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Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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• (1105)

[English]

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

[Translation]

Welcome to meeting number 28 of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans.

[English]

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4) and the order of reference from the House received on February 26, the committee is meeting to commence consideration of the main estimates 2026-27.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is being held in a hybrid format, pursuant to Standing Orders. Members can participate in person or using the Zoom application.

[English]

Before we continue, I would ask all 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—in particular, the interpreters.

I'll make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and members. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you're not speaking. I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[Translation]

Members participating in person who wish to speak must raise their hand. Members using the Zoom application must use the "raise hand" feature. The clerk and I will do our best to follow the speaking order. We thank the members for their patience.

[English]

For the purpose of opening the discussion on the main estimates 2026-27, I now call vote 1 under the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

I would like to welcome the Honourable Joanne Thompson, Minister of Fisheries. With her are Paul MacKinnon, the very recently named deputy minister—congratulations; Niall O'Dea, senior assis-

tant deputy minister, strategic policy; and Patrick Amyot, chief financial officer.

With that, we're going to start with opening remarks from Minister Thompson. You have the floor for five minutes.

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

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

The 2026-27 main estimates for Fisheries and Oceans Canada aim to continue to grow our fisheries and drive economic growth in coastal, rural and indigenous communities. One of the key items in the main estimates that I would like to highlight is the \$36.9 million in additional funding to repair and maintain small craft harbours. Since 2015, we have invested more than \$1.5 billion in our small craft harbours in B-base funding. This is on top of the annual A-base funding. Our fishing harbours are the lifeblood of our coastal communities, and that is why we have made such serious investments.

Across the globe, people want Canadian seafood. It is the best in the world. It's ethical, sustainable and the highest-quality product. Canada's fish and seafood industry contributes over \$8 billion to our economy and provides over 63,000 jobs. More than 100 countries around the world import Canadian fish and seafood.

This sector is a massive economic driver for our coastal communities. Just last week, I led Canada's delegation to this year's Seafood Expo North America in Boston to support Canadian harvesters, processors and exporters and ensure that Canadian seafood is on the menu. I spoke with our amazing harvesters and businesses about how we can continue to support their jobs and grow our fisheries.

To build Canada strong, our new government is squarely focused on supporting the sector to drive innovation and expand markets to grow our economy. That is why our government has committed to renewed fisheries funds for Atlantic Canada, Quebec and British Columbia. The fisheries funds unlock potential and help Canadian fish and seafood harvesters and businesses thrive in the face of shifting global dynamics.

I spoke with my Atlantic and Quebec counterparts in Boston last week to kick off these negotiations, and I will be speaking with Minister Neill of B.C. tomorrow to do the same. I hope to work with the provinces with the goal of building fisheries funds that tackle the realities of the current global landscape and drive innovation, sustainability and productivity so that Canada's fish and seafood sector is set up for sustained growth. In a rapidly shifting global environment, Canada's fish and seafood sector needs the tools to adapt and grow and seize these new opportunities. This funding will be critical to the businesses and projects that help drive Canada's fish and seafood sector forward.

One comment I have heard consistently in my meetings with ambassadors, and most recently in Boston, was how impressed global buyers are with the sustainability of Canadian seafood. When our fisheries are sustainable and ethical, it means higher prices for harvesters' catches and both immediate and long-term added value for the sector. It also means that our fisheries are there for communities now and will be there for our children and grandchildren for generations to come.

It starts with science-based fishery management. When we do regular science and make the right targeted investments, it informs good fisheries management decisions and tells global buyers that when they buy Canadian seafood, they can trust that it is sustainable and ethically harvested. Our government's recent work with industry and stakeholders to announce a modern whalesafe gear strategy supports this goal. It adds another tool to give Canadian seafood an advantage in growing our export markets and driving economic growth in our rural communities.

Protecting the resource is a critical part of this work. Our government is committed to safe and orderly fisheries. Conservation and protection officers are doing important work to protect the resource and enforce the Fisheries Act. This past season, conservation and protection officers seized thousands of traps, returned tens of thousands of lobsters to the water and inspected dozens of facilities. C and P will continue to have a strong enforcement posture to manage a safe and orderly fishery. I fully support the work of enforcement officers.

Owner-operator inshore regulations are a foundation of fisheries management on the east coast. My department is focused on strengthening the administration and enforcement of these rules to ensure that our fisheries benefit those doing the work and their communities.

On the west coast, we are looking to modernize our fisheries so that licensing works better for harvesters and the harvesters see more of the benefit from their hard work.

My job as the Minister of Fisheries is to ensure that we are protecting the resource and protecting the livelihoods that depend on it. That is how we build Canada strong.

Thank you. I welcome your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

With that, we'll begin our first round of questioning.

We'll start with Mr. Small for six minutes.

• (1110)

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

I'd like to welcome you, Minister and officials, to our meeting today.

Minister, in August 2025, a Clearwater Seafoods vessel, the *Atlantic Protector*, was caught illegally fishing for scallops in a closed area, 29D, off southwest Nova Scotia. DFO seized approximately 50,000 pounds of scallop meat, valued at over \$1 million.

Recently, lobster harvesters in southwest Nova Scotia witnessed a Clearwater vessel transferring lobster at sea to inshore vessels. This is a violation of the quota used to manage the area 1 lobster fishery. This vessel carries a tracking device. Your department knows where this vessel is at all times. Will you commit today to prosecuting these poachers?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: It's an important question. As I hope I very clearly stated in the opening comments, I support an authorized fishery, period, full stop, regardless of where the work is taking place, and I—

Clifford Small: Where's the violation for the 50,000 pounds of scallop meat by Clearwater? Can you tell us that?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Obviously, there's a degree of confidentiality in this work. I invite you to ask questions to the officials in the second hour.

As Minister of Fisheries, I think it's important for me to state clearly that we work with authorized fishery. You can see the work that's happened over the past year to that end. The work happens in multiple areas.

Clifford Small: I just wanted to make you aware of what was going on in the lobster fishery in southwest Nova Scotia, in case you weren't aware.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

Clifford Small: Minister, a large corporation such as Clearwater can evade the law, yet inshore fishermen like the cod harvesters in Newfoundland and Labrador are fined on the spot for simply not being accurate enough with their estimate. Will you commit today to the inshore fishermen that you will change this next year and not prosecute them for being a little off on their estimate, especially when they have quota remaining and the estimate is not putting them in a position in which they're exceeding their quota? Will you commit to the inshore fishermen of Newfoundland and Labrador today to fix this for next year?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I am pleased to once again clearly state that the rules are the same across the industry. Enforcement is what we accept—full stop.

Clifford Small: Do you consider an estimate that's not up to your department's accuracy standards a violation of law?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I won't speak to a specific case, and certainly there is a second hour with officials, but I will again say that I believe in authorized fishery. We are working diligently to ensure that across the sector.

Clifford Small: Minister, snow crab harvesters throughout Atlantic Canada are at the mercy of a precautionary approach to fisheries management that was supposed to remove peaks and valleys from their quotas from year to year. This has failed, obviously. Will you commit to removing this precautionary approach from fisheries management in a species such as snow crab in favour of a more stable management approach?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I meet regularly with harvesters and the industry. I would go back to something I said earlier in these meetings. This is a science-based sector, but the work happens alongside harvesters and alongside industry to ensure that the information from science matches the information from harvesters. When it doesn't, there are processes to find alignment. At the same time, I also know the economic importance of the sector to communities. We will continue to work in balance.

Clifford Small: I'll go back to what the Prime Minister said last April, that he would listen to what he heard at the wharf. Now, these harvesters are the folks who go out and collect the data in the snow crab trap survey, but the data is being withheld from the very people who go on the water to collect it. A start would be to provide the snow crab harvesters with the results of the trap survey in a complete form that they can understand, as well as to show them how much of the assessment relies on what came out of the trap survey from the catch results and from the trawl survey. This could completely break it down and make it transparent for them.

Will you do that, Minister?

• (1115)

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I want to reassure you, Mr. Small, that there's been a series of steps we've taken over the past year to ensure that the meetings with industry, with harvesters, with the department and with my staff are very transparent and open and intended to remove any barriers in terms of what we share.

Clifford Small: Okay.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: That work continues and, as you know, this is always a work in progress in terms of how we ensure we get true dialogue.

Clifford Small: I have a question that I want a written response to, Mr. Chair.

Minister, the Ottawa Citizen reported that 30 soldiers from 3 RCR got severe frostbite injuries while training recently in Alaska. The National Research Council has confirmed that sealskin and other fur would provide better protection than the clothing they have.

Could you provide to the committee a response about conversations you've had with DND and whatnot to create a domestic opportunity for sealskin products that would foster a domestic market and help balance our ecosystem in terms of predator-prey relationships?

Thank you.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Small.

We're over time. If this could be an answer in writing, it would be much appreciated.

We're going to Mr. Morrissey for six minutes.

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

I'll begin my questions.

Minister, you opened with referencing a subject matter that consumes a lot of time in this committee: funding for small craft harbours. Could you expand a bit more on the difference between the base funding and the additional funding that comes from time to time?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Thank you.

Yes, I'm happy to answer the question. The base funding, which is what we are working from at the moment, is \$463.3 million over three years, finishing in 2027. Then there's the A funding of \$90 million.

I was pleased to visit your province recently and to visit the various small craft harbours. I certainly understand the many challenges with harbours, not underestimating the impact of weather changes such as storms, seascapes, pressure with water levels or wave action.

