HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

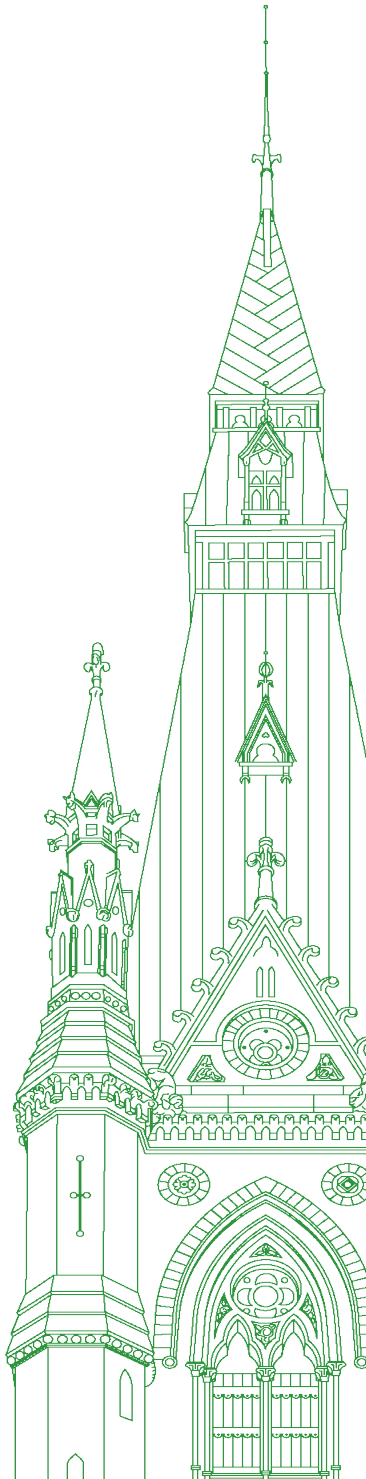
45th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 027

Wednesday, March 11, 2026



Chair: Patrick Weiler

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Wednesday, March 11, 2026

● (1600)

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

Welcome to meeting number 27 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 we express gratitude that we're doing the important work of this committee on lands they've stewarded since time immemorial.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee is meeting to continue its study of Atlantic mackerel and Atlantic herring fisheries.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Pursuant to the Standing Orders, members may attend in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[*English*]

Before we continue, I would like to ask all of our in-person participants to consult the guidelines written 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, but particularly the interpreters. You will notice a QR code on the card, which links to a short awareness video.

Pursuant to our routine motions, I would like to advise committee members that all witnesses appearing virtually today have successfully conducted the required technical testing.

I'll make a few comments for the benefit of witnesses and members.

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

[*Translation*]

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

For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. The clerk and I will do our best to preserve the speaking order. We thank you for your patience.

[*English*]

With that, I would like to welcome our witnesses today.

Appearing in person, we have Lucas DesRoches, a commercial mackerel fisherman.

[*Translation*]

We also welcome, by video conference, Dominique Robert, professor at the Université du Québec à Rimouski.

[*English*]

Also in person, from the Prince County Fishermen's Association, we have Mark Arsenault, president, and Nigel Buote, vice-president.

We're going to our opening statements for five minutes or less, starting with Lucas DesRoches.

Lucas DesRoches (Commercial Mackerel Fisherman, As an Individual): Good evening. My name is Lucas DesRoches. I'm a lobster, tuna, herring, halibut and mackerel fisherman from Prince Edward Island. I'd like to thank you for giving me the time to speak to some issues in the mackerel industry from a fisherman's standpoint.

As fishermen spending time on the water fishing multiple species—when I say “we”, I'm speaking of myself and other fishers all over the island—we can't help but notice and document the increase of schooling mackerel compared to previous years. We believe the stock is showing signs of recovery, even if this trend has not yet been fully reflected in the science due to multiple factors that I believe are giving negative data.

One factor would be the timing of these studies. For example, I think our egg surveys should be done maybe a little earlier and a little later than they are normally done, just to ensure that we're getting the data when the eggs are actually there.

Another factor would be fishing methods. Whenever we use drift nets in Prince Edward Island for mackerel, the common practice is about 32 nets, which is 500 fathoms. The reason we use that number is so that the boat will drift with the nets properly to keep everything strung out to maximize the chance of catching mackerel. However, when DFO instructed us to do samples, we only used five nets, and the wind played much more influence than the tide, making it not effective in catching mackerel at all. We believe that fixing minor issues like that could yield a lot better results in our sampling. We've voiced these concerns many times to the DFO, but these were ignored.

Another example is in using the handline method. Generally, we use a large weight with 36 hooks, and we lower it far down into the school of mackerel. It seems that the larger mackerel tend to be toward the bottom. However, whenever we did science with DFO, we only used six hooks and a very small weight, which left the hooks on top of the school of mackerel. The top of the school of mackerel seemed to generally be smaller mackerel, so we believe it gave poor accuracy with regard to representing the actual stock.

There should be more communication with industry when it comes to every discussion associated with mackerel. I've attended AMAC meetings, and it's very obvious that there's a disconnect between DFO science and fishermen.

Fishing mackerel for lobster bait is a very important part of fishing operations in P.E.I. Traditionally, we have relied more on catching our own bait that on having to purchase it from someone else who caught it from the same schools that we've had to watch swim by, since it's a migratory species. They sell it to us at prices that have been drastically inflated in recent years.

Access to the bait fishery is very important. When it comes to business planning and cost stability, I believe that moving forward there should be a “bait first” approach. In this “bait first” approach, I feel that halibut should also have some of the total allowable catch allocated in order to make the operation a bit more efficient for fishermen.

If a commercial fishery should be opened, I think attention should be placed on an individual quota, limiting large operations from repeating the harm they potentially have already caused to our industry and/or from creating a monopoly, which will only increase prices for fishermen.

My understanding as of late is that U.S. scientists have determined that it's safe to remove approximately 10,000 tonnes of mackerel this year. This is with the anticipation that Canadians will be fishing some, which will be subtracted from the total, and the remainder will be fished by them, so approximately 10,000 tonnes will be fished, whether or not we participate in the fishery. It would be a great chance to take our share of approximately 4,000 tonnes and have measures in place to collect the best science possible while fishing to obtain the most accurate representation of the stock, with the ability to catch our own bait, cutting the cost of operation for individual fishermen with bait licences.

That's pretty much all I have. I just want to mention that we're seeing a lot more mackerel schooling. We're seeing a lot more out there. We have a lot of fishermen, and a lot of them are seeing the mackerel schooling in multiple different areas simultaneously. We just feel that the science is not reflecting that. If we can work together a little better to get a more accurate representation of what's actually in the stock, it will be beneficial for the future.

● (1605)

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

We will now hear from Professor Robert for five minutes.

Dominique Robert (Professor, Université du Québec à Rimouski, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

I thank the members of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans for inviting me to appear.

I am a professor and Canada research chair in fisheries ecology at the Université du Québec à Rimouski. For more than 20 years, my research has focused on understanding the factors responsible for recruitment variability in marine fish. In this regard, much of my research has focused on the ecology of fish during the first year of life, a period when mortality is high and variable. Over the years, my work has focused on several fish stocks in Atlantic Canada, including mackerel and southern Gulf of St. Lawrence herring.

Contrary to a number of forage species stocks in Canada, the assessment of mackerel and southern gulf herring stocks is based on reliable surveys, and these stocks can therefore be considered data-rich. In the case of mackerel, adult abundance is derived from egg abundance measured annually in the spawning area. For herring, abundance is primarily derived from an annual acoustic survey.

Because mackerel is a highly migratory species, it is essential to periodically verify whether a substantial proportion of spawning occurs outside the area covered by the egg survey. In recent years, the survey has been extended on an ad hoc basis to a number of adjacent areas, but a recently published synthesis has shown that the amount of spawning outside the gulf can be considered negligible in calculating the abundance index.

Unfortunately, despite strong restrictions on the commercial fishing of mackerel and southern gulf spring herring over the past several years, the state of these stocks remains in the critical zone, with biomass at approximately 30% of the limit reference point for both mackerel and spring herring. The critical state of these stocks is the result of high mortality among both adults and juveniles.

The high adult mortality rate is explained in part by the current high number of predators in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence. The main predators are grey seals, gannets and bluefin tuna—species whose populations have increased compared with past decades.

In addition to high mortality in adults, the low productivity of these stocks is also due to a decline in the survival rate of juveniles. This decline in recruitment has been traced to environmental conditions that had become unfavourable for larvae and juveniles. The rapid warming of the southern gulf has notably altered the development period of key zooplankton prey, which now develop earlier in the season, while the spawning period has not changed.

Finally, mackerel is a unique case because it is a transboundary stock, and the commercial fishery operating in the United States catches part of the Canadian contingent during its overwintering period. Following its most recent stock assessment, NOAA Fisheries concluded that the U.S. contingent was no longer overfished and decided to triple the Total Allowable Catch, or TAC, from 3,200 to 10,714 tonnes for this year.

Recent studies using otolith composition and genetic markers to distinguish Canadian and U.S. contingents suggest that between 20% and 80% of U.S. landings consist of fish from the Canadian contingent, depending on the year. However, the methodologies developed to date carry a high level of uncertainty. Even so, considering that only 10% to 20% of U.S. landings consist of fish from the Canadian contingent, the substantial increase in the U.S. TAC could still undermine Fisheries and Oceans Canada’s recovery plan.

Based on all of these considerations, I would like to make the following three recommendations.

First, keep fishing activities as low as possible until signs of recovery are observed in mackerel and southern gulf spring herring stocks.

