the TAC. For our stock—

**Robert Morrissey:** My question was, what was the experience of fishers with their catch volumes?

• (1145)

**Bernard Vigneault:** On the experience of fishers, the catch per unit effort is not used for stocks that aggregate, like mackerel. Because they aggregate in very dense, small locations, you can fish and have extremely high success in catching the fish despite the overall biomass being very low.

It's not used directly for the stock assessment for mackerel and other species that aggregate like mackerel—mainly pelagic species.

**Robert Morrissey:** Yes, I understand that, but my question was.... Somebody, I assume within the department, would have verification of the volumes of mackerel that were caught globally in the North Atlantic region by fishers.

Mr. Williams.

**Todd Williams (Senior Director, Resource Management - Operations, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** I have some statistics for you going back to 2017, as an example.

**Robert Morrissey:** Okay.

**Todd Williams:** Landings, including bait, across Atlantic Canada were at 10,266. In 2018, we saw a slight rise at 11,050, and then from 2019, it was at 8,750, 7,957 and 4,519. Then we got into a closure period, and there are minimal numbers due to bycatch after that.

**Robert Morrissey:** Up until 2022, there were no restrictions to what the industry could catch.

**Todd Williams:** There were. Those were just the landings. What we had in 2019 and those subsequent years were more or less in alignment with the total allowable catch and the landings. However, in the years preceding that—I don't have access to that information right now—I recall that there was a large discrepancy between what the TACs were set at and what the landings were actually—

**Robert Morrissey:** Could you provide to the committee, in as much detail as you have, the actual landings that were documented by DFO in the various regions where fishing was considered the North Atlantic stock, leading up to the 2022 decision to close?

My next question is again for whichever witness wants to answer.

Could you expand a bit on the U.S. stock and the Canadian stock? Often, fishers will refer to them as one stock. From what I heard in your opening statements, they may not necessarily be so. Can you elaborate for the committee on whether there is a difference between the two, and the impact that could have on the resources in the northern stock, as well as what's referred to as the southern stock, which would be U.S. mackerel?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes, the stock that is assessed in Canada is the northern contingent of the stock. That one is—

**Robert Morrissey:** Am I right or wrong to assume that the mackerel off the U.S. coast swim up into Canada and are available in Canadian waters for Canadian fishers?

**Bernard Vigneault:** That's the northern contingent. The northern portion of the stock that we assess in Canada comes to Canadian water from the U.S. It migrates in the spring to Canada across the province and goes back to the U.S. in the fall.

In the United States, there's another contingent that we don't assess in Canada—the southern contingent—but when the U.S. does their stock assessment, they do it for the entire population of the northwest Atlantic. They assess both the northern and southern contingent together. In Canada, we assess the northern contingent separately, because that's the one being harvested in Canada.

**Robert Morrissey:** On the other stock you referenced in the U.S., the southern stock that they don't consider, where would that stock primarily be located?

• (1150)

**Bernard Vigneault:** It doesn't come to Canada in the summer. It stops in the northeast—

**Robert Morrissey:** Does it come to Canada at all?

**Bernard Vigneault:** It doesn't come to Canada at all.

Part of the science that's done to do the stock assessment is to establish how much of the fish are caught in the winter in the U.S. or what proportion of the northern contingent, when it winters in the U.S., is caught by the fishery in the U.S. That's part of the stock assessment.

There's quite a lot of uncertainty on that. It ranges from 20% to 80%, and that's why we've decided to redo the stock assessment earlier to assess the change with the decision in the United States.

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

[*Translation*]

I will now give the floor to Mr. Blanchette-Joncas for six minutes.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses who are with us today.

My first question is for Ms. Gaudet.

On February 5, I sent a letter to the Minister of Fisheries, Joanne Thompson, regarding the announced cuts at the Maurice Lamontagne Institute, located in Mont-Joli, in my riding. Despite a reminder on February 12 on the floor of the House and a new email sent out on March 5, I have yet to receive a response.

Can you confirm today that there will be job cuts at the Maurice Lamontagne Institute, which falls under the Department of Fisheries and Oceans? If so, how many positions would be affected?

**Céline Gaudet:** Thank you for the question.

I don't have the details with me today. If I may, I would like to answer you in writing.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Ms. Gaudet, in the interest of transparency for the employees and the people in my riding, I would appreciate it if you could send a written response regarding the following points.

First, I would like you to provide us with the exact number of positions affected, broken down by job category: researchers, scientific staff, technical staff, administrative staff, contract staff and casual staff.

Second, please tell us what kind of cuts are being made, whether they involve the elimination of positions, non-renewal of contracts, hiring freezes or other measures.

Third, I would like you to distinguish between permanent positions and precarious or term positions.

Fourth, I would like to get a breakdown of the cuts by program, branch and research mandate, including applied basic research and scientific monitoring activities.

Fifth, please share with us the specific timeline for the implementation of the decisions as well as their time frame, including whether further rounds of cuts are anticipated beyond the current fiscal year.

Sixth, I would like to know the reasons given, including any budgetary, strategic or organizational analysis that led to these choices.

Seventh, I would like to know the anticipated impact on scientific capacity, the continuity of research mandates and the next generation of scientists.

Eighth, I would like to know what mitigation or support measures are planned for the affected workers.

Ninth, I would like to know what consultations, if any, were held with staff, scientific branches or union representatives.

Tenth and finally, I would like assurances about the Maurice Lamontagne Institute's future and the compatibility of the cuts with federal obligations toward scientific monitoring, the protection of marine ecosystems and sustainable resource management.

Can you commit today to providing that information in writing to the committee as soon as possible?

**Céline Gaudet:** We'll be following up on this issue, of course.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you.