I understand that small craft harbours are critical to the industry. The current funding continues until 2027. We continue to meet to dialogue and look at ways we can work together to ensure that our harbours, which are the lifeblood of the industry, and their infrastructure are protected and able to withstand the stresses both from the sector and from climate.

Robert Morrissey: It's important for people to know, because we push constantly for small craft harbours funding, and it's not an east coast issue. It's a west coast issue and actually an Ontario issue. A lot is spent on lakes. In fact, there was a port in a riding a couple of hours from here, and the department would have spent more on dredging it than on all the harbours in my riding combined. This infrastructure is important across Canada, including in the north.

Could you advise the committee of how much has been dedicated to SCH in the past 10 years? If you don't have it with you, I would appreciate it if you could provide the total between the A-base and the additional funding that has come at a consistent time over the past number of years.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Over the past decade, it's been \$1.5 billion.

Robert Morrissey: It's \$1.5 billion...?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Yes. It's significant. We know how important small craft harbours are across the country, from coast to coast to coast, and as a government, we're committed to supporting the harbours.

Robert Morrissey: Minister, you referenced the renewal of the Atlantic fisheries fund. I'm not sure if the numbers were attached. Is it something you could talk about at the committee this morning?

• (1120)

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I can't give specifics, but what I can say is that the funding has been renewed.

I was in Boston at the time, and my colleagues from the Atlantic region and Quebec were there, so we had a brief meeting. I can share that there was a strong sense of co-operation and collaboration, as well as an understanding that this funding is not a continuation of the past five years, but an opportunity to look at the industry today and, in understanding what has worked well, what we need to focus on. Then, collectively and in partnership—it's really important to understand that it's a partnership—we address the opportunities and the concerns of this moment.

Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Minister.

I know there was a lot of lobbying. There was a lot of concern amongst provinces, fishers and fish organizations about the AFF and whether it would be renewed.

Was there a similar fund within the department, prior to the establishment of the AFF a number of years ago?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I looked to a colleague and was told no.

Robert Morrissey: This is all new money dedicated to the fishery, in collaboration with the provinces, in a host of areas. That's a critical piece of maintaining areas of market access, as well as research on the key fisheries.

When you were in P.E.I. with me, we visited the school that trains the protection personnel within DFO. Conservation protection is the foundation of a successful fishery, regardless of where it is. I've noticed a change in direction by the department on enforcement, on charges being laid.

I asked a question awhile back, but I don't think the question was correct. Can you elaborate on the resources that have been dedicated to this branch of your department and the number of additional personnel there after the department in conservation protection was significantly downsized by the previous government?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Thank you. It's an important question.

Some of the details can be addressed in the second hour, but I can tell you, when I came into this role a year ago, it was a priority. Working with the department, we have moved forward to support the very specific policy of authorized fishing only, period. It was wonderful to visit the centre in P.E.I. and meet with the cadets. It was an impressive group from across the country. Their dedication was inspiring.

When I travel—and I have travelled the country from coast to coast—I meet with fisheries harvesters in each area and thank them for the work they do. It's often behind the scenes, but they are making a difference. Collectively, it ensures that we have a safe and peaceful fishery.

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

[*Translation*]

We'll now turn to Mrs. Marilène Gill.

Welcome, Mrs. Gill. You have the floor for six minutes.

Marilène Gill (Côte-Nord—Kawawachikamach—Nitassinan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I too would like to thank the minister, the deputy minister, the senior assistant deputy minister and the chief financial officer for joining us.

I have several questions to ask, of course. Ten minutes go by very quickly, so I'll ask my questions quickly and would like quick answers. We can follow up in writing, if necessary.

You talked about the issues of innovation, diversification and conservation protection, and rightly so. You noted that Canada is internationally recognized for its sustainable fisheries. However, the budget proposes cuts to the Maurice Lamontagne Institute, which means cuts are being made in the science sector. I remember in 2015, we welcomed the supplementary budgets because cuts had been made, and now we're going through budget cuts once more.

I wonder what motivates these cuts, especially since you prioritized what I talked about earlier.

[*English*]

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Thank you. I appreciate the question.

Let me be quite clear: We value science. Science management is the backbone of all the decisions, so there are no cuts in science. We look at processes. We modernize, and there are new technologies we can employ. However, in no way is this a step back from a science-based fishery management.

• (1125)

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Although budgets will change and staff will be cut, you say you remain just as committed to science and that it's important to you.

Is this the first round of cuts? Are there cuts being made in institutes similar to the Maurice Lamontagne Institute, whether in the Pacific or Atlantic region?

[*English*]

Hon. Joanne Thompson: The departmental officials with me can answer more specific questions, but at this point, I don't want to speak to specific HR shifts. However, I will continue to reassure you that science-based management in the fishery is a priority, and this will continue.

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Along the same line, cuts were made to the sentinel fisheries program in Quebec on February 6, for example—in your province of Newfoundland and Labrador, it's cod. These programs were created because scientific data, such as multispecies surveys, were insufficient. Now, the government is making cuts in these programs. Obviously, this affects the science sector, but also food security for communities. We also need to consider economic activity. Without that, economic development is obviously impossible.

So I'm wondering why, even though it's been done elsewhere before, you came to this highly damaging decision without even notifying the associations and fishing groups. You say you visit every region to discuss fisheries issues, so I'd like you to come to the Basse-Côte-Nord, for example, where this decision will have, and already has had, serious consequences on the fishing industry. I think this decision goes against science, is counterproductive for the people and jeopardizes food security for communities already severely affected not only because of what they're going through, but also because they live in isolated areas.

[*English*]

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I think there's an opportunity to ask officials in the second hour. I want to reassure you that science is still core to this work. We can update science management. It's prudent to do that based on emerging technologies. I also want to reassure you that we remain in consultation and dialogue with harvesters in industry. In no way is it a surprise to industry when something changes, but it is about understanding that we have to evolve. There are improvements in how we collect data, and we need to ensure that our scientific information is aligned with the best possible information. Please let me reassure you it is always in consultation.

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Madam Minister, it's not by cutting funding for this program that we'll have more information, quite the opposite.

You talked about consultation. I consulted with people, and no, they weren't informed. There were no consultations and no information was provided. They got a letter, and it took them completely by surprise. I'm also surprised. You tell people they can rest assured, but I'm not reassured at all, because you said you didn't know cuts had been made to these programs and that people everywhere were feeling the impacts. That's why we need to look into this, dig a little deeper and visit the communities dealing with the consequences.

Let me give you another example. You might tell me to ask my question in the second hour, but I know government departments are interconnected. Take Radiométéo, for example. I don't know if fishermen were consulted. Cuts were made to this tiny \$4 million program. That's nickel-and-diming. Fishermen told me network access and information are not available everywhere. Anticosti comes to mind, for example.

I have to ask myself why those cuts are being made, once again, without consulting the public, without really considering the poten-

tial consequences of eliminating such a service, a service offered primarily to keep fishermen safe.

You might say that this isn't within your department's purview, but I think it's still the ministers' responsibility to talk to each other and figure out the potential impacts of their decisions, and what new initiatives to introduce to replace this program.

[*English*]

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I'm happy for the officials to be more specific, but I will reassure you again that science is the backbone of what we do. The science management evolves based on emerging technologies. The need to remain in dialogue and communication is critical. I was in Quebec City recently, and Montreal, continuing to meet with harvesters from the region. I will be visiting the Magdalens in the next couple of weeks. I continue to visit communities. Processes are in place so people can feel they've been heard. I'm happy to have the officials speak to this in the second hour, but certainly communication and relationships are critical—science is a backbone—in concert with harvesters and industries. In no way is this being shifted or compromised.

• (1130)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Gill.

We've come to the end of the first round.

[*English*]

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

Mel Arnold (Kamloops—Shuswap—Central Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister and officials, for being here.

Minister, you stated that you value science, and science is the background of what we do. It's widely accepted that monitoring is essential to the decisions you make.

Canadians are concerned by cuts you have planned for the coming year. In a 2025 academic report, researcher Emma Atkinson found that almost two-thirds of historically monitored salmon populations have no reported estimates for 2014 to 2023, the worst decade for data since broad-scale kit surveys began in the 1950s, yet you are slashing more monitoring. This is dangerously reckless. Monitoring is an essential component of the wild salmon policy and in determining sustainability, which you also talked about the ambassadors being amazed at. Would you say that monitoring is essential to your decisions? If so, why are you slashing fisheries monitoring?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Thank you for the question.

Let me reassure you that we are not in any way stepping back from science, monitoring, and understanding stock health, but we can't—

Mel Arnold: There are huge budget cuts for monitoring.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: We have shifted to different types of monitoring—in-stream monitoring, for example—but in no way are we cutting science from the work we do.

Mel Arnold: You are, though.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: It is appropriate that we evolve—

Mel Arnold: Has your department done a comparative analysis of the new and previous monitoring systems to ensure that the new assessments retain the reliability in monitoring?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I think this is a question that the officials can address—

Mel Arnold: No, it's a question you should be able to answer, because it's your budget that has these decisions.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I am trying to answer you. What I'm saying to you, very clearly, is that science and science management are the backbone of the work we do. That is not changing. We will shift and modernize how we collect science. That is what we need to do to ensure that we have the information we need in order to make decisions.

Mel Arnold: Can you answer whether you've made those comparative studies I mentioned?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: As to the specifics on a comparative study, I will have the officials speak to that in the second hour, but I will tell you that when I receive briefings—

Mel Arnold: You don't know.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: —specifically—

Mel Arnold: You don't know.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I receive briefing notes on a regular basis. We look at comparative data as part of the evaluation. I can reassure you that science is still the backbone.