Next, continue research aimed at accurately identifying the proportion of Canadian contingent mackerel in the U.S. fishery, which I believe is one of the greatest sources of uncertainty.

Finally, establish a joint stock assessment and management strategy with the United States to ensure that the state of both contingents is taken into account in all management decisions on both sides of the border.

Thank you.

● (1610)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

We will now hear from Mr. Arsenault for five minutes or less for opening remarks, please.

Mark Arsenault (President, Prince County Fishermen's Association): First of all, we want to say thank you to the committee for the invitation to speak here about issues that are very important to us and to the members we represent. It's an honour to be here, where so much of Canada's history was and continues to be made.

My name is Mark Arsenault. I'm the president of area 25 lobster fishery on the Prince Edward Island side of the zone. With me today is Nigel Buote. He is the vice-president.

Our fishery is somewhat unique. We are the only lobster fishery on the Canadian east coast operating in late summer and early fall, with our season running from mid-August to mid-October. We have approximately 220 members in our local. When the New Brunswick fleet is included, we have about 600 fishers operating in LFA 25.

We are here today to share our perspective from the water. We are not scientists or economists, but we spend a great deal of time at sea. Observation is an important part of understanding what is happening in our fisheries.

When I'm fishing lobster, I travel as far as 40 nautical miles each way, each day. For Nigel it's similar. Over the past few years, we have observed a noticeable increase in both the number and size of mackerel schools. On calm days, they seem to be endless. Even when mackerel are not visible at the surface, we can still tell they're there. Our electronic equipment shows them clearly. Seabirds, especially gannets and seagulls, are another strong indicator of fish. When gannets are diving, it usually means there are fish below, typically mackerel or herring.

It is also important to note that the areas we travel during our lobster season are not normally the areas where mackerel fishing occurs that time of the year. In late summer and early fall, mackerel tend to gather around herring spawn areas, which is where fishers who target mackerel usually operate.

Turning to the economics of it, we all know that there are only two ways to improve the bottom line in any business: increase your revenue or reduce your costs. We have fishers who have bait bills in excess of $50,000 for a two-month fishery. That is a significant number, particularly when we are seeing large amounts of potential bait in the water just under our feet. In small coastal communities, when fishers struggle financially, the effects ripple through the entire community. When our incomes drop, we spend less at local businesses and contribute less to the community. The impact is felt by everyone.

Another issue we'd like to raise is stock-sharing with the U.S.A. From a fisher's perspective, it is difficult to understand why American fleets will be able to harvest fish from the northern stock while Canadian fishers have no access. The U.S.A. has reportedly requested a total TAC of more than 10,000 tonnes for 2026. It is possible that a large portion of that could be coming from the northern stock. For fishers in Atlantic Canada, that raises an obvious question: Why are we in Canada unable to access a resource that is available, just to lose much of that resource to the Americans?

Finally, we'd like to speak a bit about spring herring. There has been a request submitted to open a small herring fishery in our area. Our observations suggest that the herring stock has increased significantly.

I am on the water throughout the spring, lobster fishing as a helper, as is Nigel. Along the same shorelines where we fish lobster, we regularly see large numbers of diving gannets. They seem to increase every year, as they have for the last number of years. This usually indicates schools of herring gathering to spawn. The economic benefit of allowing limited access to this resource would be similar to what we described with mackerel—a reduction in bait costs, of course.

We sincerely hope that this committee and the honourable minister will give serious consideration to these concerns. With rising fuel costs and increases in operating expenses, access to a sustainable bait fishery would make a meaningful difference for many fishers, their families and the communities that depend on them. We are simply asking for the opportunity to fish sustainably for the resources we see almost daily. No one has a bigger interest in protecting the fishery than those whose livelihoods depend on it.

In closing, I would like again to thank the committee for the invitation to speak here today. It's been an honour.

● (1615)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Arsenault.

With that, we're going to begin our first round of questions, starting with Mr. Small for six minutes.

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

My first question will be for Mr. Arsenault.

I'm looking at the 2026 season. I'm looking at projections for fuel prices and the uncertainty with the U.S. market.

What impact would it have on your enterprise if you were able to catch all of your bait yourself versus buying it?

Mark Arsenault: As I stated, a lot of guys are in the $50,000 range. I'm not very far off from that. The catch total would be a bit unrealistic, I suppose, but we could cut our bait bill in half easily.

Clifford Small: In the last mackerel report, which was published in the winter of 2023, there was a recommendation for Canada to match a quota equivalent to what the U.S. is catching. Over the last couple of years, Canada has caught 440 metric tons of mackerel for bait. In the same time, the United States harvested 15,000 metric tons. What do you think of that?

● (1620)

Mark Arsenault: It's not good. That is what I think about it.

As fall fishers, we didn't get a crack at the bait fishery at all, because the first part was gone long before we started. The second part only started after we started the lobster fishery. It was during the first part of the lobster fishery, when we were really busy with the lobster, so we didn't have time. Most people didn't land their mackerel in the fall fishery.

For us, it's totally inaccurate. It's just no good.

Clifford Small: Do you have any thoughts on why the spring opening lasts for several weeks and the late summer, early fall opening for bait fishery goes for less than 48 hours? Do you have any thoughts to share on why that's happening this way?

Mark Arsenault: In the spring, most of the boats are for fish and lobster. Some of them participate. Maybe they get a couple of pans, which is 250 or 300 pounds. Some don't participate at all. Whenever the lobster gear came ashore in late June, when it opened again, there were a lot of boats that had nothing else to do, so they just got their quota every day. It didn't last very long.

Clifford Small: It wasn't for a lack of mackerel during that spring opening.

Mark Arsenault: No.

Clifford Small: Have the sightings been strong? How would you compare what you're seeing on the water now with what you saw when you were a boy, when mackerel were plentiful?

Mark Arsenault: Regarding the number of schools, it's probably more. I'm not saying there are more fish, because you can't see the depth of it all the time, but as I said, I'm sailing over 40 miles some days. When you go home in the daylight and the waters are calm, it's one after the other after the other. It's not every day—I'm not here to tell you lies—but in some cases it's just crazy.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Arsenault.

Now I'll go to Mr. DesRoches.

We had DFO's director of science here on Monday. He talked about the sightings of mackerel on top of the water. He said that plentiful sightings of mackerel on top of the water is not a true indicator of a plentiful resource.

You've fished mackerel all your life. If you were looking for an indicator of mackerel, what would you be looking for?

Lucas DesRoches: As Mark previously mentioned, historically, when people were going after mackerel, they would find schooling herring. That's where the bulk of them would be. Where there's smoke, there's fire. If there are tons of mackerel showing up on top of the water, there are tons of mackerel there. It's hard to tell exactly what's going to be in a school, but you have to go into it and fish it to see the quality of it and the size of the mackerel in it.

I can tell you that, at times, when I fish bluefin tuna and there are no schooling herring around.... We have radars in our boat that we can set up to pick up gannets and other birds diving, and we'll follow to where those birds are. You'll always find a school of something. Sometimes those schools are quite significant as well.

The biggest indicators are visibly seeing the mackerel and knowing from herring fishermen that there are herring spawning and that there will be mackerel around, or just sailing around, following your radar and finding the birds, because they're diving for something.

Clifford Small: We only have a few seconds.

Mr. DesRoches, you were at the AMAC meetings this year. Is that correct?

Lucas DesRoches: In person, no.

Clifford Small: Okay. You know who was there.

Lucas DesRoches: Yes.

Clifford Small: How many ENGOs attended the AMAC meeting this year?

Lucas DesRoches: I couldn't give you an exact number, but I know there were more than last year. There seem to be more every year, which is troubling because—

Clifford Small: Tell me about the influence the ENGOs have compared to the input that harvesters have with their on-the-water experience, which the Prime Minister said he was going to listen to when he campaigned in April. How's that going?

● (1625)

The Chair: I'm afraid, Mr. Small, we are over time.

I'm sorry, Mr. DesRoches. If you'd like to provide a further answer in writing, the committee would appreciate that.

Clifford Small: I will get to him again.

The Chair: At this point, I'm afraid we'll have to move on to Mr. Morrissey.

You'll have the floor for six minutes.

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

The first question is for Mr. DesRoches. Anybody else can join in or opine on it.

Just briefly, can you go back to the common fishing practice you said you use and that you feel gives you a better assessment of the stock than when practices are dictated to you for research purposes?

Lucas DesRoches: The simplest way to put it is that whenever DFO wants to work with us to collect science, instead of asking us how we catch the fish, they come out with a procedure telling us how to fish, which usually doesn't line up with the traditional ways.

For example, in using the gillnets, we have nets adding up to 500 fathoms that we'll have behind the boat and drifting. This way, they work as a sea anchor, so that whenever you have a bit of wind pushing on your boat, it doesn't influence them and it'll keep your nets stretched out. That translates to approximately 32 nets. Whenever they had us do that based on their guidance, it was with only five nets, and the wind had a bigger influence because the nets weren't enough of a sea anchor. It just didn't work properly to yield any results. We fishermen have been doing it for years. We came up with the number of nets to make it work properly.

It's a science practice that from the beginning we know won't work. We tell them it won't work. There's nothing else we can do other than.... We don't want to just deny the science practice, so we go out and do it anyway, knowing that it's going to yield very negative results. It's been year after year now, I guess.

Robert Morrissey: You are giving testimony to this committee that the methods dictated to you by DFO are giving a distorted view of the stock. Is that what you're saying?

Lucas DesRoches: That's correct.