Ms. Gaudet, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans regularly refers to science to justify its decisions. Yet if cuts are reducing scientific capacity at centres such as the Maurice Lamontagne Institute, how can you guarantee that decisions will continue to take into account the best available data?

**Céline Gaudet:** Thank you for the question.

I'll ask my colleague, Mr. Vigneault, to answer this question.

**Bernard Vigneault:** In terms of the cuts implemented, we made sure to maintain the core capacity needed to support the department's decisions on fisheries in particular. We can use certain tools that basically provide the same information, but in a more effective and less costly manner. In the case of fisheries, we prioritized this area and we didn't make any major cuts. It's directly tied to our capacity to support decisions, as you said. Despite the decisions made regarding cuts, we're still in a position to support decisions on fisheries.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you for these clarifications, Mr. Vigneault.

Ms. Gaudet, I'll turn to you. You're a director. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans plans to cut 724 full-time positions by 2028-29. How many of these cuts could affect scientific capacity?

• (1155)

**Céline Gaudet:** Thank you for the question.

In terms of scientific capacity, science remains a top priority for the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. Again, if you're looking for specific figures, I can get back to you in writing. That said, I can tell you that science is a priority at the department. We'll find every way to ensure that our programs continue. It will depend on our resources. However, as Mr. Vigneault just said, we'll make sure that all our tools are used and that we have the right tools to make the proper decisions.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Ms. Gaudet, if science is a top priority for your department, why are you authorizing cuts to a scientific research institute such as the Maurice Lamontagne Institute? Please explain.

**Céline Gaudet:** Thank you for the question.

As I said, the science is there and it's part of our program. There may be some cuts. We'll give you the data, as you requested. We can respond to you that way.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Ms. Gaudet, who made the decision to go ahead and implement these cuts in the scientific sphere, particularly at the Maurice Lamontagne Institute in our area?

**Céline Gaudet:** Thank you for the question.

I would like to ask my colleague, Mr. Vigneault, to chime in if he has anything to add to my response.

The decisions about programs are made at the department level. It's a process. It isn't one thing in particular. Decisions are made based on all sorts of factors. We must ensure that the department's mandates are upheld and fulfilled.

**The Chair:** Thank you. Your time is up. If you would like to add any comments, please send them to us by email.

[English]

That finishes our first round of questions.

We're going into the second round, which is the five-minute round, starting with Mr. Arnold.

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

Thank you to all the officials for being here today.

This gets quite technical. I'm referring to a document that was prepared for us by the library analysts. It talks about how "Continued U.S. catches affect the estimated timeframe needed to grow the stock above the LRP with a 75% likelihood". It says, "in a scenario with no American or Canadian fishing, 'the minimum time to grow the stock to above the LRP with a 75% likelihood was estimated at 6 to 7 years'", and "in a scenario with American removals of 3,639 mt (the 2023 commercial TAC), the rebuilding time 'would increase to between 7 and 9 years.'"

That sounds reasonable, but then the document we were provided says, "Therefore, DFO estimates the 'minimum time required for the stock to rebuild above the LRP with a 75% likelihood in the absence of Canadian fishing...under prevailing productivity conditions' to be nine years." Then it says, "DFO 'will aim to rebuild the stock to the rebuilding target in 18 years' or twice the estimated minimum time required to rebuilt."

Can you explain why we've jumped to 18 years in what we're provided?

**Bernard Vigneault:** The minimal rebuilding plan is based on no Canadian fishing. That's the nine years that was last estimated. When we take into account the bait fishery that was authorized and so on, that's where we get the larger rebuilding plan.

What's important for this stock is that we have a very definitive impact on fishing and the timelines for recovery. We can see, for example, at the current TAC for the bait fishery of 500 tonnes, that we have a 75% chance of the stock biomass increasing in the next two years. If we start increasing the commercial TAC or if the removals from the U.S. increase, that will reduce the probability of the growth of the stock.

• (1200)

**Mel Arnold:** So much depends on the U.S. continuing to take from the total allowable catch; is that correct?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes. As I mentioned earlier, we account for the U.S. catch in our stock assessment. The U.S. does the same. When they did their last assessment, they accounted for the 500 tonnes.

**Mel Arnold:** Thank you.

I want to move on to the letter that was sent to the minister on February 22, 2023, including the 28 recommendations. We probably aren't going to get a chance to go through all 28 recommendations today, but the first recommendation was to "restore all standard science and assessment activities for all fisheries management decisions, especially moratoriums and closures."

Have those standard science and assessment activities been fully restored?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes, they have been fully restored. We have since done the annual sampling for the stock assessment—the egg and larvae survey. We've done the stock assessment every two years, and as we mentioned earlier in our introduction, we're even doing it annually this year to account for the change in the U.S. We're doing that along with consistent work in research to address the concern and the recommendation from this committee on mackerel.

Along with that work, we have started the collaboration with industry and the collaboration with academia to look at the reproduction of the stock, the predation of the stock and so on.

**Mel Arnold:** Okay. Thank you.

Before I run out of time, I'd like to ask Ms. Gaudet if she could please provide the committee with a summary of the actions taken and/or completed on the 2023 recommendations in that letter.

Could you provide a summary to this committee on what actions have been taken and/or completed on that?

**Céline Gaudet:** I will defer this question to my colleague Mr. Williams.

**Todd Williams:** Yes, we will.

**Mel Arnold:** Thank you.

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

We're going to Mr. Cormier for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Over the course of this study, we'll probably be hearing from fishers' associations, or even from fishers themselves. You're the ones here today.

Since 2022, there have been two points of view. We have your perspective and the industry's perspective. The industry people maintain that the mackerel are plentiful and that they see them everywhere when they go fishing. At the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, you have a more bureaucratic point of view. You maintain that the mackerel are all gone and that we must be careful.