Mel Arnold: You just don't know today, because that's what I asked you.

Minister, there are 7,000 stocks, broken into 427 conservation units of wild Pacific salmon, that require adequate monitoring to be managed. How can Canadians believe that you can manage fisheries sustainability when you're eliminating basic monitoring programs?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I want to reassure you that we are not eliminating science and science management from our salmon stocks.

Mel Arnold: Where do the budget cuts fall, then, in this monitoring?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I think there may be a little confusion in terms of budget and what you mean by budget cuts. In terms of what we're seeing happen, the Atlantic fish funds and BCSRIF are examples of funding that—

Mel Arnold: No, we're talking about the entire budget. There are huge cuts in salmon monitoring.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: There may be a disconnect in what you're saying and what I'm trying to explain to you. There's a series of funding streams coming forward—BCSRIF is one—intended to support the management of fisheries. We will see more of this. I

want to reassure you that this is not about cutting the work we're doing.

Mel Arnold: We're not getting the answers Canadians are looking for.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Well, it may be the way you're looking for it.

Mel Arnold: Minister, you say you've balanced science in the decision, but you've prioritized cuts to the genomics program at DFO's molecular genetics lab in Nanaimo, which has developed molecular tools now integral to managing risks to protect salmon populations. Why have you made cuts to the genomics program?

• (1135)

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I'll let the official speak to specifics, but I can tell you that, as I've been saying, the work of science continues. We need to evaluate where we are accessing the information we need, modernizing and shifting—

Mel Arnold: You can't answer why you're cutting the funding for the genomics lab.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I'm not prepared to answer to a specific area.

Mel Arnold: That's what we're asking, though.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I'm telling you that the folks—

Mel Arnold: Minister, I have one more very important question about the west coast. A few months ago, your ministry released its discussion paper on the salmon allocation policy review. The paper contains a proposed removal of the priority public access for chinook and coho salmon, another example in which you're creating a problem where none exists.

Minister, has your ministry completed an economic analysis for the proposed removal of the public fishery access for chinook and coho salmon?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Thank you. That's an important question.

I'll start by saying that the allocation policy came into play in 1999, so it's appropriate for us to review this. There was a year-long consultation process. It ended at the end of January. We are still going through what we heard. I will have something for you coming forward. No decision has been made.

Mel Arnold: The question was this: Have you done an economic analysis?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: There—

The Chair: We are at time. I am going to have to cut it off there. There will be another opportunity for questions.

With that, I am going to take the next round. This is a five-minute round.

Thank you, Minister and officials, for being here today to speak to the estimates.

I want to continue along the line that a couple of my colleagues brought up. DFO is facing cuts of nearly 30% as compared with roughly 15% across other agencies. That's excluding the changes from the transition from the Coast Guard to National Defence. As part of that, there's a 78% reduction in funding for the salmon enhancement program and similar cuts in aquatic species and habitat restoration.

Given DFO's mandate to conserve and protect fish and marine habitats, how does the department expect that these reductions will affect conservation outcomes?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Thank you. Again, that's an important question.

I want to clarify that, certainly, the cuts reflect changes in the department and the role of the Coast Guard. This was at a point in time. We saw, for example, BCSRIF come forward days ago. In no way has the priority shifted regarding the work of conservation, protection and support for the fisheries across the country, coast to coast. We will see programs come on stream during the next year.

I want to be clear that, for science-based management, the focus on fisheries has not changed.

The Chair: You mentioned BCSRIF. Beyond this funding, what else can you share with the committee regarding programming to fill some of this gap?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Certainly, as we move forward and as funding streams come on side, I will let you know. I can't give you specific dates, but we know the work is important. Support for the industry in B.C., northern, Atlantic and inland regions will continue.

I'm not able to give you timelines today.

The Chair: No. Of course, I wasn't asking about timelines but rather about specific programs.

I'm going to move on.

As part of the CER, the comprehensive expenditure review, DFO is planning to cut 551 full-time equivalents over the next few years. This concerns me greatly when I look at my riding. Thirty years ago, on the Sunshine Coast, there were six DFO officials working. Then, in 2012, the Conservatives shut down the DFO office there. It's been exceedingly difficult ever since then to enforce illegal fishing in this part of my riding.

There's only one staff person on the Sunshine Coast. This person is serving in an essential community adviser role, working with first nations and non-profits and solving many of the fisheries issues we're seeing on the Sunshine Coast. Now I understand this person has been given notice after working with DFO for over three decades.

With these types of changes, how are you going to ensure that DFO has a footprint on the ground, both to tackle illegal fishing and to ensure that the habitat restoration partnerships can lead to the restoration work necessary for a sustainable fishery?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I can't speak to a particular HR issue, but I can tell you that, across the country, the work of the depart-

ment, DFO, happens in regions. Eighty per cent of the staff is in regions, and this is not going to change. I'm not even sure if the officials can speak to that particular situation, but it's certainly a question for them.

I will tell you that enforcement is a priority across the country and will continue to be a priority. Let me reassure you and others in your area that both of those considerations are paramount. They are not changing. However, no, I can't speak to a particular case.

• (1140)

The Chair: No, that's well understood.

Minister, you brought up the announcement of a few weeks ago regarding the launch of negotiations for new fisheries agreements across the country. You mentioned that you are going to be speaking with Minister Neill in B.C. in short order.

There is some concern across the province about the changing focus of these agreements. BCSRIF, to date, has been primarily focused on conservation and habitat restoration work. There is concern that, with this new proposal, this is going to change significantly.

Can you clarify for this committee that this will remain a potential focus of the agreement, if it's in the interest of, or a request from, the province?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I welcome that question.

It was only last week that the announcement was made. Very much so, the framework happens with provinces, with counterparts across the country. Nothing is imposed. When I met with Atlantic and Quebec counterparts in Boston, it was very much specific to a shared understanding of what the priorities would be and how we would do this work together. I will do the same thing with B.C. It's not about imposing anything.

I want to be very clear that it is appropriate to look at a program after five years to see what has worked well and where we have missed the focus—to understand that a new round of funding is an opportunity to look at very targeted results, given that things have shifted. It is an opportunity for us to ensure that we meet the concerns and realities of regions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Marilène Gill: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I have a question about exploratory fishing licences for lobster.

Obviously, companies have to bear the costs of this fishery in accordance with the latest licenses issued in Quebec. The fact is many fishermen end up in a zone without any lobsters, so they catch almost nothing. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans is aware of the situation, but refuses to reconsider the zones.

I know this isn't strictly a budget issue, but if we want to develop the economy of these regions and ensure the fishing communities' vitality, we have to try and issue licences that, on the one hand, allow fishermen to collect data—which is what we want—and, on the other hand, allow us to evaluate the possibility of harvesting the lobster later.

Regarding zone 18 specifically, I wonder if the department is open to creating zones larger than the current six subzones, because there's a problem. Many fishermen aren't catching anything, and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans is well aware of that. The department needs to act fairly quickly. For example, we're asking fishermen to get a different boat if they want to fish in certain areas, but they don't have the money to do that. There are no resources either. That's another issue.

[English]

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I've met with harvesters in the region. It is an exploratory licence, so it's science-based. It's a couple of years. We collect data at the same time as providing access for harvesters who otherwise would not be able to participate in the fishery. We will remain in dialogue. We will continue to look at science, and we're pleased that we could continue for another season.

[Translation]

Marilène Gill: There's no data, and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans is aware of that, and there will never be any data. We already know that, and yet, we keep asking fishermen to collect data.

Something needs to change. That's really the point here. We can monitor the situation for 30 years, there's still no lobsters. The lobster population might increase, but right now, there are no lobsters, so it's pointless.

I have one last question.

I know the Baie-Johan-Beetz wharf belongs to Transport Canada, but for years the Department of Fisheries and Oceans has been asked to designate it as a fishing harbour. There were no roads before, so it served as a shipping lane. That said, communities such as the indigenous community of Nutashkuan and, of course, the Baie-Johan-Beetz community would like to use the wharf. They'd like to know if that's a possibility under the small craft harbours program. The community's been asking for this for decades, and first nations are now asking for it for economic development reasons. They're willing to use the wharf, but it's in really bad shape. However, Transport Canada and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans keep passing the buck. Both indigenous and non-indigenous communities want to know if there's still an opportunity to diversify, or at least stabilize economic activity in this area.

• (1145)

[English]

Hon. Joanne Thompson: We remain in dialogue. When we evaluate catch, it's also a source of data. We always collect data, and that's the reason for the partnership with harvesters and industry. It's all-important to understanding what the health of the stock looks like in the region.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Gill.

[English]

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

Aaron Gunn (North Island—Powell River, CPC): Minister, the last time we spoke, you accused fishermen of spreading misinformation relating to MPAs and the government's plan to close significant areas of B.C.'s coast to fishing, yet we recently learned from Kathy Graham, the DFO director of marine planning and conservation, that your government is still planning to implement the UN's 30 by 30 framework and that the department's previously released drafts—the ones showing massive closures along B.C.'s coast—were still the basis for what is planned going forward.

My question for you, Minister, is this: Would you like to use this opportunity to apologize to fishermen, their families and coastal communities and acknowledge that, yes, the government is planning to close areas of B.C.'s coast to fishing?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I will say to you what I said the last time I was here. I believe we can do both. We can move forward with conservation sustainability and, at the same—

Aaron Gunn: What do you mean by “do both”?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: —time—if you could allow me to finish—we support fisheries. We can do both in marine protected areas, and I will work to ensure that both happen.