We believe that one of the examples is the methods of science, and the other one is using the handline. We think the data is well put together. It's just incorrect data, because it was obtained in a manner that's not accurate for common fishing practices.

Robert Morrissey: There was documentation provided to the committee earlier that said prior to the closure in 2022, the stock was declining in the years preceding that, when the catch rate did not match the allowable catch that was given. How would you account for the declining landings in mackerel going back over the years? My notes say that it was in 2016 going into 2022.

Lucas DesRoches: Personally, it was my best year in history. I just had to travel a bit more. A lot of other vessels weren't willing to travel. I feel that since I had to travel, it meant that the mackerel were not in the same areas—

Robert Morrissey: You would tell the committee that the effort put out by fishers was not as extensive. That would have an impact on the landings being lowered.

Lucas DesRoches: I would say that. As well, some of the areas that were chosen for sampling may not have reflected the actual area of the fish.

Robert Morrissey: This was not sampling. These were actual landings.

Lucas DesRoches: I would say that with the actual landings, that effort may have played a role in it, for sure.

Robert Morrissey: I take it that all three of you were listening to Professor Robert. His opening statement highlighted that, from his perspective, the mackerel stock in the gulf is in a critical area. Can you respond to Professor Robert's comments on that?

Professor Robert is not DFO. He's not fishing. He's appeared before the committee before, but he would provide a different perspective than what you would be given and it's important to.... How do you respond to that?

That is for anyone, if you can answer it.

Lucas DesRoches: I believe that with the data he was given, he would have no choice but to make that assumption or decision, but we believe that at the level of collecting the data, it was incorrect data. That's why he's getting a false sense of what the actual stock is. I believe as a fisherman that the data is just not true to what's actually in the waters and doesn't properly reflect the stock, due to the factors previously stated, such as the sampling and the effort.

Do you want to touch on that too, Mark?

● (1630)

Robert Morrissey: You made the reference that when you were travelling the strait in the fall, you were seeing mackerel in an area where it was not normal for mackerel to be. You made that comment, but what do you define as a normal area and why would it be important if mackerel were where they would not normally be?

Mark Arsenault: It only goes to show that.... When fishermen were targeting mackerel in years past, they would go to where the herring spawn was. There wasn't the number of schools where we are that there are now, but there's no herring spawn where we're at, or very little of it, so the guys who are—

Robert Morrissey: How do you explain the importance of that to the committee—the fact that although there was no feeding source, there would still be, in your opinion, an abundance of mackerel?

Mark Arsenault: I think there was still a feeding source, and that would be lobster larvae, but that would probably indicate smaller mackerel. The larger mackerel are on top of the herring spawn, which is not where we are. The guys who are fishing tuna, like Lucas, will tell you that the amount of mackerel that's there, and the size of it, is crazy.

I want to tell you a crazy little story to go along with that. One of the guys was out fishing his bait quota for the day, which was 1,000 pounds or so. He said he didn't have time to finish his cup of tea before the crew had the 1,000 pounds on the boat, so obviously that wasn't a small amount of mackerel and obviously there was a lot of mackerel there.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Simard, welcome to this committee.

You have six minutes.

Mario Simard (Jonquière, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would really like to stop the clock to give our friends a few seconds to tune into the interpretation and the lovely voices of the female interpreters rather than my gravelly voice. It's nicer that way.

I will start with you, Mr. Robert.

One question strikes me as fundamental in the context of this study, and that is the need to bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and the observations made by fishermen.

You probably know better than me that science is not perfect. I am not sure how you reconcile the method you use and the observations presented earlier by Mr. Arsenault and Mr. DesRoches.

Is there a way for you to take this data into account to confirm or perhaps refute some of your positions? I would like you to tell us about this.

Dominique Robert: Thank you very much for the question.

Egg abundance data is the data used to estimate the abundance of the Canadian contingent of the stock. It refers to females that lay eggs in a specific area, known as the spawning zone. By estimating the fertility of the females based on the number of eggs laid, we can calculate the number of fish present in the area. This is what allows us to estimate the spawning biomass of the stock.

Obviously, this does not allow us to assess the portion of the population that has not yet spawned. This type of method does not allow us to see all juvenile mackerel, which are not yet adults. What is most important, however, is still measuring the adult biomass, since it is this biomass that subsequently replenishes the stock.

This well-proven method was developed in Europe, is used in Canada, and enjoys broad scientific consensus.

As for sightings of large schools or shoals of mackerel, I have no doubt whatsoever about what the fishermen are saying. Mackerel is a species that moves in large schools, and there are still thousands of tons of mackerel in the Canadian contingent of the stock. If the mackerel are in one location anywhere in the gulf, you are sure to see a lot of them. It’s just that we are currently below the reference limit. According to the data we have from the egg survey, we are well below the reference limit. That is why we should avoid fishing the stock at this time.

● (1635)

Mario Simard: I completely understand.

However, last summer, I went lobster fishing in the Îles de la Madeleine with my colleague Alexis Deschênes and a fisherman, and there seemed to be a considerable gap between the data from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the fishermen’s practical knowledge, even though, at that time, they were not talking about mackerel but other types of bait. I believe they were talking about redfish. These people were drawing conclusions based on decades of experience and the knowledge of people they had worked with in the past who had spent their lives on the water.

I completely understand your scientific reasoning, which, I have no doubt, is quite compelling. However, is there any way to reconcile your findings with the findings that people are observing? For example, as part of the studies you conduct, have you ever gone out on a fishing trip to see what these people see, among other things?

Dominique Robert: Thank you for the supplementary question.

As mentioned at the start, I am not part of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, so I am not the one responsible for stock assessments. I do participate in them regularly, however. When I conduct my own research—which is often done in collaboration with Fisheries and Oceans Canada—I mostly use fishing industry vessels as research platforms.

A recent example is my research program on Atlantic halibut. We have collaborated with the Association des capitaines-propriétaires de la Gaspésie in Quebec, the Prince Edward Island Fishermen's Association in Prince Edward Island, and the Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union in Newfoundland and Labrador. My team goes out with the fishermen. We talk a lot with the fishermen. We certainly draw on their observations. That's how we develop hypotheses.

I completely agree with you that fishermen's knowledge must absolutely be taken into account in all matters related to research hypotheses, as well as in stock assessments. Fishing data is therefore also taken into account in stock assessments.

Mario Simard: What happens if different conclusions are reached? I am not familiar with the finer details of the decision-making process at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, which must have its own scientists. However, when there is a disconnect between the knowledge of people in the fishing sector and that of the scientific community, how can the Department of Fisheries and Oceans ensure a decision-making process that is truly aligned with the existing fish stocks? It seems quite complex to me, especially since there are, I assume, enormous costs associated with your economic activities. These decisions therefore have an impact on fishermen and on the people around them, such as service providers.

I wonder how we can ensure that Fisheries and Oceans Canada makes a decision that is in line with science, but also in line with what is observed on the ground. I do not know whether, currently, you have the tools to do so.

The Chair: I apologize for interrupting, however, we have gone far beyond the allotted time.

If the witnesses wish to provide us with a written response, the committee would be grateful.

[*English*]

We are going to the next round, starting with Mr. Arnold for five minutes.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today and appearing. I want to start with the three at the table.

I'll start with you, Mr. DesRoches, because you talked about the test nets and the way DFO is telling you to set them up, and how it's not efficient. This brings to mind complaints I've heard from the west coast from the shrimp trawlers' association that DFO is not using efficient tow methods or net-setting methods in doing the shrimp surveys on the west coast, so it gets bad numbers. It doesn't get a true stock assessment versus what the harvesters could show them, in that there are more fish in the water than DFO's test methods state.

You've described that fairly well, but is there anything you'd like to add to that? Did you used to test a different way? I think you said you used to test with eight net lengths, and you had different results.

● (1640)

Lucas DesRoches: To reply to that, it was 32 nets, and they put us down to five nets. Moving forward, I think the most accurate form of data you're going to get is if something is operating at its normal capacity. That's the best measure we have. Any time you make a compromise, you're also going to compromise your results.

It would be a great time to make a compromise and take some of the total allowable catch from the American source. We can take it from the northern stock and put a plan in place. Whenever we're fishing mackerel, whether it be with drift nets or handlines, we record everything. We use this chance to get the best and most accurate science.

I think the most accurate form of science we're going to get is if things are running at normal operation versus a compromised method that's not going to work.

Mel Arnold: Thank you very much.

Maybe for each of the three of you at the table, it sounds like most of you fish multiple species. How much mackerel are you encountering as bycatch when you're out fishing for other species? Are you able to retain those mackerel for bait? What happens to them if they're caught as bycatch when you're fishing other licences?

Mark Arsenault: There is no bycatch from mackerel. We don't catch any. Maybe once a year you get a small one in the head of a trap, in the twine of a trap, but that's it.

Mel Arnold: Are you able to be selective enough in your harvesting methods that you're not removing mackerel?

Mark Arsenault: It's not a viable way to catch.

Mel Arnold: Thank you.

I want to switch now to Mr. Robert.

Mr. Robert, you mentioned indications of high mortality from predation. Are you aware of any measures that DFO has undertaken to study or reduce the predation of mackerel stocks or herring stocks?

Dominique Robert: The predation has been studied. That's available in internal documents published by CSAS. That's how we get a sense of the importance of each predator, especially of herring, but mackerel and herring predators are about the same. The only difference is that, because mackerel migrate way outside of the southern gulf, they cross through several different predator fields. There's no action taken by DFO to reduce the number of predators, because it would mean either a gannet or seal cull, something like that, and that's not really acceptable.