I would just like to put things in perspective. Who is telling the truth here? How can we obtain an accurate and fair picture in order to explain the health of the mackerel stock to the different groups?

What steps are you taking to explain to fishers' associations the threat to the species and the need to exercise caution? You said earlier that you carried out scientific surveys in 2025. Are you doing your surveys in partnership with the industry, or are you doing them on your own, with the department's scientists?

How can we ensure that everyone understands the current condition of the mackerel stock?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Thank you for the question.

Actually, it isn't one or the other. Both are true.

The fishers' observations are entirely plausible and valid when it comes to the clustering of fish in high concentrations in localized areas. Think, for example, of the fish found near the west coast of Newfoundland and Labrador as a result of warming waters.

We worked with the Fish Food and Allied Workers union, FFAW-Unifor, to set up a number of research projects in order to take these observations into account and to ensure that the model of our scientific biomass study remains valid under these changing conditions. So far, we're quite confident in the results. The stock assessment is based on eggs and larvae collected throughout the Gulf of St. Lawrence by sampling the water—

**Serge Cormier:** I don't want to cut you off, but have you been doing these samplings in the same places for the past 20 years?

• (1205)

**Bernard Vigneault:** Some places are the same, but measures are in place to ensure that we have plenty of sampling areas. This matter was explicitly discussed in detail in 2023, when we carried out the stock assessment. We confirmed that the current model remained appropriate and that most of the eggs were in the areas where the collection takes place in June.

**Serge Cormier:** Does the industry know how you carry out these surveys? Do they actively participate in your data collection?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes, we work with the industry. For example, they give us samples of adult fish. We use these samples to establish the maturity of the fish and their fertility rate. This direct input in our model helps us to fine-tune our biomass projections.

We also work with the industry to establish research priorities. A number of research projects have been set up in response to comments and questions from the industry. We're looking in particular at environmental factors and climate change. We have work under way to study how climate change affects larvae prey, a key factor in the species' reproductive success.

**Serge Cormier:** Since the introduction of the moratorium in 2022, a certain quota for bait has been made available to fishers. What is the current figure? Is it the same as last year, or will it be reviewed this year?

**Bernard Vigneault:** I'm going to ask my colleague Mr. Williams to answer you.

[English]

**Todd Williams:** Since 2024, we've allowed a small bait fishery of 440 tonnes, shared across Atlantic Canada. We've instituted a range of monitoring requirements for that, which vary to some degree among regions, including hails or daily catch reporting and so forth.

**Serge Cormier:** Is the total available quota for the bait fishery this year set already, or not yet?

**Todd Williams:** Last year, the minister made a two-year decision in which 500 tonnes were allocated for each year, 440 tonnes being for bait each year. However, given the renewed focus on what the U.S. announced and the ongoing input we receive from stakeholders.... We just met with the Atlantic mackerel advisory committee a couple of weeks ago—with industry. They had a number of suggestions, and we're taking those on board. We're looking at the

latest science advice, and we'll provide the opportunity for the minister to evaluate this again for 2026.

[Translation]

**Serge Cormier:** Thank you.

[English]

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

[Translation]

Mr. Blanchette-Joncas, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll continue with my questions for Ms. Gaudet.

I want to make sure I understand what you said about the elimination of 724 positions at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans by 2028-29. In your opinion, these job cuts will not result in any loss of scientific expertise. Is that correct?

**Céline Gaudet:** Thank you for the question.

In terms of expertise, the cost-cutting exercise is also a review of priorities and resources in order to put the people we have in the right place. Sometimes a reduction doesn't necessarily mean a loss of jobs, but rather a reorganization of priorities or the way things are done. That's how I would answer your question. We have to remember that this is also in a reorganization exercise. As mentioned earlier, there are things we are going to do better, and we are going to adapt to today's needs. That is also the intent of the exercise.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Okay.

Can you provide us with a written response indicating how many of those planned job cuts will actually affect the department's scientific capacity? That's my question. If the department is planning those job cuts, has it assessed the risk of the permanent loss of scientific expertise, particularly if analytical capacity is affected? I would like you to answer that.

Ms. Gaudet, you will understand that it is with a great deal of emotion that I am speaking to you today. I represent the people at the Maurice Lamontagne Institute in Mont-Joli, in my riding. Those employees and families are grappling with uncertainty.

Can you tell us if their jobs will soon be at risk?

• (1210)

**Céline Gaudet:** Thank you for the question.

Again, I don't have the details about the people affected. There is cost-cutting at the Maurice Lamontagne Institute, but if you want details, we can provide them to you in writing.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Ms. Gaudet, the herring and mackerel stocks are going to need more science, specifically for their recovery. How can the department strengthen its analyses if it reduces its scientific capacity?

**Céline Gaudet:** Thank you for the question. I'm going to turn to my colleague Mr. Vigneault if he would like to respond.

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes, thank you.

You have to remember that this is part of a budget reduction exercise. We have been tasked with reducing our spending, especially where there is duplication. One way to reduce the impact of this reduction is to work with internal organizations, which usually happens through contribution funds. We can maintain the same science, but everything will be delivered differently. As a result of partnerships, we will need fewer resources. There may also be longer periods during which we have the same information, but then we will need fewer resources—

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Are you going to privatize the analyses—

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

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** I would like an answer in writing, Mr. Chair, because that answer didn't reassure me very much.

**The Chair:** Okay. You'll have a few more rounds of questions as well.

[*English*]

With that, we will go to Mr. Gunn for five minutes.

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

I'd like to pass my time to Mr. Small.