Aaron Gunn: I appreciate your argument that there are no trade-offs in this. I obviously disagree. I'm trying to get this on the record, because we've had deflections and evasions on these questions. Is the department planning to close areas of B.C.'s coast to fishing, yes or no, and do you acknowledge that marine closures have real economic effects?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I will say to you, which is what I've just said, that marine protected areas enable us to have conservation sustainability for the next generation and to maintain fishing. We can do both, and it's important that we do both.

I'm not able to say more than that, so no, I'm not going to answer the other question.

Aaron Gunn: You can't give a yes or no...because Kathy Graham told us—

Hon. Joanne Thompson: It's about balance, sir. We can do both.

Aaron Gunn: Okay, that's fine, but I'm asking you some simple yes-or-no questions so that we can get a framework for what is happening.

Yes or no, is the department planning to close areas of fishing off B.C.'s coast as part of the marine protected area plan?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: The officials are going to speak in the next hour, so you're welcome to ask them.

Aaron Gunn: Are you not planning to close areas?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I will say to you that I believe we can do both in marine protected areas. We can support fishing because that is an economic driver—

Aaron Gunn: Are you planning closures, yes or no?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I can answer what I can answer.

Aaron Gunn: That's what marine protected areas are. They're closures. They're not jet ski parks or where people are going water skiing.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: You can ask the officials in the second hour.

Aaron Gunn: What are they? They're closures by definition.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: We need to have conservation sustainability so that the next generation is also able to participate in fisheries.

Aaron Gunn: I understand all that. I'm just trying to get a simple yes or no answer out of you.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: It is our role as coastal communities.

You're trying to debate an answer, and I am telling you that we can do both.

Aaron Gunn: I'm just trying to get the truth.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Beyond that—

Aaron Gunn: You can do both what? You can close areas?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: We can have fishing activity and promote sustainability.

Aaron Gunn: Are you planning to close areas to fishing on B.C.'s coast?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: We can have balance.

Aaron Gunn: You can have a balance of what? Is it a balance of closing areas and still having a...

The entire point of marine protected areas is to restrict access for various forms of fishing in various areas. Do you agree that this is the point of marine protected areas?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: We can circle around this for the rest of the time I have today, but I will answer exactly the same way.

Aaron Gunn: Are you still using draft scenario two as the basis for the marine protected areas planning framework, as was reported by your director general, Kathy Graham?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: You're welcome to ask these questions of officials in the next hour. I will answer the same way. We need to have balance. We need to maintain conservation sustainability and we need to support—

Aaron Gunn: Are you considering adopting the UN 30 by 30 framework without closing any areas to any forms of fishing whatsoever?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I believe we need balance.

Aaron Gunn: You're evading the question. I'm asking a very simple question.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I am answering in the capacity of Minister of Fisheries.

Aaron Gunn: No, you're not answering the question, Minister.

• (1150)

Hon. Joanne Thompson: We can do both.

Aaron Gunn: You're not answering the question.

You can say you're going to close areas of fishing and you believe it's in the best interest of Canada, but you can't sit here and not tell people or fishermen the truth. Why don't you just acknowledge, on the record, that you're planning to close these areas to fishing?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: You don't want to hear what I'm saying. We can have—

Aaron Gunn: You're evading the question and trying to prevent yourself from going on record acknowledging what everyone knows to be the case, which is that large closures are coming to British Columbia's coast over the next few years if you want to meet the UN's 30 by 30 framework.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Within a marine protected area, we can honour fisheries and we can protect and conserve for the next generation. It is balance, and I believe in balanced approaches.

Aaron Gunn: Are no fisheries going to be losing access? Will there not be a 30% loss of access to prawns on the central coast as per DFO's draft scenario two?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: We need to stay at the table. We always need to remain in communication, and we can have balanced approaches.

Aaron Gunn: You're not answering the question. Fishermen in this country deserve the truth. Just level with them about what the government is planning to do. If you don't know, say that.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: We will move forward with balanced approaches.

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

Next, we'll go to Mr. Connors for five minutes.

Paul Connors (Avalon, Lib.): Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, officials, for coming out today.

My first question is around the use of artificial intelligence and digital.

As part of the 15% reduction, DFO is saying that it's going to "leverage artificial intelligence and other digital tools to modernize Canada's fisheries management system."

Can you elaborate on what type of artificial intelligence and what digital tools will be used, and how they will be used?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Thank you. It's a good question.

For example, the e-logs we're seeing on the water, which really help us understand science and catch management, are a form of digitalization. It's incredibly important when we understand that the markets are changing and we need to diversify. Having data from harvesters links back to the need to ensure that we understand what harvesters see, because they have knowledge that's incredibly important. E-logs help us see this in real time. They help inform science and help us with certifications that strengthen our ability to diversify market access.

Paul Connors: My second question would be, have you heard any concerns from fishers about the introduction of artificial intelligence digital equipment? Last year, when it was introduced in Newfoundland, some lobster fishermen were concerned about having to use e-logs.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Change is always challenging. I visited a number of wharves and had direct conversations. Officials were there as well.

We learn each year how we can strengthen processes going forward. Also, I know there were some challenges with the technologies being ready. Again, it's part of how we learn from one year to the next. Technologies evolve quickly. We will, I'm sure, be ready for this season. It wasn't in Newfoundland and Labrador, but parts of Atlantic Canada. It's important to have access to the data that informs science, that allows us to have the information we need to strengthen market diversification, the price harvesters and industry receive for our products. We know we have a world-class product. I heard that over and over in Boston. Certifications ensure that harvesters and industry receive the highest price for a product that is world-class. It's fisheries management and it's input in science. It's a positive, but we'll continue to work with harvesters so they can use the technologies in a way that has a positive outcome for all involved.

Paul Connors: Minister, I also want to give you an opportunity to give an update on where we are for the recreational food fishery in Newfoundland and Labrador. We did the survey, and many recreational fishers are anxiously awaiting what the outcome will be.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Thank you. I'm really pleased with the response to the survey. Ten thousand people participated, which is really significant. Ninety-five per cent of them were from Newfoundland and Labrador, and 96% had participated in the fishery more than two times. There's really good information. We're still working through the data. It will be out before the season opens. I just want to reassure all concerned that the information we received will help inform the decisions going forward.

• (1155)

Paul Connors: I heard from recreational fishers in my area, and they would like to know as early as possible. I urge you to get it out as quickly as possible.

Minister, you mentioned your visit to the Boston food show. I know you're working with other departments to open up markets around the world. Can you elaborate a little on how the work is going and what new markets will be opening up?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I can tell you this very clearly: It was obvious to me that the world wants Canada's seafood. We have a sustainable industry. The fishery is ethically sourced, and there is a high demand for our product. It's on all of us to work together to ensure that we have the certifications that many of these new markets want. Those certifications result in the highest price for the industry and for harvesters. I am optimistic about the opportunities for markets around the world. We will still work to ensure the markets that we have remain open, but at the same time, it's prudent for us to continue to expand.

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

I'm looking at the time.

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

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Arnold.

Mel Arnold: It's concerning that the minister has repeatedly said she can't answer questions when this is what she's here for. Parliamentary functions have fundamental conventions that include ministerial accountability.

Mr. Chair, I would ask you to remind the minister of her duty to uphold the principle of ministerial accountability—

Robert Morrissey: Chair, I'm not sure if this is a point of order.

Mel Arnold: The minister has stated that no science will be cut, but the current lead of the genomics program in Nanaimo has been given notice that his position will be—

Serge Cormier (Acadie—Bathurst, Lib.): Mr. Chair, this is debate. This is not a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Arnold, I hear you, but it is not a point of order.

We would like to get in a bit more questioning. There will be a short additional round. I'm going to do three minutes and three minutes to wrap this up. We're going to be a little bit late.

Clifford...Mr. Small, you have the floor for three minutes.

Clifford Small: Mr. Chair, we're on a first-name basis.

My question for the minister is on the sentinel cod surveys being cut this year due to cuts in the budget. The sentinel cod surveys in Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec, which have been a tool in understanding where the rebuilding processes were over the years, are now being completely eliminated. It's understandable on the Labrador coast, on the northeast coast and on the east coast of Newfoundland, where these stocks are pretty much in the healthy zone. However, cod stocks on the south and west coasts of Newfoundland, the 4R portion of Labrador and 4RST portion in Quebec and the Maritimes, are below the cautious zone.

Why would you cut a tool that you've relied on and that's proven over time to be a great help in knowing the health of these stocks? Why would you cut that in areas where the stocks are below the cautious zone?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: It's interesting. I appreciate your acknowledgement that the health of the cod stocks varies around the province, because this wasn't reflected in a recent private member's bill.

We are committed to robust science. It is appropriate that our data collection methods shift as the scientific tools available to us modernize, but in no way is it a step back from solid science management.

Clifford Small: If there's no commercial fishery, if there's no sentinel fishery, if there's limited recreational fishery only on weekends, and we have to rely on DFO science—which has proven to be a bit dodgy over the years—how are we ever going to get an accurate picture for the fishing industry of what's in the water?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: No decisions have been made around recreational fisheries, as you know. I mentioned this a moment ago.

• (1200)

Clifford Small: Why would you cut that sentinel program in areas where they need it?

Hon. Joanne Thompson: Robust science is critical to fisheries. That is not changing. The methods we use to collect data shift based on modernizing these systems.