Mel Arnold: That's interesting. I'm referring back to a letter that was sent to the minister back in 2023, three years ago. One of the recommendations in that report, number six, was "That Fisheries and Oceans Canada ensure resources and directives are in place to ensure the department adequately studies the predator-prey interactions between seals and mackerel stocks." Are you aware of any further action on that from the recommendation?

Dominique Robert: Not really, so I cannot speak to that.

Mel Arnold: You mentioned that Canada should develop a bilateral stock management agreement. One other piece in that letter, which had a number of recommendations, was recommendation number 12: "That Fisheries and Oceans Canada develop a bilateral stock management agreement with the United States for the 2023 Atlantic mackerel fishing season." Are you aware of any movement by Canada to establish that bilateral stock management agreement?

Dominique Robert: I talked with some people in DFO science, and I know there is a will by Canada to increase dialogue with our U.S. counterparts, but one of the issues now with the current geopolitics is that it seems, on the U.S. side, that such an effort has decreased over the past couple of years.

● (1645)

The Chair: I'm afraid I have to jump in here. We are over time, but we'll have an opportunity for another round.

Next I'm going to Mr. Cormier for five minutes.

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

Mr. Robert, I will go to you in just a minute.

Just briefly, Mr. Chair, I want to welcome back a former colleague, who is in this room and who was part of this committee for many years, Ms. Lisa Marie Barron.

Thanks for being with us again. It's nice to see you.

To the fishermen who are here, my dad was a fisherman all his life. I understand how difficult it is to see that a stock is not in the healthy zone we used to see. I think our hope, and my dream, is to make sure we have a resource that's back in good health so we will be able to have a commercial fishery again in the near future. We want to have both sides of the coin.

I'm going first to Mr. Robert.

[*Translation*]

You heard the representatives of the fishermen's group say earlier that, when they went out fishing, they saw a lot of mackerel at the surface and caught a lot of them.

Is that in itself a sign that the fishery is healthy?

Dominique Robert: It is a sign that there are fish, but it is not necessarily a sign that the fishery is healthy.

Mackerel is a species with a vast range. So, of course, from one year to the next, its position in the system can change. It's a species that moves in schools. If, over a given period of years, conditions are better in one location, people living near that location will certainly see a lot of mackerel, even if the stock is not healthy. We could say that the stock is healthy if everyone in Quebec, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador saw a lot of mackerel at roughly the same time.

That's more or less the question.

Serge Cormier: The fishermen also discussed the data collected and the scientific surveys conducted by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. They would like to see these done a little differently.

As you mentioned earlier, you are not a scientist affiliated with the department. In your opinion, could the method proposed by the group of fishermen for conducting scientific surveys differently from what the department currently does provide a slightly more realistic picture of the stock's health, or would it produce data that is unreliable?

Dominique Robert: The primary indicator used to assess the health of the stock is eggs. Other surveys are used more to assess the condition of the females, such as spawning conditions and the average number of eggs each female will lay in a given year. It is then possible to link the number of eggs to what we observe in the females. In my opinion, then, eggs are the most important indicator. I am not saying the others are not important. They are important too, but they are complementary.

As for how to fish for these fish, I must admit that, personally, I do not know enough to comment on the difference between the method prescribed by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and what the fishermen propose.

Serge Cormier: As I said earlier, I hope—and I think the entire committee hopes as well—that we can once again have a commercial fishery, to help fishermen earn a little more income, or even to help them if they want to use that fish as bait.

I will move quickly to my question, since I do not have much time left.

Officials came here on Monday, and they seemed to suggest that there was a mackerel stock found exclusively in the United States, which was considered the southern stock, and a stock in Canada, namely the northern stock. There seem to be many different opinions on this. Are we fishing the same stocks?

As you mentioned earlier, I believe we are fishing a percentage of these same stocks. Can you give us an accurate overview of the situation so that we can fully understand the difference between these two stocks?

● (1650)

Dominique Robert: Yes.

The Canadian contingent of the total stock is fished in the summer during the spawning period and the feeding period that follows. At that point, the Canadian contingent is isolated from the American contingent, so the fishery that's happening in Canada is catching only Canadian fish, so to speak.

Conversely, fishing in the United States takes place in the winter, in the area where both contingents of the stock overwinter. That means the United States fishery catches some fish that belong to the Canadian contingent.

In other words, that fishery influences not only the abundance of fish in the American contingent, but also the abundance of fish in the Canadian contingent. That's the important distinction.

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

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

Mario Simard: Thank you.

Gentlemen, two minutes isn't long, so I'll be very quick.

Earlier, you talked about bait. I have two fairly simple questions.

As I understand it, you get a tax deduction for 100% of the bait you buy. You can confirm that for me later. There are also special licences for bait fishing.

Do you have access to those special licences?

Would access to special bait licences be enough for you, or are you really aiming for access to a larger volume fishery for a commercial fishery?

[*English*]

Mark Arsenault: The bait licence would be sufficient if we could use it, but we're not using it. By the time we get our lobster season going—this is in the last couple of years—and the second quota opens up, which is only open for two days, we're busy with lobster, so we don't have a chance to get one. We've tried for the last two years to get the season open on August 1, so at least we could participate in the fall fishery, but it hasn't worked.

I talk to people from all over the east coast, and fishers from everywhere tell me the same story. Where there's smoke, there's fire, and there's a lot of smoke and fire in eastern Canada when it comes to mackerel as far as I'm concerned. I don't know if the science needs some different form of work, as Lucas said, but we're definitely too far apart to make sense. It doesn't make sense.

Lucas DesRoches: To touch on whether it should be bait or commercial access, bait would be great. That gives more fishermen access, but commercial access itself is going to allow Canadian fishers to supply Canadian fishers with bait instead of having to buy it from outside sources.

We don't have to pay tax on the sale of bait, but we do face inflated prices year in and year out. Right now, there are talks of a pound of mackerel going for close to four dollars when just seven years ago, it was a little over one dollar. Access is what we want.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm sorry—

Mario Simard: I would just ask you to submit in writing what you would consider a sufficient bait fishing period for the purposes of the committee's report.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Next we're going to Mr. Small, and then to Mr. Hardy.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. Robert.

Historically, beyond the last 30 years, the Gulf of St. Lawrence would completely freeze over every winter. Harp seals would reproduce there, typically, but that is not happening these days. Historically, mackerel reproduced in these same waters when water temperatures, at various times of the year, were very different than they are today.

Mr. Robert, you know the ecosystem has changed. You're a climate-change believer, and I believe it's changing as well. Fish depend on certain temperatures to thrive and reproduce.

Why is science still looking for mackerel larvae where they looked 30 years ago instead of trying to find out where the mackerel are reproducing today? Why is there not a concerted effort to find out where these mackerel are actually spawning? You know the harp seals aren't reproducing there. You know that, because you can fly over and see it. Can you square that circle for me, sir?

● (1655)

Dominique Robert: You're totally right that the system has changed quickly. However, one thing that doesn't change is that there is still winter. Basically, the system becomes cold in the winter, and then the temperature will reincrease. There are freezing temperatures at the surface of the gulf anyway. The temperature will reincrease in the spring, and the mackerel follows temperatures that are—

Clifford Small: May I interrupt for one second? How deep is the water in the Northumberland Strait? Is it 15 or 20 fathoms? Do you think that water doesn't get cold right down to the bottom and warm up right down to the bottom with the season changing?

Dominique Robert: The mackerel don't spawn in the Northumberland Strait, and there's no station for—

Clifford Small: That's where they look for the larvae.

Dominique Robert: No, it's not there. It's up north in the southern gulf. There's no station for larvae in the Northumberland Strait. They're eggs, actually, not larvae. They're up north of the strait.

The thing is, when the water temperature increases, the mackerel come in and spawn. Where I totally agree with you is that the survey should be expanded at least every three or four years to look at adjacent areas. So far, the synthesis of data we have shows that there is no or not much spawning outside the southern gulf, but this should be monitored regularly, because with the changes, it's not impossible that the mackerel spawning area could change.

Clifford Small: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Gabriel Hardy (Montmorency—Charlevoix, CPC): I'm going to start with some questions for Mr. Robert.

Thank you for being with us.

This is one of my first times on this committee, and I notice that the science and the fishers who actually do the work don't seem to agree.

In my riding, Montmorency—Charlevoix, fishers regularly tell me that there's a huge abundance of striped bass, but officials tell them there aren't enough and they have to wait.

Do you see the same thing with other types of fisheries? Do you find that the science doesn't actually align with what the fishers are saying?

I have a second question about that.

Fishers are scientific too. Do you take their science into consideration, or is it not part of the equation because, to a certain extent, you think that what fishers say or think is just a feeling? Do you think your figures are accurate and their science is inaccurate?

How do you calculate that?

Dominique Robert: In the stock assessment process, calculations always include the commercial fishery data. This is actually the first data we look at in stock assessments, and the fishery—

Gabriel Hardy: I'll stop you for two seconds: If they don't have the right to fish or fishing is limited, their data is limited as well, so that skews your calculations, doesn't it?

Dominique Robert: Indeed, if fishing is shut down, it's more complex, because at that point, there are no data coming from the fishery. That's the situation right now—I agree with you—for stocks like spring herring or mackerel, where there is very little fishing. However, there's generally always at least a small fishing quota, and we're able to make calculations based on measures that come directly from fishers. I'm thinking of the catch effort, for example, that is to say the catch per unit of effort. These are indicators of how much effort fishers have had to expend, on average, to land a given quantity of fish.