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

I'm looking at recommendation number five: “That Fisheries and Oceans Canada begin using additional stock assessment methods, including acoustic sounders, to assess Atlantic mackerel populations, as is the current practice in other North Atlantic nations and publicly release the conclusions of these assessments.”

Mr. Vigneault, I'm wondering if any part of that recommendation has been acted upon.

**Bernard Vigneault:** We have worked with other nations, like the United States, and with ICES, the organization in charge of the survey, to fine-tune and develop the methodology for our acoustic survey and egg survey.

I just want to point out that no other jurisdiction uses acoustic as their main end on this. They also use the egg and larvae survey, as we do in Canada. The difference is that some jurisdictions, such as in Europe, have enough capacity to use acoustic data to supplement the science. We are part of those discussions.

**Clifford Small:** Are you aware that the herring acoustic assessment in 3L and 3K in Newfoundland waters had the seventh year of

the seven-year acoustic program cancelled this past year? Are you aware of that?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes, we are aware of that. We are looking at other ways to do the science, because—

**Clifford Small:** How much mackerel was observed acoustically in year six of that seven-year program?

**Bernard Vigneault:** It's a fact that mackerel was observed through this acoustic survey, but to my earlier point to the committee, really, the key input into the stock assessment is the egg survey.

**Clifford Small:** The mackerel were observed acoustically. The recommendation in this study, which was released in 2023, was that acoustics be used in stock assessments. How much of the mackerel acoustics information that was gathered in the fall of 2024 was used to follow up on recommendations in this report, or was it not used at all?

**Bernard Vigneault:** The science advice for the evaluation of the stock is to use the egg survey, because the acoustic survey is not currently possible. Because it's a very mobile species, as we know from the harvesters' observation, first off—

**Clifford Small:** It's very mobile. It's everywhere. No doubt you follow social media. You've seen pictures and videos of schools of mackerel on top of the water, off the Bay of Fundy, the south shore of Nova Scotia, the eastern shore of Nova Scotia, the southern gulf, the Gaspé, the northern gulf and around all the shores of Newfoundland and Labrador. With these videos basically being taken within a month of each other, it can't be the same mackerel making that huge migration.

There's an immense amount of mackerel, based on simultaneous recordings of the surface action of these mackerel, wouldn't you say?

• (1215)

**Bernard Vigneault:** There is mackerel, but as I mentioned earlier, we have done very dedicated, targeted work to look at where the core of the spawning occurs. It's still in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where we sample.

We are collaborating with the ocean tracking network to use acoustic sensors. That's an ongoing project where we have put sensors into mackerel. To your point, that will enable us to track mackerel in Canada and along the U.S., and will guide us in future adjustments to the survey. The main point is that we have had a dedicated effort to look at where the egg spawning occurs, and we're still confident in our science.

**Clifford Small:** Thank you.

I have a little time left. You described how the fish harvesters were collecting samples of mackerel for you. I understand that in the riding I come from, there was at least one person collecting samples with nets that had mesh of one size. How many different year classes can you catch in one-sized mesh?

**Bernard Vigneault:** The focus of the sampling is to get the state of maturity, so we're looking at the larger fish, not taking samples to look at composition. It's mainly to get the size of the fish and account for—

**Clifford Small:** That's the year class the minister said was missing. It's a missing year class.

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

**Clifford Small:** Did you find any of those mackerel in that study?

**The Chair:** We're over the time, so I'll have to interrupt. Of course, if there's anything more that Mr. Vigneault would like to add to that, it can be done in writing. There will also be another round of questions for Mr. Small, and for others as well.

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

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

My question is for Mr. Vigneault.

Can you tell the committee what may be different in the assessment that's going to take place in 2026, from a methodology perspective, versus assessments you did earlier?

**Bernard Vigneault:** There are a number of questions we've addressed through targeted research, which were embedded in the recommendations from the committee. Making sure that we account for the impact of climate change, we confirmed that the location of our survey is still valid with the ongoing change in the warming water—

**Robert Morrissey:** Do you have confidence in your site locations for the survey, even with the impact of climate change?

**Bernard Vigneault:** We are fully confident. Furthermore, we hope to be able to add additional accuracy to the survey by taking into account the direct effect of temperature and the development of prey on the development of the larvae and young fish, because we think they're some of the minor drivers of rebuilding the stock.

**Robert Morrissey:** You answered a question earlier referencing the importance of the egg survey. Can you expand on that?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Because the fish move a lot during the summer, it will be very challenging to design an acoustic survey that captures the fish across the whole of Atlantic Canada.

**Robert Morrissey:** What does the egg survey tell you that a count of mature fish does not?

**Bernard Vigneault:** The egg survey allows us to make sure that we count the entire population. That's the work I've described. We've confirmed that the core of the spawning still occurs in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where we do our sampling. We take the egg data from the water sample, and from that, we extrapolate the future biomass of the population.

**Robert Morrissey:** I assume that's a proven scientific method that is used in more than just Canada in projecting the health of the stock.

**Bernard Vigneault:** It's the same method that's used primarily in the U.S. and by European countries. For all of these jurisdictions, for the reason I just mentioned, the egg survey is the core indicator for the stock assessment.

**Robert Morrissey:** We often hear, as referenced earlier, about the abundance of schools of fish in the water here, there and everywhere. Could you explain to the committee why you may be seeing this and why at the same time, from a scientific level, there's a concern about the abundance and health of the stock?

● (1220)

**Bernard Vigneault:** There are a number of species that naturally aggregate in very high concentrations of fish. Even if the overall population has been reduced for any reason, you can still have at specific locations pelagic species like mackerel aggregate and be very visible.

That's the other characteristic of mackerel. It stays close to the surface and it's very visible. You can have a large number of fish visible from the surface in high numbers, but if you take a step back and look at the entire population, you can still have depleted populations despite seeing aggregates.