Clifford Small: It's becoming less robust. You just said that you need robust science, but you're making it less robust.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I can assure you that the science around cod is robust and will continue to be robust.

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

We're going to conclude with three minutes from Mr. Morrissey.

Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, I will give you the chance to answer the questions I have.

The oyster industry in P.E.I. is facing a crisis. All indications are that it will spread to neighbouring provinces. This industry will depend heavily on the Atlantic fisheries fund. That's one example of a support program going forward. I know you're working well on it.

Could you comment briefly, because then I want to pivot to Mr. MacKinnon? We don't often have the president of the CFIA before the committee.

How is the department preparing to support this vital industry? We should all be confident that there will be a future if we get the steps right.

Hon. Joanne Thompson: I have met with the industry and harvesters. I know how difficult this is. The newest version of the AFF is not a continuation of what happened in the last five years, for example. Looking at the current state is an example. Oysters are one example of why it's so important. Circumstances change; markets change, and the health of stocks changes. We need to ensure that the funds and supports are there to meet the concerns of industry and harvesters.

In fairness, yes, oysters are an example of work we need to do to help the industry recover from where they are and to understand why this has happened. The work of research is an important tool, but we're here to work with them.

Robert Morrissey: Thank you. I appreciate the support.

On this one, science is going to be vital. There is a future. Areas have shown, outside P.E.I., that the industry can rebound and thrive, but we have to depend heavily on science to get it right.

Mr. MacKinnon, can you update the committee on where the CFIA is with all the extensive tests you've been doing with regard to the ability to import oyster seed to P.E.I.?

Paul MacKinnon (Deputy Minister, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Mr. Chair, I'll say a few words even though I'm officially not at the CFIA now.

Robert Morrissey: Oh, okay.

Paul MacKinnon: We're working very closely with the industry on P.E.I., including with Atlantic Aqua Farms and Onda, as you may know.

We're doing a scientific risk assessment now at the CFIA—

Robert Morrissey: You [*Inaudible—Editor*] respond to the DFO side, then; that's fine. Go ahead.

Paul MacKinnon: I'll just sum up.

The scientific risk assessment from the CFIA should be done very shortly. I think you'll be seeing the fruits of this work within a very short period of time.

Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

That's going to conclude our first panel. I would like to thank the minister, as well as the departmental officials, for taking the time to meet with us.

I'm going to suspend for a few minutes to allow the minister to depart. We're then going to continue with questions for officials for the second hour.

• (1200) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1205)

The Chair: Colleagues, we're going to get started again.

I want to welcome our new witnesses to the table. We have Joanne Garrah, assistant deputy minister, ecosystems and oceans science; Jennifer Saxe, assistant deputy minister, aquatic ecosystems; Peter Lambertucci—it's good to see you again—national chief enforcement officer; and Mark Waddell, director general, fisheries resource management.

Before we continue, I would like to flag for members that we are going to vote on the main estimates before we finish today.

With that, we're going to jump back into the order that we were in.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Gill, you were next on the list. You have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Marilène Gill: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for joining us.

The minister said earlier there were no cuts at the Maurice Lamontagne Institute, no cuts to the science sector, but we know things are quite tense at the institute. It's been all over the media, particularly the regional media. We know jobs have already been cut.

Could you tell us as specifically as possible about the cuts to be made at the Maurice Lamontagne Institute? You can provide that information in writing later if you don't have it with you. Apparently, 20 jobs are set to be eliminated; that's what we heard. In my opinion, cutting scientists is making cuts in the science sector. Would you agree?

Niall O'Dea (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you for the question.

To follow up on what the minister said, I'd say the idea is to continue investing substantially in science. Scientific research methods might change from time to time, just like the personnel required to do the work.

• (1210)

Marilène Gill: Does that mean cutting scientists is a way to improve things? You say you're improving and modernizing your operations. Is cutting jobs a way to modernize and improve things?

Niall O'Dea: Sometimes, talent needs to be reassigned to different jobs.

I can ask my colleague to tell you a little more about the approach we're taking with our investments in science.

Marilène Gill: Actually, my question is just about human resources, since 20 jobs have been cut. I don't want the same answers the minister gave us regarding investments in science.

You said human resources needed to be reassigned. Does that mean those who have lost their jobs are being assigned to other positions? That is what "reassigned" means. Have these people been reassigned elsewhere?

I don't know, you just talked about it. I hadn't planned on asking that question.

Joanne Garrah (Assistant Deputy Minister, Ecosystems and Oceans Science, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you for the question.

[*English*]

I can speak to a number of different things. Certainly, within the department, we were asked to look at our expenditures as part of the government's expenditure reduction exercise. That included all aspects of the department, as well as the Maurice Lamontagne Institute.

I can give reassurances, as the minister did, that science continues to be an integral and critical part of the department. We were very sensitive to how we made cuts—specifically, those to science. Generally, we focused those cuts by looking at opportunities either to modernize our work or to stop or wind down activities when we felt that the program had achieved its objectives or that there were other data sources available to it. This applied to that facility, as it did to others.

In some cases, it meant we were simply winding down activities. This had impacts on staff. In other cases, it meant that we were able to align staff to key priorities within the department. In some cases, it meant that they were moved into other activities within their roles.

[*Translation*]

Marilène Gill: Would it be possible to get the details in writing—

The Chair: I apologize Mrs. Gill, but your time's up.

Marilène Gill: I'll come back to it later.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I know time's flying by, but you'll get another turn to ask questions.

[*English*]

Next, we'll go to Mr. Arnold for five minutes.

Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the officials.

There's quite a group of you here this morning.

I was appalled at the minister's inability to answer questions this morning. She repeatedly said that there would be no cuts to science, yet we see significant cuts in science programs, in habitat restoration programs and in the salmon enhancement program.

How could the minister say there would be no cuts to science when we see all of these cuts across different levels of this department?

Niall O'Dea: I'll perhaps explain what we see in the main estimates, which of course is the topic of our conversation today.

There are shifts in spending seen from main estimates to main estimates that are reflected in what's before the committee today. A number of our science programs receive significant investment through various temporary programming, which can be reflected in both main estimates and supplementary estimates decisions throughout the year. Differences in main estimates to main estimates do not necessarily reflect the full balance of decision-making with respect to science investments to be made over the course of the coming fiscal year.

Mel Arnold: These were temporary programs, but the genomics lab was not a temporary program. Is that correct?

Niall O'Dea: The genomics lab has existed for some time. I can affirm that.

Mel Arnold: The minister said there would be no cuts to science, yet the lead of the genomics program at the lab in Nanaimo has been given notice that they would be terminated. How is that not a cut to science? Square that circle for me and for Canadians who want to know.

Joanne Garrah: Certainly, I understand the sensitivity, given the importance of science to the portfolio and to the department.

I would say that the minister is correct in her statement in the sense that science remains a critical part of the department. We had to make decisions within the program as to how we align those resources within science. In some circumstances, this means we have to realign activities based on key priorities.

• (1215)

Mel Arnold: You're not explaining why the lead of that very important program has been cut. That is a science cut. If the lead of the program is terminated, explain how it is not a cut.

Joanne Garrah: I would say a couple of things in terms of information.

First of all, I'm not going to speak to the circumstances of an individual. Those are very personal decisions that have a great impact on our employees, and this is not the forum in which I want to communicate that information.

Generally, as at all times within the program, we have to do our best to align our resources with the government's key priorities. In some cases, this meant we were winding down activities to focus our resources on the key priorities within the sector.

Mel Arnold: I want to go to a question that the minister said you could answer.

Are you doing a comparative analysis of the new monitoring methods versus the established methods, which have been in place

for decades, to ensure that the new monitoring methods would be reliable?

Joanne Garrah: I'll speak to a couple of things.

I'll say this right off the bat: We use a variety of different techniques to gather information in support of science assessments. Monitoring is an important component of science assessments, and this will continue to be the case. It will take many different forms within the department.

I don't have the specific data you're referring to, so it's difficult for me to respond to that.

Mel Arnold: I'll give you the specific data.

You've had stream monitoring cuts because you're going to use new AI systems. That is what we've been told. Have the comparative been done between those two programs?

We've also heard about the shrimp trawl sector on the west coast. On the DFO test vessel, they refuse to adapt their catch net to one that would work. They're told they can't use it because it's not the method that's been used for 30 years, and they don't have a comparative analysis.

Has a comparative analysis been done between the new proposed programs and the existing programs? It's a simple question. Has the analysis been done?

Joanne Garrah: Yes.

Mel Arnold: If not, you can provide it in a written response to the committee.

Joanne Garrah: I'll go back to your earlier question related to monitoring. Monitoring is and will remain a—

Mel Arnold: No, my current question is, has the comparative analysis been done? If you can't provide that now, say so and provide it in writing afterward.

The Chair: Can you provide a short answer? We are at time.

Joanne Garrah: Monitoring is and will continue to be an important part of the program. It's difficult for me to respond without the data in front of me, but a normal part of our science activity is to review how we do our business and to identify whether there are more modern ways to conduct the activity.

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

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

Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Chair.

Whoever wants to answer the question can.

How much has the department grown over the years comparatively when you isolate the Canadian Coast Guard, which has been removed from the department? The overall budget would be down substantially because the Coast Guard has been transferred to DND. When you isolate it out, how has the department's budget grown over the years?

Niall O'Dea: Perhaps I'll turn to my colleague, the chief financial officer, to address the question. It's rapid math to do, given the substantial portion of the department that the Coast Guard represented.

Patrick, do you want to speak to it at a high level?