Gabriel Hardy: I agree with you. However, what they are telling us here is that, in a few minutes, they're able to reach your limits, and then they're no longer allowed to fish any other species; after that, they're told that there isn't enough stock and therefore that they can't fish any more. In a way, there's a disconnect. I think it's extremely important that one day we connect with fishers and listen to their science as well. It has to be part of the equation.

I have one last question for you, in closing. In your equations, do you take into account the survival of fishers and their businesses, by recognizing that if we restrict fishers, they'll stop operating, or do you focus on protecting fish without taking into account the protection of fishers?

The Chair: Time is up.

If you could give a very short answer, I would appreciate it.

● (1700)

Dominique Robert: First of all, I'm not the one who manages this; it's Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

Second, there is still an advisory committee whose role is to reconcile scientific advice with the socio-economic reality of fishers. So there is still a process that allows the situation to be moderated to some extent.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Hardy.

[*English*]

We're going to finish with five minutes for Mr. Connors.

Paul Connors (Avalon, Lib.): Good day. My first question is for either Mark or Lucas. Both of you can answer it.

We all know the negative impact if we fish in the critical zone and what that would cause. What would be the negative impacts if we do not fish the quota of mackerel that needs to be fished? Would there be any negative impacts?

Lucas DesRoches: One of the negative impacts is.... A large part of the mackerel's diet is lobster larvae. Earlier, there was talk about eggs and larvae. What Clifford was saying was that over in the strait, there are samples taken for the largest number of lobster larvae. We think that if sampling isn't done for mackerel, there should be. Since this is a large part of their diet, it makes sense for them to be there. I just wanted to add that.

The risks would be.... Especially if somebody else is going to be fishing the same stock and selling it back to us, it's not very beneficial to individual fishermen.

Mark Arsenault: I'll back up what Lucas just said 100%.

A while ago, something was mentioned about bass. We have the same issue with that. We're fighting science all the time with bass. That is also a predator to lobster. It may be more so; I'm not sure.

It is my feeling and the feeling of a lot of fishers that we need to balance the wheel. We have a lot of predators chasing our lobster. That's all we have left to fish. If you're taking out a lot of lobster at the larva stage—who the hell knows how many—and then you get the predation of bass later when the lobsters are bigger, you're putting extreme pressure on the only resource we have for income right now.

Paul Connors: Were you ever consulted on or asked about the research technique and what you should be doing? You mentioned so many nets, hooks and lines. Were you ever asked for input on that?

Lucas DesRoches: I've been to quite a few meetings, and I've never been personally asked. Neither has our organization, as I recall. I know we've more or less been told what to do versus how to do it. We give lots of suggestions and lots of ideas after the fact, but they usually don't stray much at all.

Paul Connors: Do you have anything to add, Mark?

Mark Arsenault: I can't add to anything about science for mackerel. I didn't do any, but I did it a couple of years ago for halibut, and it was the same thing. We were told where to go rather than to go where we thought the fish might be. They wanted us to tag some fish. Well, you can't tag fish you don't catch.

Let the fishermen help you make the decisions on where you should go if you're targeting something and want accurate data. Lucas is a good man to find some mackerel. Let him find the mackerel. Let him tell you how to catch it, because that's what he does. You don't catch mackerel.

Paul Connors: Lucas, have you never been asked where to go to do the sampling?

Lucas DesRoches: No, I've never been asked. I've just been told.

According to where science wants us to go, it would be great if they thought the fish would be in the same area at the same time every year. If fishing was that easy, everyone would be doing it, but that's just not the case.

Paul Connors: Mr. Robert, they're not asking the people participating in the fishery for advice on research. Is that a standard practice? Are they just told where to go to do the samples?

● (1705)

Dominique Robert: That's a good question. Once a survey has been organized and planned, of course, there are precise stations where people need to go to fish.

The consultation should come ahead of any survey plan. Of course, working often with industry, I fully agree that a dialogue should exist between Fisheries and Oceans and industry in order to make sure that everybody is on the same page and that everybody buys into the surveys being conducted.

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

That takes our panel to a close.

I want to thank the witnesses for taking the time to be here today and for providing testimony for the study we're working on right now. Your testimony is going to be very helpful as we finalize the report and, importantly, the recommendations to government.

With that, we're going to briefly suspend while we welcome our next panel.

● (1705)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1710)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the new witnesses, although I think they might have heard this from being in the audience.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking.

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

As well, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses. We have Trevor Barlow, a fisherman.

[*Translation*]

We also have with us Ghislain Collin, president of Regroupement des pêcheurs pélagiques professionnels du sud de la Gaspésie.

[*English*]

With that, we will go to opening statements of five minutes or less.

We will start with Mr. Barlow.

Trevor Barlow (Fisherman, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for inviting me here today to speak to you about the spring herring and the mackerel fisheries on the east coast of Canada, in particular the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence.

My name is Trevor Barlow. I'm a fisherman from the west end of Prince Edward Island. I've been a herring and mackerel fisherman since 1998. I've been the chair or co-chair of the small pelagic board since 1999, and I still am today. I have attended countless meetings over this time period for both fisheries.

I'd like to start today with the spring herring, if I may, and the differences between what we as fishermen are seeing on the water and DFO science data.

The spring herring, from what I can see by looking out and not being able to fish, have made a strong recovery and look very healthy, with more and more spawning events taking place every spring. I believe the reason that DFO science is not as optimistic as fishermen is a change they've made in their data collection over the years.

When the fishery was in decline and the total allowable catch was not being met, DFO science started looking for reasons to explain why they seemed to be overestimating the stock biomass. One thing they assumed was that their acoustic survey was potentially counting fish twice by following migratory patterns. The survey began in Chaleur Bay. Then it moved outside of the bay to the north shore of P.E.I. and up the west coast of Cape Breton. Now they only do the inside of Chaleur Bay and a little small area on the outside of Chaleur Bay.

We are managing a migratory stock based on a stationary snapshot. By shrinking the survey area, DFO has effectively created a coverage gap. If the fish aren't in that specific area during the survey window, the model assumes that they don't exist.

Also, before making this change, they did not fully assess how other management measures being enforced by DFO to the industry—such as no night fishing, changes to opening dates, and weekend closures to allow for recruitment—may have impacted the TAC results. When restrictions are placed on when to fish, catches will naturally drop. DFO interpreted this drop as a lack of fish, when in reality their own conservation efforts were contributing factors. Management measures resulting in conservation success should not be misread as fish decline or industry collapse.

In the absence of a commercial fishery, DFO is relying solely on data from their acoustic survey, which covers only a fraction of the historical grounds it once did, and it does not mirror what fishermen are seeing. Although DFO has begun using other data sources, they do not provide data on abundance. I believe all these factors have caused the stock biomass to be underestimated.

Moving on to the mackerel fishery, again, it seems there are differences between what we as fishermen are seeing and DFO science data. The fishery appears to have made a remarkable recovery—to what I would call historic levels within my career—but it's hard to know for sure when you're not allowed to fish. I believe it can support a commercial fishery, but I do not believe it can be the historic fishery that it once was when the reason for the collapse of the stock has not yet been addressed by DFO management.

In the early 2000s, DFO moved one goalpost and not the other by adding capacity to the fishery in Newfoundland, but did nothing to add more recruitment or protection of recruitment for the region. Prior to adding new tuck seine licences to the fishers of Newfoundland—which, I might add, was against the advice of DFO science at the time—our region was healthy and had never experienced any concern, decline or closure of the fishery, which indicates capacity mismanagement versus overfishing.

We never needed a total shutdown. We never had an overfishing problem. We had a management-induced capacity problem that the entire east coast has since been paying for. We needed responsible capacity limits, which we saw work for decades.

In conclusion, the total closure of these two fisheries is a blind management strategy. Zero fishing does not mean zero fish; it means zero data available to evaluate and make proper decisions around fishing. Without a commercial fishery, DFO is navigating in the dark. We need to reopen these commercial fisheries immediately, with responsible management measures in place.

Thank you for your time.

● (1715)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Barlow.

[*Translation*]

We'll now go to Mr. Collin for five minutes.

Ghislain Collin (President, Regroupement des pêcheurs pélagiques professionnels du sud de la Gaspésie): This is my fourth appearance before the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans, and I am here to present the views of the group I represent regarding the herring and mackerel fisheries, two pelagic species mainly fished by our members.

The position of the Regroupement des pêcheurs pélagiques professionnels du sud de la Gaspésie is clear: A regulated reopening of the commercial fishery would make it possible to achieve a number of things. First, it would allow for the collection of essential scientific data through mandatory catch reporting, using tools such as logbooks, hail-ins and dockside weighing. It would also allow fleets affected by the moratorium to resume their activities and create two to three jobs per vessel in the affected coastal regions. In addition, it would ensure a supply of quality bait for the fishers who depend on it. Finally, it would generate economic benefits in regions that have lost their pelagic fleets.

Unlike the commercial sector, fishing for bait has several significant limitations. First, this type of fishing provides little to no scientific data on herring and mackerel stocks. This lack of data makes it impossible to rigorously monitor the status of these resources, even though such monitoring is essential for sustainable and responsible management.

In addition, fishing for bait provides no tangible support to fishers who are facing difficulties as a result of the moratorium or restrictions in place. It also does not generate significant economic benefits for coastal regions, unlike an organized commercial fishery, which supports local jobs and economic activity.

Finally, it's important to note that, from a fiscal perspective, the tax reductions applicable to bait in Canada make purchasing bait more advantageous than investing in fishing activities to obtain it. This situation accentuates the economic limits of the bait fishery and reduces incentives for a structured exploitation of the resource.