**Robert Morrissey:** What would be the outcome if you simply made a decision based on seeing schools of fish on the top of the water in several locations, making the assessment that the stock is in abundance?

**Bernard Vigneault:** You would likely overestimate the biomass of the fish. That would be deleterious to the population itself, because the harvest, which is based on aggregates, would be overestimated. We've seen that in other science assessments for stock.

You can maintain a very successful catch, because you concentrate your fishing efforts in an area where the population aggregates—

**Robert Morrissey:** What happens when decisions are made based on that alone? How quickly do you go from a fishery to a disaster?

**Bernard Vigneault:** In the case of a species that aggregates, there's not much between a TAC where you would see a probability of growth and a TAC where you don't see growth. It could be a conservation issue if you do not account for the entire population when you do your stock assessment.

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

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

That finishes our second round.

We're going to start the third round, with Mr. Arnold for five minutes.

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

Again, thank you to the witnesses.

I'm not sure if this should be for Mr. Vigneault or Ms. Gaudet.

Out of the 28 recommendations three years ago, I want to focus on recommendations 12, 13 and 14. Recommendation number 12 was, “That Fisheries and Oceans Canada develop a bilateral stock management agreement with the United States for the 2023 Atlantic mackerel fishing season.”

We're now three years past that date. Could you update the committee on the progress of the bilateral stock management agreement that was recommended?

**Todd Williams:** Indeed, Fisheries and Oceans Canada agrees with the recommendation of the committee, in that we should be working closely with the United States and having regular engagement with respect to the management of this fishery.

We have engaged the United States regularly at multiple levels over the past three years to aim for a more formal arrangement. Unfortunately, to date we have not succeeded in that, but there have been U.S. issues as well.

**Mel Arnold:** Would that relationship have been easier to work out two years ago?

**Todd Williams:** I wouldn't speculate on all the reasons why. I know that we were engaging prior to two years ago and have done so since two years ago, but certainly we have not yet succeeded. Again, we continue, even as recently as a couple of months ago, to reach out.

**Mel Arnold:** I'm moving on to recommendation 13: “That Fisheries and Oceans Canada provide Canadian fishers with equivalent harvest opportunities to any total allowable catches set by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) for 2023 since Atlantic mackerel is managed as one stock.”

When we did that study, we were told that Atlantic mackerel was managed as one stock. Now you're trying to say that there are two stocks. Why aren't Canadian fishers allowed to harvest when the Americans continue to harvest and can apparently take more of a harvest if Canadians aren't allowed access?

• (1225)

**Todd Williams:** First, I think it might be important to note that the U.S. stock assessment and the Canadian stock assessment, as my colleague outlined, are not equivalent. While the U.S. stock assessment focuses on the stock as a whole, both north and south, when it comes to fishing opportunity, we are really looking at the northern component of that. We then rely on the science provided to us by our DFO science colleagues in terms of accessing the northern contingent of mackerel. It wouldn't necessarily be appropriate to draw a parallel to harvesters who are fishing in a southern contingent.

**Mel Arnold:** They really are being managed as two separate stocks, then, not as one stock, as the committee was led to believe in 2023.

**Todd Williams:** The way I view it is that it is a stock with different contingents that mix periodically throughout the year.

**Mel Arnold:** They are being managed as two separate contingents of one stock, then. Is that correct?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes. From the science perspective, it is done separately.

In the U.S., they do the science advice and the management for the entire U.S. stock, which is primarily the southern contingent and a portion of the northern contingent.

**Mel Arnold:** Canadian harvesters continue to be restricted. Commercial harvesters continue to be under a moratorium, yet the U.S. contingent is able to harvest more because Canadian harvesters aren't allowed. Is that correct?

**Bernard Vigneault:** I will turn to my colleague Mr. Williams on management, but I just want to remind the committee that the increase that was seen in the latest science advice in the U.S. is primarily due to a growth of the southern contingent—the contingent that doesn't come into Canadian waters and is not fished in Canada.

**The Chair:** We're over time, so if you could, make it very brief. For anything else, writing in would be preferred.

**Todd Williams:** We have seen alignment since 2012 in terms of the TACs with the United States. Sometimes they misalign because, as Mr. Vigneault noted, they see growth in the southern contingent, but most recently in 2025, the U.S. commercial TAC and the Canadian TAC were very similar.

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

Next we'll go to Mr. Klassen for five minutes.

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

Madam Gaudet, science has been done on the Atlantic herring stocks, which will be released prior to the meeting of the herring advisory panel this spring. It appears as though the most recent data does not indicate any positive changes in the health of the species. Warming waters, access to food, and predation all impact the recovery of the stock.

Can you tell me about the impacts of climate change on the gulf and on the recovery of mackerel and herring?

**Céline Gaudet:** Indeed, climate change is a serious consideration that has an impact.

I'll turn to my colleague Mr. Vigneault, who may have additional scientific perspectives to give in answer to your question.

**Bernard Vigneault:** Thank you.

All pelagic species are very sensitive to climate change impacts. The Gulf of St. Lawrence, and the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence in particular, has seen warming water temperatures, which affect the ecosystem.

In the case of the Atlantic mackerel, we still think it is important for the recovery of the stock. We see a significant beneficial impact from reducing the fishing effort in the recovery, but in addition to that, they're impacted by climate change. Often it's the timing of when the larvae of the Atlantic mackerel hatch and the availability of their prey that are really critical. In a changing climate, it could be offset. You could have the hatching of eggs without suitable prey available at that time of the year because of a mismatch, and that could cause difficulty for the stock.

