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Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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• (1630)

[English]

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

[Translation]

Welcome to meeting number 35 of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans.

[English]

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

I also want to welcome two new members to our committee.

I welcome the Honourable Hedy Fry.

Welcome back, Mr. d'Entremont.

Today, pursuant to Standing Order 108, the committee is meeting to continue its study of recreational and traditional fishing for soft-shell clams.

[Translation]

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

[English]

Before we continue, I would like all in-person participants to consult the guidelines written on the cards. The measures are in place to help prevent audio and feedback incidents, and to protect the health and safety of all participants, particularly the interpreters.

I will advise members that all witnesses appearing virtually have done the required technical testing.

I have a few comments for the benefit of witnesses and members. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating via video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic. Also, please mute yourself when you're not speaking.

[Translation]

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

[English]

This is a reminder that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses.

From the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, we have Evelyn Soo, director general, food safety and consumer protection directorate.

From the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, we have Alistair Struthers, director, aquaculture policy and regulatory affairs.

By video conference, from DFO, we have Céline Gaudet, regional director general, gulf region; and Sylvain Vézina, regional director general, Quebec region.

From the Department of Environment, we have Joanne Volk, director general, environmental science directorate; as well as Arash Shahsavarani, director, emergencies and marine science division.

We will move into opening statements from the witnesses. You have five minutes or less.

We'll begin with Ms. Soo.

Evelyn Soo (Director General, Food Safety and Consumer Protection Directorate, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Good afternoon. I am pleased to appear before you today to speak to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's role in the Canadian shellfish sanitation program, CSSP.

The goal of the program is to minimize the risks of consuming contaminated bivalve shellfish such as oysters, mussels and clams. This protects the health and safety of consumers, supports trade within Canada and internationally and plays a key role in Canada's coastal and economic landscape.

The scale of the CSSP is significant. It monitors more than 2,000 shellfish harvest sites along the 78,000 kilometres of coastline spread through the Pacific, Quebec and Atlantic regions. The CFIA plays an important role in protecting the health and safety of Canadians and supporting trade by minimizing the risks associated with consuming contaminated shellfish.

Under the CSSP, the CFIA runs a surveillance program that monitors shellfish harvest areas for harmful marine biotoxins. CFIA's marine biotoxin monitoring program begins once DFO and ECCC have completed the work to classify a site. The CFIA conducts marine biotoxin monitoring only in harvest areas that are appropriately classified for harvest. Based on the results of the laboratory analyses, the CFIA provides recommendations to DFO on whether shellfish harvest areas should be closed or can reopen safely.

The CFIA also licenses and inspects 272 parties that process, package and label shellfish for export or interprovincial trade as well as parties that import shellfish into Canada. As a science-based regulator, the CFIA verifies that licence-holders are meeting their food safety obligations and, when necessary, conducts food safety investigations and overseas recalls.

The CSSP supports three distinct shellfish harvest sectors, each playing a vital role in Canada's coastal and economic landscape. The CFIA plays a role in supporting each sector.

The first is the commercial harvest sector. This includes shellfish harvested for interprovincial trade and exports, and it's valued at approximately \$475 million annually. Aquaculture exports alone are estimated at \$240 million a year, with the United States, the European Union and Asia representing the major export markets. The integrity of this program is, therefore, not only a matter of public health; it is also a matter of economic significance for Canada's coastal communities and our international trade reputation.

The second sector is harvesting for indigenous food, social and ceremonial, FSC, purposes. In addition to the existing support for indigenous FSC, budget 2024 allocated \$25.1 million over two years to the CFIA, ECCC and DFO to expand program activities that support some coastal indigenous communities' access to shellfish for food, social and ceremonial purposes. With this funding, the CFIA established new biotoxin surveillance stations and conducted biotoxin testing in the CFIA laboratories. By March 31, 2026, the CFIA had signed 23 memoranda of understanding with first nations communities and analyzed approximately 700 samples for marine biotoxin hazards.

The third sector is recreational harvesting. This includes traditional harvesting by local communities for personal consumption, recreation and cultural or heritage purposes. Recreational harvesting remains an important cultural and community tradition, particularly in Quebec and Atlantic Canada.

In closing, I would like to underscore that the success of the CSSP rests on the strength of federal collaboration and communities. No single department has the regulatory authority to deliver this program alone.

The CFIA takes seriously its responsibility to coordinate across partners, maintain the integrity of national standards, liaise with foreign authorities and ensure that Canada's food safety system commands the confidence of Canadians and our trading partners around the world.