Patrick Amyot (Chief Financial Officer, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you for the question.

I am relatively new here as the CFO, and that's historical information. I know that the amounts have grown. DFO has grown, excluding the Canadian Coast Guard, but I'd have to provide you with some information....

Robert Morrissey: That's fine. Could you provide this to the committee? I would like to know how the budget of the department, excluding the Canadian Coast Guard, has changed over the past 10 or 11 years. Thank you for that.

Next I have a number of questions for Chief Lambertucci.

Chief, you've been on the job now for not quite a year. Is that correct?

• (1220)

Peter Lambertucci (National Chief Enforcement Officer, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): I just celebrated one year on February 17.

Robert Morrissey: Congratulations.

Peter Lambertucci: Thank you.

Robert Morrissey: Now that you've been there for a year, what would you say is the greatest challenge confronting the protection branch of DFO?

Peter Lambertucci: There are a number of challenges. The fact that everybody wants us everywhere—this is about people's livelihoods—is a definite challenge. We use very intelligence-supported and data-driven priorities to allow us to be in the right place at the right time, and we're capable of working within those guardrails.

Robert Morrissey: Could you advise the committee on how you would see...? From intelligence and data, the world is changing quickly. We see this in areas of conflict, and some of the technology could be adapted to areas that require oversight and protection. Do you see this as an area that will allow the department to provide more timely surveillance as it relates to protection without incurring what would have been an exorbitant cost?

Peter Lambertucci: We are in the process in C and P of going through both a digital and a business transformation to economize and maximize what is available to us. Specifically to your point about digitization, this is going to be one of the greatest enablers we are investing in. We have a very fixed three-year strategy to invest in digital tools that will both enhance officer safety and uncover a number of economies moving from labour-intensive paper to the digital tools required to allow us to put extra boots on the

ground and boats on the water. This would include things like drones, body-worn cameras and VMS on the boats, which will enhance our networks.

Robert Morrissey: You make a valid point that everybody wants to see a uniform when they're doing things right. The opposite occurs outside of that, but it's extremely important that the men and women who serve in uniform protecting the resources of this country feel safe. They can do the job only when they feel safe.

Could you expand on this a bit more, how the department is ensuring not only the people power but the safety and protection of those officers in the field of action?

Peter Lambertucci: Thank you for the question.

Officer safety is the number one priority, regardless of the situation we are faced with. We implement a number of tools for that. It starts at the very foundational level at the Atlantic Police Academy in terms of the type of training they are provided over a 19-week period. There are very specific tools that we've implemented for officer safety. This includes hard body armour and body-worn cameras. Drones can be used as an officer safety tool to do triage and reconnaissance of areas. We've also invested in a learning management module so that we provide very good and clear guidelines and policies for our officers on a continuous learning perspective. They go into the learning management module for in-service training on standard operating procedures, guard lines, guardrails. All of those things are implemented in one digital package.

Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Chair.

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

That's going to complete our third round.

We're going to start the fourth round with Mr. Gunn for five minutes.

Aaron Gunn: Thank you, Chair.

The first time I chatted with the minister is getting close to nine months ago, I think. I asked her about the vague transition that the government was promising to impose on the B.C. salmon aquaculture industry, the details of which were unknown and unclear. She said at the time that certainty and a decision were coming soon. It's now nearly April. There is still no decision and no certainty. Workers are being laid off; investment decisions are being put off; and individuals who rely on the industry to feed their family and to pay their mortgage are worried sick about what the future may hold.

When will we get some answers on what this so-called transition will be, and what assurances can you give to those currently working in the industry?

Jennifer Saxe (Assistant Deputy Minister, Aquatic Ecosystems, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you for the question.

The key points to make here are that there's been interdepartmental work and, as the minister has previously mentioned, the interdepartmental task force was set up. It undertook over 120 extensive engagement sessions with various fishermen, industries, stakeholders—

• (1225)

Aaron Gunn: Do we have a timeline at all?

Jennifer Saxe: That consultation engagement has happened over the course of the past year. We've been hearing about the potential impacts on the aquaculture. We've been trying to get a deeper understanding from first nations workers—

Aaron Gunn: Is there still no timeline for a decision?

Jennifer Saxe: The analysis continues to be under way.

Aaron Gunn: Can you guarantee that farms will be allowed to operate beyond 2029?

Jennifer Saxe: At this point in time, the analysis from those engagement sessions continues.

Aaron Gunn: Okay. Thank you for your bluntness.

I have a second question. In British Columbia, as I'm sure you all know, salmon carry very significant cultural, environmental and economic value to first nations and to recreational and commercial fishermen. An important component of rebuilding and maintaining these salmon stocks is hatcheries all up and down the coast, of various sizes, many of which rely on volunteers as much as they do their limited private and public contributions. For example, the Powell River Salmon Society has been one of the most productive hatcheries on the coast despite having no increases in federal funding in more than 40 years.

I now hear that they are being told by DFO officials that their very limited but essential funding is at risk in light of the significant cuts coming to the department.

I recently wrote to the minister about this, who graciously replied but, noticeably, did not commit to preserving funding for hatcheries such as the one in Powell River.

Can hatcheries that have served wild salmon in the environment and their communities so well and with so much success expect cuts in the upcoming budget? If so, how deep are the cuts we are talking about?

Niall O'Dea: As I noted in response to an earlier question, there is a series of items reflected in the main estimates and other questions about programs that have received long-standing temporary funding in the past.... In some cases, they remain to be made and will be reflected in further decision-making, and if so, in future estimates.

Aaron Gunn: As far as you know, no decision has been made relating to the funding of individual hatcheries.

Niall O'Dea: To my knowledge, no.

Aaron Gunn: We're jumping all over the place, so I appreciate your staying with me.

This year, the International Pacific Halibut Commission set Canada's halibut quotas at historic lows—down more than 7%—yet the American allocation remained unchanged. Why is that?

Niall O'Dea: I'll turn to my colleague, Mark Waddell.

Mark Waddell (Director General, Fisheries Resource Management, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you.

Those negotiations proved to be challenging for Canada. I admit that. A reduction was necessary based on the science advice.

Aaron Gunn: Do you mean an overall reduction?

Mark Waddell: Yes, an overall coast-wide reduction was in the cards, based on the scientific advice provided to both Canada and the United States.

Aaron Gunn: Why did the reduction fall on Canada? Why was it not split evenly?

Mark Waddell: It is because there proved to be very challenging discussions with our American counterparts.

Aaron Gunn: Did they threaten Canadian access to their seafood market?

Mark Waddell: They did indeed.

Aaron Gunn: Does it seem as though we just rolled over and took it, then? You said these were challenging negotiations, but it seems as though we took 100% of the cut and the Americans took nothing. That doesn't sound much like a negotiation.

Mark Waddell: Those negotiations will continue over the course of the coming months and years. We expect that we will not necessarily have the same outcomes in future negotiations.

Aaron Gunn: Okay.

I have another question.

We talked a bit about this. Obviously, there's a difficult financial situation at the department and in the whole government. About nine years ago, the government set out on the 30 by 30 initiative to create a massive network of marine parks. Nearly a decade later, the only thing that's been created, as far as I can tell, is a lot of uncertainty in the industry for fishermen, their families and coastal communities.

Do we have an estimate on how much has been spent on this initiative to date?

Patrick Amyot: Thank you for the question.

I don't have the information right now, but I'm happy to provide it in writing.

Aaron Gunn: Okay.

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

I'll take the next five-minute round.

I want to pick up on a line of questioning by my colleague Mr. Morrissey about the use of drones in the work of fisheries enforcement.

I certainly experienced, in my riding, not having access to the people on the water. I was hoping you might speak a bit more about how these tools are being used on the west coast for enforcement against illegal fishing.

Peter Lambertucci: Thank you very much for the question.

If fishery officers aren't visible, it doesn't mean they're not engaged in doing their enforcement, monitoring and inspection work. Drones are great examples of that. This work is taking place on the west coast, in the Pacific region, where we have a number of pilot operators who fly drones for that purpose. In terms of our presence, we are on land, we're on the sea and we're in the air. If it's not a drone in the Pacific region, it could be an aircraft, a high-visibility patrol or a walking patrol. There are a number of tools at our disposal for us to use.

I'd also like to talk about the interdepartmental dependencies we have on every coast. It is not just DFO's C and P doing the work. We have a number of interdependencies with partners that facilitate this work.

Again, when we're not visible, we're still very much engaged in quite a profound way.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm going to switch gears.

The estimates have a budget for the support of asset disposal programming, with an increase of 278%.

This may be a question for Mr. O'Dea.

What specific programs...vessel removals or operational targets are going to be met with this? Particularly, does DFO have measures focused on things like abandoned and derelict vessels as part of this increased funding?

Niall O'Dea: Thank you for the question.

DFO, as colleagues understand, is responsible for a fairly massive infrastructure nationally with respect to small craft harbours, other facilities, equipment, etc. The asset disposal function will be for activities related to the disposal and management of things like vessels that need to be decommissioned. It may be for components of harbour infrastructure that need to be decommissioned or replaced, or for other assets, such as the equipment found in scientific laboratories, that may have come to its end of life, at a certain stage, and needs to be replaced.

I can turn to the CFO if there's any more detail on this, but I think that's a high-level response to the question.

The Chair: Thank you.

Is there anything you'd like to add?

Patrick Amyot: No. I have nothing to add, unless you have a specific question.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Garrah, you mentioned that DFO is winding down research and monitoring activities that have been deemed to have achieved their objectives—or for which alternative data sources exist.