For herring, we think it's primarily driven by environmental conditions, similar to what I've described as a mismatch, for example, between when the larvae hatch from the eggs and the availability of prey to sustain their growth.

• (1230)

**Ernie Klassen:** Thank you.

Mr. Williams, in the past, when the population was healthy, one out of 10 mackerel was older than seven years. Now it's only one out of 100. Older fish lay more eggs, so having fewer of them means that fewer young fish are born. It takes six to seven years for young fish to grow old enough to help rebuild the population. They used to lay seven times more eggs than they do now.

Fish harvesters are seeing lots of mackerel on the water. Are those fish old enough to reproduce? How would you compare the number of large fish today to those in 2010?

**Bernard Vigneault:** We still see that the mackerel population is, as we call it, truncated, because we see much smaller and much younger fish than we have in the past.

Since 2011, it's been rare to have fish older than seven years old, and indeed, while the fish are mature at two to three years and can live for over 15 years, it's really the larger fish that produce the most eggs and are the most significant for reproduction. We still see right now that there's a depletion in those larger fish in the Gulf of St. Lawrence ecosystem. That's a subject of ongoing research.

We will be starting a project, in collaboration with industry, to sample fish across Newfoundland, not just to see their size but also to look in detail at their maturity and their capacity to produce eggs and contribute to the reproduction of the species.

**Ernie Klassen:** Can you tell us more about the age breakdown for current mackerel stock signs?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Right now, as I mentioned, we see that the majority of the fish are smaller at seven years old. In the last assessment, we saw that the fish were smaller than their average size in the past. It's still part of the natural variation that we've observed for the population, but in the most recent stock assessment, not only were the fish younger than they have been in the healthier population state in the past, prior to 2011, but the fish were getting smaller.

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

[Translation]

We'll go to Mr. Blanchette-Joncas now for two and a half minutes.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Gaudet, as part of the comprehensive spending review, has the department analyzed the impact on its scientific capacity if positions were to be eliminated or affected?

**Céline Gaudet:** Thank you very much for the question. I'm going to ask my colleague Mr. Williams to answer.

**Bernard Vigneault:** Thank you.

It would be easier for us to provide you with the written answer that you requested because we don't have it, but I can to reassure you—

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** I'm going to give you two suggestions for an answer, Mr. Vigneault: Is it yes or no?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes, we can provide—

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Have you done an analysis, yes or no?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Absolutely, we have done an analysis. We looked at that, as I said earlier, to ensure that there would be no impact on decision-making for fish stocks.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Will you send the full analysis to the committee?

• (1235)

**Bernard Vigneault:** We'll look at what documents we can send you. I can tell you right now that these decisions were made jointly for all the regions.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** You have to tell us, Mr. Vigneault. If not, we will table a motion to force you to make that analysis public. Thank you.

Ms. Gaudet, I'll come back to you. If scientific positions are cut, will certain analyses have to be entrusted to outside organizations?

**Céline Gaudet:** Once again, since the question pertains to the management of the department's science program, I will ask my colleague Mr. Vigneault to answer.

**Bernard Vigneault:** Providing data by contract or otherwise is not part of the plans.

What I said earlier is that, for science, it's always important to collaborate with outside organizations, such as universities and industry. That was the case even before the cuts. It helps provide a different perspective for the interpretation of the data. It helps us increase our capacity to gather data. This is something we will continue doing in the future.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Has the department assessed the risk of becoming more dependent on outside expertise?

**Bernard Vigneault:** As I said earlier, we are not more dependent on outside expertise. We made sure that we had the scientific capacity to—

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** My question is whether you assessed it, Mr. Vigneault.

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes, we looked at that in detail. We made sure—

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Please send us that answer in writing.

Can the department guarantee that the frequency and quality of scientific advice on mackerel and herring won't be affected by the current spending review?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Absolutely, they will not be affected. In fact, we have put in additional resources, as we said earlier. We're currently conducting analyses that we hadn't planned to do and we've accelerated those analyses to provide for informed decision-making.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** I would like a detailed written reply, please.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Blanchette-Joncas.

[*English*]

We are going to Mr. Small for five minutes.

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

I find it very frustrating to sit here at this table—having been duly elected by the people of Newfoundland and Labrador, having been on the water and having known so many harvesters, processors and those who rely on jobs in the seafood processing industry—and hear the statements being made by our officials right here in talking about the science, the year classes, what's missing, what there's more of and all these things. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that what's being said here is orchestrated and fabricated.

That's extremely frustrating, having been a former fisherman myself and knowing the size of mackerel caught this past summer off the northeast coast of Newfoundland, off the west coast of Newfoundland, off the coast of Labrador and off the south coast of Newfoundland. The mackerel were 1,000 grams. They weren't two years old, and there were many of them.

My question is for Mr. Vigneault.

You referenced the fish sizes getting smaller in every assessment. How did you gain the information about the year-class distributions you're referring to? What was the methodology?

**Bernard Vigneault:** I would first like to point out that the science we provide is through a peer-reviewed process. It includes industry's input—

**Clifford Small:** How many times was a seine shot around a school of fish and the fish that were in that seine were randomly sampled, weighed and then put into the various year classes they should be in? How many times did you catch fish and actually sample a body of fish in the last four years?

**Bernard Vigneault:** In the last four years, the sampling was done in collaboration with industry, and those samples were brought into the labs to do—

**Clifford Small:** They were caught in a gillnet with one mesh size, so how do you know the distribution of year classes? When you were taking samples from gillnets with one mesh size that were going to catch one size of fish, how can you say, beyond a shadow of a doubt, what you've said here today, Mr. Vigneault?

I know you were probably sent here to say that. You're a very good man, but how can you come here and tell this committee what you've told us when it's based on nothing? You know it, and I know it.