Scientific data play a fundamental role in the rigorous assessment of the status of herring and mackerel stocks. Responsible management of fisheries resources depends on the ability to collect and analyze this information on an ongoing and reliable basis. In this regard, Quebec's pelagic fishers stand out for their active involvement in the collection of essential data, which is fully integrated into the operation of the commercial fishery.

In the context of a moratorium on herring or mackerel fishing, it is essential to recognize the repercussions suffered by the fleets concerned. Accordingly, when the fishery reopens or resumes operations, it seems legitimate for these fleets to be given priority in the allocation of commercial, exploratory, scientific or other licences. We are calling for priority access to emerging fisheries that are developing or will develop in the years to come. This approach is intended to support affected fishing communities while ensuring rigorous scientific monitoring and sustainable exploitation of the resource.

In conclusion, managing fisheries resources in coastal regions affected by moratoriums requires a structured approach based on sustainability and respect for local communities. A well-organized coastal commercial fishery that prioritizes the use of selective gear, such as gillnets and hooks, helps maintain the species while generating economic benefits for the regions concerned. Not only does this approach provide an environmentally responsible solution, it also contributes to the collection of scientific data essential for stock monitoring, thereby supporting responsible and sustainable resource development.

By adopting this approach, we help safeguard the future of the species while supporting fishers affected by the restrictions. The economic, environmental and scientific benefits of a structured fishery are inseparable from the long-term vitality of coastal communities and the effective management of marine resources.

● (1720)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Collin.

[*English*]

We'll start the first round of questioning with Mr. Small for six minutes.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for Mr. Barlow.

Mr. Barlow, on Monday we had Mr. Vigneault here, who is basically the director of DFO science. He told us about mature year classes of mackerel that are capable of reproducing. He almost painted a picture of them being non-existent and that the younger year classes were increasing somehow. I don't know where their parents are, but anyway....

What do you think of the picture the DFO has on the year-class distribution of mackerel?

Trevor Barlow: I believe they're totally wrong. You're right; maybe there is a lot of immaculate conception out there in the mackerel fishery. I don't know; I'm not out there. However, I know I did the mackerel net test survey this spring, and it's a 10-net fishery. It doesn't work.

I tried to explain it last year at AMAC. I sat there with science and argued that the boats don't drift right with those 10 nets. The longest I had the nets in the water was three hours. I was supposed to be out there all night. I couldn't keep them in any more than three hours. I had them tangled around the boat and twisted more times.... I had more headaches than it was worth. I did get their samples for them, but not good ones.

Clifford Small: In the spring election, the Prime Minister made the comment—in fact, he made it in St. John's, Newfoundland—that basically the decision-making under his government would be based on what he was hearing at the wharves. Have you seen any of that in terms of mackerel?

Trevor Barlow: No—none.

Clifford Small: Do you expect to see it? Do you think this study could spur him on to keep his election promise?

Trevor Barlow: I'll put it this way. The minister asked for the science to be redone this spring—and they're doing it now, I guess—and if they don't see improvements, they had better clean house, because the eggs were literally running out of the fish when I had done the sample.

Two years ago, in 2023, or maybe at the 2025 AMAC, we sat there and science said they couldn't find eggs, but they found lots of larvae—all kinds of larvae. That tells me it's in better shape. It's better to find the larvae than it is to find the eggs, but it means that if there aren't eggs, it doesn't go in the model.

Clifford Small: You've lived in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the southern gulf, for all of your life. You've seen quite a few changes in the ecosystem. Water temperatures have changed and there are variations in migration.

Do you think that maybe DFO science should be looking everywhere except where they used to look?

Trevor Barlow: I don't know for sure, but I know they went looking once. They've never done it consistently over the years to get the timing right. I don't know.

Clifford Small: I guess you can recall pretty well that when the closure of the mackerel fishery happened, certain ENGOs—which I get a letter from once in a while asking for a meeting—did victory laps around the mackerel closure. Now, at AMAC, what kind of influence are these ENGOs having compared to the influence of harvesters such as yourselves on the decision-making process?

● (1725)

Trevor Barlow: As a fisherman in the southern gulf, I believe that among New Brunswick, P.E.I., maybe Nova Scotia and the southern part, we have five seats at the table. There are at least three NGOs, maybe more, that are sitting at those tables too, so they're getting pretty weighted.

Clifford Small: Do you think DFO science is listening more to the ENGOs than they are to you?

Trevor Barlow: I think they probably have no choice.

Clifford Small: Do you think there's any correlation between the fact that these ENGOs are basically U.S.-funded, that they're shutting down our mackerel fishery and that Americans jumped from 833 tonnes last year to almost 11,000 tonnes this year? Do you think that's money well spent by the Americans?

Trevor Barlow: Well, it is certainly for them, and I raised that exact issue two weeks ago at AMAC. I brought it up that they should at least get the donor list, but they, you know....

Clifford Small: Monsieur Collin, I heard you talking about the importance of a commercial fishery, and I certainly agree with you. Which type of commercial gear would you think is best suited to getting an accurate representation for science of the year class distributions and whatnot?

[*Translation*]

Ghislain Collin: For spring herring, it would be gillnets. For mackerel, it would be hooks. In the case of mackerel, we're somewhat reluctant to use gillnets, because that's the period when the fish are spawning. However, if the Department of Fisheries and Oceans wants data, gillnets could be used.

[*English*]

Clifford Small: Now, I—

[*Translation*]

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

[*English*]

I'm sorry, but we are right at time.

Next we are going to Mr. Morrissey for six minutes.

Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Chair.

I want to focus more on the herring fishery, because we have not had a lot of discussion about it here, and we're referencing the spring herring fishery.

Mr. Barlow, could you brief the committee on the difference between the spring and the fall herring fisheries? Are they different stocks?

Trevor Barlow: Yes, they are two totally different stocks. Genetically, it's been proven that when one spawns in the spring, it's a different component compared to the fall.

Robert Morrissey: Your testimony was referencing, from your perspective, the health of the spring herring stock. Am I correct?

Trevor Barlow: Yes, that's correct.

Robert Morrissey: That's what I want to focus on. You said that from your perspective, it looks very healthy, and then you made a reference to the changes DFO made in science methodology. Can you expand a bit more, from your perspective as a fisher, on what they changed in the methodology that you view as not adequately capturing the true health of the biomass?

Trevor Barlow: When the TAC wasn't being met by fishers, DFO went looking for a reason they were overestimating the TAC. One of the reasons they came up with was that the acoustic survey possibly could have been counting fish twice. As they moved out of the bay in their boat, they assumed they followed the fish to the east, but there was no evidence to prove that's what was happening; they just assumed that.

They reduced the acoustic survey from doing the whole southern gulf to just doing the inside of Chaleur Bay and a small portion outside of the bay, when, in fact, they used to do all of the north shore of P.E.I., in and around Pictou Island and up the west coast of Cape Breton.

Robert Morrissey: You said the stock biomass was underestimated and that the fishery...it once was. Could you explain that a bit more?

Trevor Barlow: I don't....

Robert Morrissey: You referenced that they're not capturing the fishery that it once was because they're underestimating stock biomass.

● (1730)

Trevor Barlow: If you look at just acoustics, you have nothing else to input to show abundances. There used to be a CPUE from the commercial fishery, a phone survey and a few other things that went into it, but they have nothing other than the acoustic survey to show abundance now.

Robert Morrissey: Do they only do the one type of survey on spring herring?

Trevor Barlow: Since the closure, they started a test net fishery, which is a small net that—

Robert Morrissey: Is that the one you were referencing about them only allowing you 10 nets?

Trevor Barlow: No, that was in the mackerel survey.

In the spring herring, there's a small test net. It has different panels of nets, and when you hang it up, the panels hang in a “V” like an hourglass. That wouldn't catch a fish even if you tried to drive one into it, and they're trying to make a model out of that. It will catch a fish, I guess. Maybe that's all they want.

Robert Morrissey: Was that herring or mackerel?

Trevor Barlow: That was herring.

Robert Morrissey: As a long-term fisher, your view would be that it would not have adequately or accurately reflected what may have been in the water. Is that correct?

Trevor Barlow: You'd probably get some age discrepancies in the different panels, but there's no way to possibly get an abundance from that.

Robert Morrissey: You made reference to a management-induced fishery.

Trevor Barlow: That was in the mackerel.

Robert Morrissey: Yes.

Trevor Barlow: Back in the early 2000s, when the.... Are you talking about adding the seine fishery?

Robert Morrissey: Yes, you referenced it. That's why I want you to elaborate more on it. Things were going well, in your words, and then you mentioned the problem was from a management-induced issue.

Trevor Barlow: When you add capacity to a fishery and have the capability to catch more fish, it's obvious that something is going to happen if you don't want to add more eggs. That stands to reason with any fishery. If it was a lobster fishery and you add more licenses, you have to add more recruitment somehow. Am I correct?

Robert Morrissey: In the time I have left, could you give your opinion to the committee on this? You referenced that going forward, we need responsible management practices. How would you describe a responsible management practice? I would like your opinion about the spring herring as well as the mackerel.

Trevor Barlow: We can't repeat what we did. It's plain and simple.

Robert Morrissey: Expand a bit more about repeating what we did. What did we do? What went wrong?

Trevor Barlow: Let's go with the mackerel. There was never a closure in the mackerel until there was added effort. When you add effort, all of a sudden the TAC is.... Well, the TAC wasn't being met before either, so maybe it was science. I don't know what caused it.

When we started catching the TAC, things went to pieces. We weren't seeing the fish coming back to the spawning grounds. We've seen it. I was probably one of the first to see it. As a gillnetter, we're the first to see the reduction. We're also going to be the first to see the improvements.