There's also been discussion about using new methods. I think digital logs and artificial intelligence were mentioned, but I've also read about the use of eDNA in scientific monitoring.

I was hoping you might speak a bit more to that type of work, whether it's to supplement or to replace some of the work being done through more traditional methods.

Joanne Garrah: Thank you for the question.

Within science, we continue to evolve. We continue to look for opportunities to introduce new technologies. Environmental DNA, or eDNA, as you referred to, is an important component of that. We have certainly used it in a number of different settings, and we hope to continue to explore different opportunities for it, whether that's through stock assessments or trying to identify information for species at risk or for invasive species.

There are a lot of different scenarios in which we can use the technology to take micro amounts of DNA that might be available in the ecosystem to try to amplify the information and use it for some of the information we assess within science. This may be for stock assessments or, as I said, the presence of invasive species—or to try to get a sense of whether there is loss of species through species at risk. This is a technology that we will continue to explore and invest in.

Artificial intelligence, as you referenced, is similar. We continue to explore, within the science program, a lot of different opportunities to introduce this technology to improve our science assessment processes across the board.

The Chair: I have a final quick question. What changes do you foresee for in-river monitoring as a result of the changes in the estimates?

Joanne Garrah: We don't anticipate significant changes to in-river monitoring through the changes we have proposed as part of government expenditure reduction exercises. As the minister articulated when she was here, I think the key message is that the core functions within science will be preserved.

That said, we continue to look for opportunities to better align them with priorities and look for opportunities to implement new technology. Sometimes that may mean a reprioritizing of activity or a shifting of resources towards them.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mrs. Gill, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Marilène Gill: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I have one more question. I don't think you'll have enough time to answer it, so you can submit the rest of your answer on the Maurice Lamontagne Institute to the committee in writing.

We know the Department of Fisheries and Oceans' regional offices are already understaffed. As a result, they're not as functional as they could be. Staff are also unable to move up the ranks. Many people are on sick leave. It's difficult to attract staff to some regions. Obviously, I'm thinking specifically of the Côte-Nord, in my riding, but every region where there's fishing is going through the same thing.

That's why I have some questions. What impact will the cuts at the Maurice Lamontagne Institute have? Is there any way to find out the department's objectives in that regard? What will be cut exactly? Where and when will the cuts be made? Has the department studied or evaluated the potential consequences of these cuts? I see the department's using attrition, for example. That process is less obvious, less visible. It doesn't change the fact that the workload is getting heavier for all employees.

In short, could you tell us where and when these cuts will be made, and what the anticipated consequences are? I'd also like to know the reasons that motivated the department to make these cuts. I mentioned the cuts at the Maurice Lamontagne Institute and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, among others, but there's also the Coast Guard. Sorry, I mean the fishery guardians, but it could also be the Coast Guard, since it falls under your department's jurisdiction.

• (1235)

Niall O'Dea: I'll give Ms. Garrah a minute to answer your questions on science in particular.

I just want to point out that 80% of the department's personnel budget is allocated to the regions, and regional investments are very important to the department. During our review of spending efficiency, we focused on maintaining core capabilities across the country, knowing most of our activities take place in the regions.

Ms. Garrah, would you like to add anything?

[English]

Joanne Garrah: Thank you for the question.

I don't have a lot of information to add. Within the department, we're happy to follow up and provide more information on cuts that we made within the department and how they specifically apply to science. I think the important message for MLI, as it is with all our facilities, is that we are not expecting a significant impact to the core activities of science that we do in those facilities.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Gill.

[English]

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

Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. O'Dea.

The Atlantic salmon live gene banking programs in Mactaquac, New Brunswick, and Coldbrook, Nova Scotia, are being discontinued because of cuts in this year's budget. Most Atlantic salmon runs are in the critical zone, and many consider Atlantic salmon as a whole to be endangered.

Why would you take something as precious as our Atlantic salmon and use that species as part of the cuts in this year's budget?

Niall O'Dea: Thank you for the question. I will allow colleagues to add to this, but I will start by saying that we definitely recognize the importance and priority of Atlantic salmon.

That's why, just over a year ago, we released a wild Atlantic salmon conservation strategy to align the department's efforts with partners to ensure the conservation of Atlantic salmon. That has been a framework for decision-making for the department—

Clifford Small: I understand your good intentions. However, I don't know how shutting down these facilities fits into a rebuilding program.

Niall O'Dea: I can certainly invite my colleague to speak to how we're realigning our activities in this regard.

[Translation]

Joanne Garrah: Thank you for the question.

[English]

I'll say a couple of things. I certainly understand public perception in relation to these facilities. Nobody likes to see cuts, and I understand that it's a sensitive issue, particularly for salmon.

As my colleague articulated, Atlantic salmon continue to be a priority for the department, and you're right, we have seen reductions in wild Atlantic salmon populations for many years.

Clifford Small: I have a question for you. The sport fishing industry and most of the salmon in British Columbia are worth \$1.1 billion to the economy of B.C.—actually, I think it's up to \$1.25 billion now—but there doesn't seem to be much will to grow the contribution of the Atlantic salmon to the GDP of Atlantic Canada. What's the difference?

• (1240)

Joanne Garrah: I would say that decisions regarding the facility shouldn't be perceived as a reflection on our value of Atlantic salmon and our willingness to continue to conduct science activities and other activities in support of rebuilding the population, but we did have to look, when we made cuts within the programs, at whether programs were continuing to meet their objectives. That program, from our perspective, despite many years of investment, was no longer achieving its objectives.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Ms. Garrah. If you'd like to add more to your comment by submitting a written document, you can.

Mr. Amyot, \$1.6 million has disappeared from the small craft harbours budget with no explanation on that line in the budget as to what will be eliminated by the \$1.6-million cut. The people in small craft harbours—and these folks are all volunteers who run the small craft harbours programs in the various harbours—are wondering how the \$1.6-million cut is going to affect them.

Patrick Amyot: Thank you for the question.

What you're referring to, I believe, is the \$1.6-million grant for disposal that's being reduced, but at the same time, the contribution for disposal and restoration of small craft harbours has increased by \$1.8 million. On the details of the differences and all of that, I would ask my colleagues to answer.

Clifford Small: That's okay. Thank you.

I'm going back to the cuts in the sentinel survey for codfish in the gulf and in the Newfoundland and Labrador region. The minister spoke of a need for more “robust science”.

We don't have a commercial fishery in most of these areas; we have a very limited recreational fishery, and now we don't have the tool we used to have, which was known as the sentinel fisheries. If we hadn't had these things in the last few years in the northern cod, stakeholders would have never known that the northern cod population was exploding.

Why would you take away that tool? This goes to Mr. O'Dea as well. Why would you take away the tool when you're looking at only a handful of areas? All of the eastern and northeast coast of Newfoundland and Labrador is gone from the program, so it must be nearly cut in half from what it used to be. Why would you take away that necessary tool in zones where cod is deep into the critical zone in a lot of cases?

The Chair: I'm afraid I have to jump in here. We're well over time.

Mr. O'Dea, if you'd like to provide an answer in writing, that would be appreciated.

With that, we are going to Mr. Cormier for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have one last question for you.

I know the Department of National Defence is now responsible for the Canadian Coast Guard. As you know, the Coast Guard plays a vital role in our region during snow crab season, which is about to begin.

Although the Coast Guard has been transferred to the Department of National Defence, are you still in close contact with them to make sure icebreaking operations are proceeding smoothly?

I can see the amphibious vehicle—we call it “the frog” around here—breaking up the ice near the docks as we speak. I take it contracts have already been signed.

Are you still in close contact with the Department of National Defence regarding the small and medium-sized icebreakers scheduled to arrive in the region to ensure everything goes smoothly?

• (1245)

Niall O'Dea: I can assure you we're working closely and continuously with the Coast Guard to provide scientific support and enforce fisheries management regulations.

We're working closely together in the gulf region to support the deployment of icebreakers for the opening of the fishing season. That's all covered by a co-operation agreement between the two departments.

Serge Cormier: Were the same amounts allocated to the contracts we have with third parties, such as Ocean Group? They can use their tugboats to help out if Coast Guard vessels are unavailable. Were all these contracts maintained when the Coast Guard was transferred to the Department of National Defence?

Niall O'Dea: Yes. The idea is to maintain continuity in these agreements. Nothing's going to change, unless there are reasons to make a change.

Serge Cormier: Perfect.

As you know, over the last few weeks, or rather the last few months, the Nova Scotia government has taken measures regarding the illegal practice of unreported lobster sale.

Last week, in its latest budget, the province of New Brunswick did the same thing. If I'm not mistaken, it's estimated that 10% to 30% of lobster sales go unreported.

Did your department work with the governments of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to develop this strategy? Did you make recommendations on how to conduct inspections and make arrests? After all, there are fishery officers on the docks.

Why is there some overlap here? Can you explain why these initiatives are coming from the provinces, rather than the federal government?

Niall O'Dea: I'm going to pass it over to Mr. Lambertucci in a moment, but I just want to say that we are very glad about the investments New Brunswick and Nova Scotia are making. We have a pretty high level of co-operation with them.

Mr. Lambertucci can tell you more.

Peter Lambertucci: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

We have been in very active participation, and I too am quite excited to see New Brunswick and Nova Scotia come on board with the extra resources for illegal and unauthorized sales.