**Bernard Vigneault:** Respectfully, the information I provide is based on the best science available, which we gathered through peer review. The information I mentioned about the size of the fish is part of our most recent science advice, which was published in 2025. There was a specific request to look at the model distribution of the size, and that's what we provide to fish. It's important for fish management, as the committee knows, because there's a size limit as part of the regulation for the fishery.

• (1240)

**Clifford Small:** Okay, I have an easy out for you here.

When the bait fishery was announced and the scientific aspect of the bait fishery was outlined, there was an opportunity for the fishers who collected bait to do science and forward the data to you. How much data did the bait fishers supply to you from the bait fishery, based on lengths of fish?

**Bernard Vigneault:** We have used samples from harvesters, because our collection program was initiated before the bait fisheries. As I mentioned earlier, we are working right now in collaboration with the FFAW to gather additional samples—to the member's point—to get additional information on the size and fecundity of the fish. All of that feeds into improving the science assessment over time.

**Clifford Small:** How can you get an accurate representation of the distribution of year classes without a research fishery that collects random samples all at the same time?

**Bernard Vigneault:** That's what the collaboration with the harvesters provides. It provides samples from associations that are participating in our sampling program. They collect samples across Atlantic Canada so we can get representative samples in order to get the proper input into our model and our peer-reviewed science advice.

**Clifford Small:** Do you accept that—

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Small. I'm afraid we're past time.

We are moving on to Mr. Morrissey for five minutes.

**Robert Morrissey:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We have several competent witnesses before the committee today.

If political bluster solved any problems on the east coast for fish stocks, this committee would not be meeting on any problems in any particular fishery. To quote the late John Crosbie, it was political bluster that caused the collapse of the cod fishery, which he had to shut down in the late 1990s. Unfortunately, it sounds good—they're good clips—but it doesn't solve any problem.

My question for the witness is this: Did you fabricate any testimony that you gave to this committee today?

**Bernard Vigneault:** All of the information I provide on the science side is from our peer-reviewed science advice, which is publicly available and published, or from research publications that the scientists at Fisheries and Oceans have published.

**Robert Morrissey:** Then they are facts. The people reading them can interpret them as they choose, which is their problem, but you did not, nor did the department, fabricate any testimony or evidence that was given to this committee, as an earlier member's statement accused.

**Bernard Vigneault:** We didn't fabricate any information. It's provided through the rigorous science advice process at the department.

**Robert Morrissey:** Thank you.

That's important. We may disagree, but there has to be an unbiased adjudicator somewhere, or you see the decisions I quoted earlier that lead to the collapse of fisheries. The people who pay the price are the fishers. We should be making decisions to ensure they have a viable livelihood going forward.

I want to go back.

Could you give testimony or evidence to the committee, from your studies, comparing the large fish documented today with how many would have been in a survey in 2010? If you don't have that with you, I would like to see if you have quantifiable evidence that shows the number of large fish in a survey today versus surveys that would have been taken, say, until 2010, 2011 or 2012. Would you have that information?

**Bernard Vigneault:** We could certainly provide that. That was part of the science advice.

**Robert Morrissey:** Before we get into the details, is the number of large fish today equal to, better than or less than those in 2010?

**Bernard Vigneault:** It is much less. Literally, we don't regularly see large fish that are seven years plus. Again, in the overall estimate—

• (1245)

**Robert Morrissey:** Should that concern fishers?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes. As we mentioned, those large fish are important for their reproduction. We'll do additional sampling. Again, it doesn't mean those fish don't exist. There could be observations on the water, but from all of the population estimates, our estimates are much smaller for those larger fish.

**Robert Morrissey:** We've seen fewer large fish in the scientific data in the past couple of years versus what there would have been in the period of 2010, 2011 and 2012. Is that correct?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes.

**Robert Morrissey:** As a scientist, what is that telling you about the health of the mackerel stock on the east coast?

**Bernard Vigneault:** The population is in a critical situation. It's not healthy. The fact that we are lacking larger fish is one indicator of that, and that's why we're looking at a very slow recovery.

In 2024, it was at 32% of what we have as a limit to say whether the state of the fish is critical or not. In 2025, it was 35%, so it's a very slow recovery. With time, with the reduced fishing pressure and with hopefully more favourable environmental conditions, we could see the population grow back to a healthy state.

**Robert Morrissey:** I referenced earlier the American mackerel stock in the south. You used that term. Just for the record, you stated that that stock does not migrate into Canadian waters. Am I correct?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes, you're correct.

**Robert Morrissey:** When we hear that the Americans are increasing their quota, it's coming from a stock that does not migrate into Canadian waters at times. Is that correct?

**Bernard Vigneault:** First, the increase we see in the U.S. is from the southern stock—

**Robert Morrissey:** It's from the southern stock. Okay.

**Bernard Vigneault:** —because they use our DFO data for the northern stock, so they don't have a major increase for the stock.

**Robert Morrissey:** Do they accept Canada's data on the northern stock?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes. We share data for the U.S.—

**Robert Morrissey:** Do the Americans accept that?

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, but I'll have to jump in here. We're over time.

We'll have a short fourth round, starting with Mr. Arnold for three and a half minutes.

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

This question is for Mr. Vigneault or Mr. Williams.

Out of the 28 recommendations that were sent in February over three years ago, which themes of recommendations have seen the least follow-up, or which has the department been the slowest to respond to?

**Todd Williams:** What we've seen with the recommendations is that we were able to implement some fully. Those that were more difficult for the department to respond to deal with the mandate of the department itself. There were recommendations with respect to assistance for programs for harvesters who are dependent on the fishery and those beyond the authorities that have been provided through the Fisheries Act.