Robert Morrissey: [*Inaudible—Editor*] fishery reduction—

The Chair: Mr. Morrissey, I'm afraid I have to jump in here because we're past time. There will be another opportunity to ask questions.

[*Translation*]

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

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

Good afternoon to all my colleagues.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Mr. Collin, we'll talk about the future together, but I just want to look back for a moment, to the 2022 moratorium, which was announced at the last minute and which, of course, put the members of your association in a hell of a tough spot.

Later on, in February 2023, the chair of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans sent a letter to the then minister of fisheries, oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard. That letter suggested to him that when the Department of Fisheries and Oceans orders a complete closure of a fishery, it should negotiate a financial compensation package or other equivalent supports for fishers whose incomes depend entirely on that fishery.

Have you, the Regroupement and the fishers you represent been contacted since 2023 to talk about financial compensation of that kind?

Ghislain Collin: No, we were completely ignored.

Alexis Deschênes: You did have meetings recently with regional directors of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, didn't you?

Ghislain Collin: Yes, but like they're telling us, they're merely the messengers. They don't make any decisions, they send our requests higher up and then they provide us with their answers.

● (1735)

Alexis Deschênes: There's never been any openness to financial compensation.

Ghislain Collin: No, there's never been.

Alexis Deschênes: We're going to talk about mackerel. You say that your fleet should have priority when new emerging fisheries are opened. What do you mean by that?

Ghislain Collin: What I'm saying is that we deserve to fish. Those fishers deserve to fish. We were pushed aside for virtually no reason. We don't know why.

There's no doubt that, if it's possible to put these fishers back on the water, they're ready to go. The boats are there. These jobs were lost in a region that's already very poor. So we're going to do everything we can to get those jobs back.

Alexis Deschênes: What kind of state are your members in? How are they doing?

Ghislain Collin: After five years without pay, five years with no income in a business, they have to rebuild everything. They've lost their crew and their expertise, they've lost their deckhands who work with nets. Working with nets is the most dangerous part of fishing. So they're going to have to start over. If they don't get back on the water, they lose the expertise too. If the fishery reopens one day, who will fish with nets? That expertise will vanish if they don't get back on the water.

Alexis Deschênes: You also made another suggestion, that a commercial mackerel fishery be reopened, but in a regulated manner. Explain to us what you mean.

Ghislain Collin: A commercial fishery doesn't mean we're harvesting large amounts of fish. It can be amounts similar to those in the bait fishery. When we talk about a commercial fishery, it's just that it's already structured. We already have invitations to participate, ELOGS, catches and dockside weighing. If scientists want to have fish, they're given fish right on the dock. Commercial fishing is really the only way to get data. That doesn't mean that we're overfishing and catching large commercial quantities. For the government, it's a different type of fishery, but it's the only fishery where you can get scientific data.

You can ask anyone, but there was never any scientific data on the bait fishery last year. The sampling is really not good at the outset. People who are at all involved in science and academia know that when sampling isn't good at the outset, there's no point in going any further, since the study is completely flawed.

As was said earlier, the studies were done in the middle of Chaleur Bay by 15 fishers. We wanted to get an idea of the Atlantic with the large seiners, because there were observers at sea on those boats. Two groups of fishers were used, namely fishers in Chaleur Bay and fishers in Newfoundland and Labrador, to draw a picture. It's incredible. It's not scientific. For a skewed science job like that, you'd get zero as a mark. Literally a zero, nothing more.

Alexis Deschênes: Are any of your members currently making observations?

Ghislain Collin: Yes. I managed to assign some of our members to two projects to gather data. However, it comes from the Atlantic. Quebec hasn't done any research projects. So we're going through New Brunswick, because fishers were needed in northern New Brunswick. It turns out I was able to assign two fishers to those projects. To them, the quantity is there. I was on the water all summer too.

Alexis Deschênes: Mr. Collin, what do you mean by “the quantity is there”? What is the data saying?

Ghislain Collin: With our tools and fish finders, we're able to see mackerel. Right now, when you leave any dock, anywhere, at any time, you can put your line in the water and pick up fish, I guarantee you.

Alexis Deschênes: When you say “any dock”, what area are you talking about?

Ghislain Collin: I'm talking about where I know, the southern part of the Gaspésie, from Carleton-sur-Mer to Percé.

Now, we know that there are a lot of fish on the Côte-Nord. From Baie-Comeau to Sept-Îles, boats can travel 700 to 800 kilometres without stopping, and the fish are below them. Fishers can see it with their sonar. However, no tests have ever been done on the Côte-Nord.

Alexis Deschênes: However, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans seems somewhat reluctant. It's of the opinion that the resource is not at the right level to resume fishing.

You're talking about managed commercial fishing. You're saying gillnets or hooks should be used. Explain to us how that could reassure scientists.

Ghislain Collin: It's green. It's more protective of the resource. It's the fish that take the bait. We already have the machines to harvest those fish that way. The boats are already made accordingly. The fish come and bite the hook, we don't get in their way to then catch them. It's very selective and environmentally friendly. If you're in a school where there are only small fish, you simply turn off the machines and go to another place. It's all good. There's no downside to the process.

● (1740)

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

[*English*]

We'll start our second round of questions now with Mr. Arnold for five minutes.

Mel Arnold: Thank you.

If you could pause the timer before I start my questioning time, I'd like to ask for an update from the chair.

At the last meeting, we passed a motion asking that it be reported to the House that the minister has failed to appear on the study on coastal and marine protections. Could you update the committee on when that report might be tabled in the House?

The Chair: Sure.

I'm waiting for the report. Once I have that report, I'll table it in the House. I'm waiting on that from the clerk and the analysts.

Mel Arnold: Do you have an idea of the time frame?

The Chair: It will be very soon.

Mel Arnold: Thank you.

Thank you for your patience, witnesses. We really appreciate it.

I want to start with Mr. Barlow, please.

In your opinion, are stock assessments being conducted efficiently and effectively on the herring stocks?

Trevor Barlow: No, not on the spring herring stock.

Mel Arnold: How could they be better conducted?

Trevor Barlow: It's by putting fishers on the water. That's the only way you're going to get data.

This going out and trying to get a fisher here or a fisher there with a net over thousands of kilometres of coastline is like.... You have to put your net in at six o'clock in the evening and you have to have it out at four in the morning. It's ridiculous.

Mel Arnold: Are you aware of where DFO took their direction from on how to do these herring stock assessments?

Trevor Barlow: No.

Mel Arnold: Do you know if it was directed by any science within DFO? Were there other influences?

Trevor Barlow: I know that for the five-net commercial, we asked for it, because before that we were using a little net that was absolutely nothing. Even the five-net commercial fishery gives you a little more abundance if you're lucky, but you're still only one guy out there looking over thousands of kilometres of water and trying to find a fish. It's like you have to go....

Mel Arnold: Should DFO be asking the fishermen where the fish are?

Trevor Barlow: Yes, for sure.

Mel Arnold: You mentioned that the reason for the collapse of stock hasn't been addressed. Could you elaborate a little further on that? I think you said that in your opening remarks.

Trevor Barlow: Well, prior to the closure in 2022—and I'm going to talk for more than just me—Prince Edward Island had been asking for different management measures—for exactly 10 years prior. We saw it coming. We were asking for 10 years for things to change, and nobody listened, with not one acknowledgement towards it in 10 years.

Mel Arnold: In those 10 years, the stock declined to the point where it had to be closed.

Trevor Barlow: I don't believe it had to be closed, but it was declining over those 10 years. I know some people would say differently, but the TAC wasn't being met. I think it was 80-some hundred tonnes.

Mel Arnold: This sounds similar to.... My background is somewhat in fish and wildlife management in British Columbia. They do catch effort surveys asking how much time you spend on the water or, if it's wildlife, on the land in order to reach your harvest.

Has that ever been considered by DFO? Should surveying fishermen be considered regarding the actual catch effort they have to exert to catch their quota?

Trevor Barlow: Yes, I guess so. It should be something that is there.

It is kind of there with the dockside monitoring program. They ask you how many nets you fished and how much you have. It's daily trips.

Mel Arnold: On mackerel, a previous witness said they're catching their quota in two days, basically. Would you predict the same situation with herring?

Trevor Barlow: For sure. If we look at the last opening for spring herring, just in the southern gulf—and it's only a fraction of the mackerel fishery, but the quotas were similar—we had a 500-tonne TAC, and I believe our area was shut down in six or seven days. It was only, I'd say, 25 boats.

● (1745)

Mel Arnold: Would that indicate a high abundance of herring?

Trevor Barlow: Well, it was definitely improving when they closed it.

Mel Arnold: Mr. Collin, I believe you said that you were never told the reasons for some of the decisions. Is it correct that harvesters were never told?

[*Translation*]

Ghislain Collin: That's correct.

[*English*]

Mel Arnold: Could you elaborate a little further?

[*Translation*]

Ghislain Collin: For spring herring, we knew that the fishery was closed 48 hours before it was supposed to open. Despite all the expenses we incurred in the previous weeks, we were told rather cavalierly 48 hours before the fishery was expected to open.

[*English*]

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

Next we're going to Mr. Klassen for five minutes.

Ernie Klassen (South Surrey—White Rock, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses for being here.

During this study, Mr. Barlow, we've heard reports from harvesters about large schools of mackerel in Canadian waters. From what you're seeing on the water, do these schools appear to consist mostly of young fish or mature fish that are capable of reproducing?

Trevor Barlow: I see the schools of fish, but I have no way of telling you that, because I'm not allowed to fish them.