We had a policy-level committee at the ADM level, with regional directors general and a number of our provincial counterparts, and I chair an interdepartmental working group for the operational level that includes Atlantic Canada in terms of how we will operationalize these resources' coming on board. There are discussions taking place as soon as this week on what potential joint operations can happen, but we are very much looking forward to having the extra capability and capacity to look at this.

In the interim, C and P has spent extra time at processor and buyer facilities, and we are already engaged with the provinces on that level.

Serge Cormier: Thank you very much.

Also, because my colleague, Mr. Small, touched on the Atlantic salmon strategy a little bit, in case he doesn't remember, I have a motion on notice regarding an important study that we need to do on Atlantic salmon, and I hope he will support it.

Perhaps you could talk a little bit about the stage the strategy on Atlantic salmon is at right now, because it's urgent, as you know. Where are you on this?

The Chair: We're at time. Could we have a quick answer?

Niall O'Dea: Absolutely.

We continue to invest actively in support of Atlantic salmon, including most recently a \$1-million investment made within the past year on additional research and collaboration with partners. We look forward to bringing forward more activities in the coming months.

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

Colleagues, I'm looking at the time. We'll have an abridged last round. We'll do three and a half, three and a half and then two and a half to wrap it up. Then we'll vote on the estimates.

With that, I will hand the floor over to Mr. Arnold for three and a half minutes.

Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll turn to Ms. Garrah again for this one.

DFO appears to be cutting components that are key to the recovery of wild salmon on the west coast—the genomics lab in Nanaimo, the salmon enhancement program and, certainly not least, habitat restoration. Some cuts will mean that habitat staff who are managing an area that is twice the size of Vancouver Island will be managing that area from 500 kilometres away. It's an area that produces some of the largest and strongest salmon, ones your department has identified as key to the recovery of southern resident killer whales.

Can you explain how it can be cost-effective to move habitat management staff 500 kilometres away from their work?

• (1250)

Joanne Garrah: I can respond to some of that. Some of it, my colleagues may be able to respond to.

I'm not sure of the specific example you're referring to and the data you're referring to there. I can just reassure the chair and mem-

bers that we continue to make investments in Pacific salmon, both in science and other parts of the department. It remains a critical business line for us in terms of—

Mel Arnold: No. You're moving habitat management staff over 500 kilometres away from an area that's twice the size of Vancouver Island. The question was, and it's very clear, how can moving them 500 kilometres away be cost-effective when they would have to travel to do their work?

Joanne Garrah: As I said, colleagues may have additional information. I don't have any specific information to provide on that example, but I would be happy to follow up.

Mel Arnold: Can you provide the answers in writing, please?

Mr. Gunn has asked that I turn some time over to him in this round as well.

Aaron Gunn: Yes. I have a quick follow-up question.

Earlier this year, the Canadian government acceded to American demands and threats and agreed to significantly reduce our shared halibut catch by 7.2%. Americans reduced theirs by approximately zero. Who in government was responsible for agreeing to this capitulation? How does it line up with the government's overall elbows-up approach to trade negotiations with the United States?

Mark Waddell: Certainly, the decision factored into the broader relationship we hold with the United States. It was one of multiple variables that will continue to influence—

Aaron Gunn: Do you know who was responsible for it?

Mark Waddell: At the end of the day, the decisions are taken by the officials on the floor, on the ground, of whom I was one. We ultimately report back to the minister and seek approval for the decision.

Aaron Gunn: Was the fisheries minister okay with the decision? Did they support the decision, or did they direct the decision?

Mark Waddell: In the context of the broader information and the decisions made at the time, it was the best decision at the time.

Niall O'Dea: It should be understood as well that we have industry members who participate with us in the consultation and in those negotiations. They are attuned to the dynamics at play at those tables and play a part in the decisions that are all—

Aaron Gunn: I'm wondering about the decision-making. Who is ultimately responsible? Who makes the decision?

Niall O'Dea: The minister sets the mandate, and officials execute the mandate to the best of their ability.

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

Mr. Klassen, you have three and a half minutes.

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

Thanks to all the witnesses here today.

In B.C. I'm hearing a lot of talk about dredging in some of the harbours where harvesting is taking place. Regarding the small craft harbours funding the minister alluded to, I wonder if someone can expand on whether this would include dredging of some of these areas.

Niall O'Dea: Thank you for the question.

The small craft harbours program includes a diverse array of activities, including, obviously, the building and repair of the direct small craft harbour infrastructure and the disposition of assets that are no longer required, as well as dredging activities. These activities take place across the country in order to facilitate the safe passage of fishing vessels.

Was there anything you wanted to add, Mark?

Ernie Klassen: Sorry, I thought you were raising your hand, but you were taking your glasses off.

Mark Waddell: No, I have nothing to add.

Ernie Klassen: Mr. Lambertucci, in B.C. there's quite a bit of news media right now about southern resident killer whales and keeping the distance from any boats or anything coming closer to them. I'm wondering if you can tell us how you intend to monitor this.

Peter Lambertucci: That's done through accommodation of our aerial and on-water surveillance activities. We work very closely with our departmental colleagues when we know that the resident whale population is near. We are on water quite frequently when those issues are taking place.

• (1255)

Ernie Klassen: Thank you very much.

Ms. Garrah, we've talked a lot about cutbacks and so on. I wonder if you can talk about efficiencies in merging certain programs.

Joanne Garrah: Are there any specific programs you're referring to, or is it just more generally within the science program?

Ernie Klassen: It's more generally within the science program.

Joanne Garrah: We didn't do a lot in terms of merging of programs within science. What we did do is look at opportunities to wind down activities if we didn't feel that a program was achieving its objective, if it had achieved its objective or if there were other data sources available for it.

We looked at opportunities to realign staff to key priorities. There were some circumstances in which staff were working on certain activities, and we repositioned those resources to focus on other activities. That was the primary area of focus, rather than specific merging of programs.

Ernie Klassen: Thank you very much.

The Chair: I'll take this last minute.

The DFO has cited conservation as a basis for recreational fisheries restrictions, particularly where Fraser 5-2 chinook are concerned. At the same time, we're seeing significant reductions in funding for the west coast salmon program, including habitat restoration.

Given the Science Advisory Report 2025/016 and the continued importance of Fraser spring and summer 5-2 chinook as prey for southern resident killer whales, how does the department justify reducing the conservation-related funding, while continuing to rely on conservation concerns to support fisheries restrictions?

Niall O'Dea: I would underline that, as previously mentioned, there is funding reflected in the mains. For certain temporary programs there may be future funding decisions to come that will be reflected in supplementary estimates and otherwise.

The measures to protect and conserve Pacific salmon remain a very fundamental priority of the department. As colleagues around this table will recall, historic investments have been made over the past five years in restoring Pacific salmon populations across the Pacific coast.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I hope to see those continued as many of those are sunseting.

[*Translation*]

To wrap up, we'll go to Mrs. Gill for two and a half minutes.

Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm not used to the way this committee works, so I was a bit surprised. Nevertheless, I'm very glad to have another turn, since I had four other questions I wouldn't have been able to ask on another topic.

First, I want to talk about the Quebec fisheries fund. Obviously, my colleague Alexis Deschênes thanked the minister for renewing the fund. However, we still have questions about the indicators used to calculate the amount or, rather, percentage. We estimated that it was about 10% for Quebec. Are the indicators the same everywhere? What are they? That's one of our questions.

The minister also talked about the Seafood Expo, in Boston. She talked about the Americans and the need to innovate and diversify. That makes us wonder whether the fisheries fund shouldn't be topped up to reflect that. I'm not saying we can't use the fund to innovate as it is, but it seemed to be a really important issue and many of our colleagues talked about it in Boston. The Americans said it, the tariff situation isn't over. We need to plan for that, and I think this would also be an opportunity.

In addition, depending on the indicators you use, given the size of Quebec's fishery revenue-wise, is that something worth factoring into the percentage of the fisheries fund for Quebec? I'm asking. If so, the exact numbers would need to be examined.

That's all. It's actually three questions that overlap. If you run out of time for your answer, I'd appreciate it if you would get back to us in writing.

Niall O'Dea: Thank you for your questions. I'll do my best to answer.

Regarding the fisheries fund, we are very glad that it was renewed. I know the minister and her counterpart Mr. Martel had a chance to discuss it when they were in Boston. The investment in the fund is shared, so of course, the ministers have discussions amongst themselves to determine the amounts. That said, we absolutely recognize the value of Quebec's industry.

As for innovation, the idea behind the fund is definitely to support innovation, especially if it opens up international markets, not just products for export, but also products for domestic consumption that align with the interests of consumers here in the country. Against that backdrop, there's no doubt that Quebec's fisheries are promoted. The innovative spirit of Quebec's fish harvesters and processors is clear. I think there's a great opportunity to support their industry.

• (1300)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Gill.

That's all the time we have for our second panel.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here and answering our questions.

[*English*]

At this point, we are going to dismiss our officials so that we can take care of voting on the main estimates.

Colleagues, does the committee wish to vote on the main estimates now? We just need to go through them very quickly. In all,

there are three votes in the main estimates. Unless anyone objects, I'm going to seek unanimous consent to group them together for a decision.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay. We're going to vote on the main estimates.

DEPARTMENT OF FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$1,129,592,734

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$312,651,586

Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$328,496,761

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

The Chair: Shall I report the main estimates to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay.

Lastly, before we wrap up here, you've all received a proposed budget for today's meeting. Is it the will of the committee to adopt it?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Our next meeting will take place on Wednesday, when we'll be starting our study on recreational and traditional fishing for softshell clam.

[*English*]

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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