**Mel Arnold:** The ones about coming up with agreements with the U.S. weren't the toughest to deal with, then.

**Todd Williams:** Certainly, that is a difficult area, but it's one that we continue to make progress on, and I'm hopeful in that regard.

**Mel Arnold:** We're now three years after those recommendations. The U.S. made a stock recovery time, which I'm trying to determine, of somewhere between seven and nine years, but then another paragraph says it could be up to 18 years. Many of the harvesters who participate in these fisheries may not be around in 18 years.

What is the chance of them selling their enterprise to anyone watching the very slow progress of the department on recommendations that were made by this committee after a thorough study over three years ago? What hope can you expect those harvesters to have?

• (1250)

**Todd Williams:** First, I'd like to point out that we are hopeful the stock will rebound. Fishing is—

**Mel Arnold:** When?

**Todd Williams:** As Mr. Vigneault pointed out, environmental conditions point to—

**Mel Arnold:** I didn't ask why. I asked when you hope the stock will recover.

**Todd Williams:** Speculating over that would be problematic, I think. We have a rebuilding plan, which was put in place and developed with harvesters, who agreed on these timelines, so they're aware of these timelines and we appreciate that.

**Mel Arnold:** What timelines are you referring to?

**Todd Williams:** Those in the rebuilding plan speak to 18 years.

**Mel Arnold:** By when? At what point can they expect the stocks to be a cut above the lower limit reference point?

**Todd Williams:** The aim is to rebuild in 18 years, with 2023 considered year one from that point.

**Mel Arnold:** That's 18 years from 2023. There's not much hope.

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

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

[*Translation*]

**Serge Cormier:** In short, when the resource was present, there were fishers who fished mackerel for commercial purposes and others who fished mackerel to use as bait for lobster or crab fishing. So there are two groups of fishers who are certainly affected in different ways. On the one hand, there are commercial fishers who just have mackerel fishing licences. For them, unfortunately, it is no longer possible to make a living that way. On the other hand, there are fishers in the industry who depend on mackerel for bait in their traps.

Have you talked to the industry about bait alternatives? Have there been any discussions? Have any programs been put in place to test other bait, whether synthetic bait or bait made up of fish waste, for instance? Have you done any such testing? Have you discussed that? Has money been put into certain programs to conduct tests regarding bait?

[*English*]

**Todd Williams:** Indeed, much of the fishery is focused on bait. For those who are active in mackerel fishing, that's the primary use. Through the Atlantic fisheries fund, we have provided over \$1.6 million for alternative bait solutions. We've worked in the gulf region, bringing stakeholders together to look at the issues around bait and identify alternative sources where possible.

[*Translation*]

**Serge Cormier:** Where do lobster and crab fishers in particular catch their mackerel right now? Do other countries have enough for fishers to get mackerel for bait?

[*English*]

**Todd Williams:** My understanding is that much of the bait is often purchased from foreign countries, where mackerel can still be fished.

**Serge Cormier:** Which one?

**Todd Williams:** It's the northeast stock. I believe in Europe there are sources there.

**Serge Cormier:** What is the state of the stock over there? Is it better than here, if we can purchase it from there?

**Bernard Vigneault:** I don't have the full details, but their recent assessment shows a steep decline. The stock is in a difficult situation in Europe as well.

**Serge Cormier:** That means for fishers and harvesters in the industry, it will be difficult to get mackerel as bait from even those countries.

**Todd Williams:** Yes.

**Serge Cormier:** Are the tests you've done for alternative bait conclusive right now? Where are you at with that testing?

**Todd Williams:** Certainly, we can respond in writing to the committee, if that's requested.

**Serge Cormier:** Yes.

• (1255)

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

[*Translation*]

To conclude, Mr. Blanchette-Joncas has the floor for two minutes.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for you, Mr. Vigneault.

Fishers have sighted mackerel in a number of areas where the department's scientific surveys don't detect them. How do you explain this discrepancy between your scientific assessments and fishers' observations?

**Bernard Vigneault:** I want to reiterate that we work with harvesters to get information on what they observe and samples in order to assess the stock. Stock assessment is based on the larvae and eggs collected by scientists at the Maurice Lamontagne Institute in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence. Scientific opinion is the most robust way of assessing the stock since adult fish can move around the Atlantic very quickly.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Does the department's scientific surveys include all the areas where fishers are currently reporting the presence of mackerel?

**Bernard Vigneault:** From 2000 to 2024, we conducted a series of additional samplings to confirm that there wasn't significant egg production in locations where fish had been sighted that were outside our sampling area. In 2023, we confirmed that this was still a robust method of stock assessment.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Can you give us a concrete example since 2022 when fishers' observations directly changed a scientific opinion that was sent to the minister?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes. Harvesters and industry representatives are directly involved as experts in the development of scientific advice.

In 2023, in developing scientific advice, we discussed the robustness of the assessment and took into account harvesters' observations and questions. Those are things that are discussed through peer review.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Can you give us a specific example?

**Bernard Vigneault:** As you said, fish have been sighted in areas outside the Gulf of St. Lawrence where we record egg production.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** Has the department adapted its egg production surveys to take account of warming waters and changes in spawning periods?

**Bernard Vigneault:** Yes, we've certainly done some work on that. The study conclusion is that the survey is still robust enough to capture spawning. That issue has been directly addressed in the research.

**Maxime Blanchette-Joncas:** What threshold—

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. I'm sorry, but we're out of time.

[*English*]

That concludes our panel today.

I would like to thank the witnesses for taking the time to meet with us. The testimony will be very helpful as we finalize the report and the recommendations that flow from it.

With that, we will briefly suspend in order to move to the last part of our meeting. Since it will be in camera, witnesses and members of the public will need to leave the room.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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