Ernie Klassen: In the last hour, Mr. Robert stated that the main factor in stock health assessment is the condition of the eggs.

Mr. Barlow, how would you assess the health of the stock?

Trevor Barlow: In my opening statement, I said that the stock looks to be historic, at least in my fishing career since 1998.

I don't know whether any of you have heard tell of the 1999 year class. It used to be the big talk in the mackerel fishery. The 1999 year class was going to last for generations. Right now, it's bigger. I'd say there are probably two or maybe three year classes out there that are bigger than the 1999 year class.

Ernie Klassen: From what we're hearing here today, it feels like there's a bit of disconnect between the science information and the harvesters' information.

You stated that there needs to be more co-operation and that we need to work together. You stated in your opening statement that we need to reopen these fisheries with “responsible management”. I'm wondering if you can define “responsible management” and how that differs from how you're seeing the fisheries being managed right now.

Trevor Barlow: If you're asking me about “responsible”, I think we're all responsible for the fishery. That is what I'm getting at when it comes to responsible management. There's no way science should be saying one thing but fishermen are seeing the opposite. There's absolutely no way that should happen. We have to correct that if we're going to have a responsible fishery. It has to be fixed somehow. I don't know how. Don't ask me. I'm not a scientist; I'm just a fisherman, but we shouldn't be miles apart. That has to be fixed. I don't know how we do it. I know there are smarter people than me who can figure that out.

It's the same thing with herring. We're miles apart. I just don't know how you fix it.

Ernie Klassen: I'll put the question to Mr. Collin, perhaps, then.

As Mr. Barlow said, he comes with a lot of information, but he's not a scientist, and there are obviously scientists who aren't harvesters. From your perspective, how should this management happen, and how could we align the management between harvesters and scientists a little more closely?

[*Translation*]

Ghislain Collin: First, the bait fishery should not be opened. That fishery goes against the science and provides no scientific data.

In a commercial fishery, fishers would still be able to go and catch their bait to put it in their cages. A commercial reopening to have data would start to be responsible.

Opening up the bait fishery isn't responsible. We don't even have control over the resource. There's no obligation to report, and that's ridiculous.

● (1750)

[*English*]

Ernie Klassen: Mr. Collin, during this study, we've heard reports from harvesters about large schools of mackerel. Mackerel, as you know, is a transboundary species that migrates between Canadian and U.S. waters. From your experience, can you explain whether there are different stocks of mackerel in Canada and in the U.S.?

[*Translation*]

Ghislain Collin: First of all, I listened to the testimony from the previous meeting this week. We heard scientists say that the United States has its stock and we have ours. However, we heard another scientist say earlier that stocks are mixing. I'm not a scientist, but I think fish move. So I would tend to believe that the United States is fishing Canada's fish stock. So we're protecting the fish only to let the United States harvest it.

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Simard now has the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mario Simard: Thank you very much.

You said two things that are very important, Mr. Collin.

I only have two and a half minutes, so we'll do this very quickly.

I'd like you to come back to the difference between bait fishing and commercial fishing. What I understand from your remarks is that fishing licences for bait really do nothing to help preserve the resource. They are really a problem. So you are suggesting that the commercial fishery be reopened and that volumes be better managed. I will let you respond.

You said another very interesting thing. Earlier, in a response Mr. Robert gave to one of my colleagues, he indicated that if people are seeing mackerel in Quebec, the Maritimes and all over the place, it's because the population is thriving. Earlier, in response to my colleague Mr. Deschênes, you said that people were realizing that there are indeed stocks. You're saying it, and people in the Maritimes are too. However, is anyone at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans able to gather this evidence?

So, first, I'd like to hear your response on the difference between bait fishing and commercial fishing. Then, I'd like you to tell me about the stocks you're able to observe.

Ghislain Collin: I'll start with the stocks that I'm able to observe.

In Quebec, we can see that there are a lot of fish. That's what we're hearing from all fishers. I'm listening to the other witnesses here and I'm hearing fishers from Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia say that there's an abundance of the resource. We have a man here from Prince Edward Island who fully agrees with them. So I think we've just confirmed what Mr. Robert said earlier.

Second, on the difference between the bait fishery and the commercial fishery, the bait fishery doesn't bring anything. It's a fishery to help fishers get their bait. The only reason we were able to give was that bait is expensive. However, it's tax deductible. So, yes, we have to pay for the bait, but we recover that cost in the next tax year.

Moreover, there's no obligation to declare anything and fishers are not allowed to sell, give away or trade fish. So some people pick up their fish directly from their nets at sea and put them in their cages right away, without declaring. It's very hard to monitor the resource that way. On the other hand, in the commercial fishery, there are logbooks, an invitation to participate and dockside weighing. So the monitoring is much stricter and more effective.

As I told you earlier, if you try to get data from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans on last year's bait fishery, you'll see that it's very anemic.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Simard.

Given the time we have left, we can do two three-minute rounds, one for Mr. Hardy and one for the Liberals.

Mr. Hardy, the floor is yours for three minutes.

Gabriel Hardy: I'm going to draw a parallel. There's a striped bass fishery In Montmorency—Charlevoix. Fishers are telling us the same thing. They can't believe how many fish they're seeing, they're catching a ton of it, but they don't have the right to keep it. They call the department, and they're told that what they're seeing is an illusion, that there aren't enough fish and that they shouldn't catch them.

Mr. Barlow, you say that stocks have reached historic levels. Do you consider the results of the scientists' equations to be consistent with what you're seeing? To your knowledge, are they using the right methods to determine whether there are enough fish?

● (1755)

[*English*]

Trevor Barlow: No, I don't know what they're doing wrong or what's happening, but we're not aligned at all. With the fish out there and what science is saying, we're not even in the same boat, let alone on the same page.

[*Translation*]

Gabriel Hardy: My children are still in school, and in the math equations, if they start off wrong, the result won't be right at the end. At school, they give points for effort. In your case, however, for fishers, it's costing them their careers; they don't get any points for effort.

My question is for both of you. Do you think that scientists see your knowledge as science as well or, conversely, do you get the impression that scientists often see fishers as people who aren't worried about overfishing and depleting the resource, who just want to make money and therefore it isn't really worth listening to much of what they have to say?

Ghislain Collin: I'm going to come back to the striped bass issue. In Quebec, tests on striped bass are done in Lévis. We're struggling harvesters, and we're asking for a spot in emerging fisheries. We're ready and able to collect data. We fish striped bass with hooks. The machines we use to fish mackerel would work to fish striped bass.

Striped bass don't eat the same thing in Lévis as they do in Chaleur Bay. In Chaleur Bay, they eat small lobster, but there are no small lobster in Lévis.

I figure that, when the scientist in Lévis says that the resource is in good health, she will lose her job. She'll have to go do a study on other species elsewhere. Right now, she likes living in Lévis, everything's going well, so the resource isn't too abundant.

In Gaspésie, we applied for an emerging fishery. Fish meat still has value in a tourist region like ours. We could put it on restaurant tables. We're still waiting for an answer.

Gabriel Hardy: As Mr. Barlow was saying earlier, I sometimes get the impression that people think you're pulling estimates out of thin air. However, these are not just perceptions. You have data. You have sonar. You have equipment, after all. It may not be high science, but it's still data. You're able to show that the resource is there.

The Chair: Answer briefly, because the time is up.

Ghislain Collin: I'm a former lobster fisherman. I have photos of striped bass that would get into our lobster traps. I have photos of striped bass in our lobster traps. We showed them to Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

Gabriel Hardy: So these aren't just perceptions.

Ghislain Collin: No. There are striped bass.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Hardy.

[*English*]

With that, we're going to finish our panel with Mr. Morrissey for three minutes.

Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Chair.

Before I get to my questions, Trevor, I understand that you have some evidence—some photos and maybe a disk—that you would like to present to the committee. That can be forwarded to the chair or to the clerk. Before you leave, make sure you do it.

If the department went back to the fishers and asked you to provide a test sampling methodology that you feel would better reflect what the resource is, is that something you could quantify, document and provide to the department, Trevor?

Trevor Barlow: Are you coming back to me and asking me how to do science?

Robert Morrissey: I'm talking about asking the fishers about the herring and mackerel. Clearly there is a difference, and I saw some of it myself this summer observing the water.

If the department came to the fishers and asked them to provide to the department a methodology or process that could be engaged with fishers that would more accurately reflect the biomass, is that something the fishers could provide? How would you do it? You mentioned that the nets are not enough, and there's the timing. We hear different things: “You're looking in the wrong place at the wrong time” and “The nets are different and are not accurate enough.”

Trevor Barlow: Without a commercial fishery, you have nothing, as far as fishing goes. Even if you have a small TAC, it's better to have a small TAC than zero fishery. That would be my recommendation—100%. Let the fishermen go out and fish as the fish should be. Let them use their knowledge to catch the fish, and then if they want to come and sample them, come and sample them. They're welcome to it.

● (1800)

Robert Morrissey: That would be at a time of the year when you feel it would accurately reflect the stock.

Trevor Barlow: Yes, definitely. Have it from the time the ice leaves for the spring herring to the middle of June.

Robert Morrissey: Thanks for providing testimony here today and the photo evidence you have.

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

That concludes our panel. I want to thank our witnesses for being here in person and for their testimonies.

As Mr. Morrissey said, if there is any more information, whether that's photos or written evidence, that you'd like to provide to our committee, please do so to the clerk. It will be circulated among members and will help us, along with your testimony, to finalize the report and the recommendations that will be flowing from it.

Our next meeting is going to be on Monday, March 23. We have confirmation that Minister Thompson will be here along with DFO officials for the main estimates.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.