Thank you for your time.

● (1635)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Soo.

Next we will hear from Alistair Struthers for five minutes or less.

Alistair Struthers (Director, Aquaculture Policy and Regulatory Affairs, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Mr. Chair and honourable members, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today.

My name is Alistair Struthers, and I am the director of aquaculture policy and regulatory affairs with Fisheries and Oceans Canada. I am joined by my colleague Sylvain Vézina, the regional director general for the department's Quebec region, and Céline Gaudet, the regional director general for the gulf region, both of whom manage the fishery in their respective regions. We are also joined by colleagues from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and Environment and Climate Change Canada, both of which play important roles in the overall management of the shellfish sector.

[*Translation*]

Fisheries and Oceans Canada manages shellfish fisheries in Quebec, including the Baie des Chaleurs, within the broader Gulf of St. Lawrence ecosystem. Shellfish fisheries in Quebec and gulf regions include both wild and aquaculture activities and support commercial, recreational and indigenous food, social and ceremonial harvesting.

[*English*]

The shellfish sector is managed through such measures as harvest seasons, minimum size limits and daily fishing limits. Decisions related to access, expansion or changes to shellfish harvesting opportunities consider not only resource sustainability but also environmental conditions and food safety requirements, which can vary significantly by region and species. At the national level, DFO's fisheries management sector establishes the regulatory framework and policy direction, while regional offices implement these regulations and policies, applying them in a manner that reflects region-specific biological, environmental and operational considerations.

[Translation]

The Canadian shellfish sanitation program, or CSSP, is a federal, interdepartmental program delivered jointly by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Environment and Climate Change Canada and Fisheries and Oceans Canada. Its primary objective is to protect public health by ensuring shellfish harvested in Canada are safe to consume, while also supporting indigenous harvesting, domestic fisheries and Canada's international trade obligations. Our partners will speak to their respective roles in the delivery of this program during their opening remarks.

[English]

Under this program, Fisheries and Oceans Canada is responsible for opening and closing harvesting areas based on recommendations and evidence provided by federal program partners, and for informing the public accordingly. More broadly, Fisheries and Oceans Canada supports the long-term sustainability of shellfish harvesting through precautionary management, stock assessments where information is available, and effective licensing, compliance and enforcement. Our conservation and protection branch ensures compliance with shellfish harvest regulations, including the management of contaminated fisheries regulations, in areas subject to closure or restriction. Fisheries officers maintain a presence on the ground, investigate potential illegal harvesting and work collaboratively with program partners to ensure that public health protections are respected.

[Translation]

The expansion of harvesting opportunities—including for soft-shell clams—is dependent on scientific testing, assessments and sustained monitoring capacity. In the Baie des Chaleurs region, many shoreline areas have historically not been fully assessed under the CSSP, or were classified conservatively due to limited or outdated data or the presence of multiple pollution sources.

At the same time, it is important to note that the CSSP's geographic coverage across Canada is prioritized based on public health risk and known harvesting activity. The program has experienced increasing demand over the past two decades, while core funding has remained relatively stable.

[English]

Fisheries and Oceans Canada recognizes the importance of shellfish harvesting to coastal and indigenous communities and is actively working with federal partners to improve program delivery. Recent targeted investments through budget 2024 supported increased engagement in indigenous communities and addressed long-term closures affecting food, social and ceremonial harvesting. Additionally, federal partners are advancing modernization initiatives, such as digital mapping tools, to strengthen program efficiency.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada remains committed to working collaboratively with our federal partners, provincial governments, indigenous communities and stakeholders to balance public health protection with sustainable access to shellfish resources.

We would be pleased to respond to the committee's questions. Thank you.

• (1640)

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

We'll conclude with opening remarks from Joanne Volk.

You have five minutes or less.

Joanne Volk (Director General, Environmental Science Services Directorate, Department of the Environment): Thank you, Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee. My name is Joanne Volk. I am the director general of environmental science services with Environment and Climate Change Canada. I am joined by my colleague Arash Shahsavarani, the director for emergency and marine science at Environment and Climate Change Canada. We are both responsible for managing the national and regional operations at Environment and Climate Change Canada for the Canadian shellfish sanitation program.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as part of your study on recreational and traditional fishing for the softshell clam, or *Mya arenaria*. I am pleased to speak on the role of Environment and Climate Change Canada in supporting the Canadian shellfish sanitation program. As you just heard from our colleagues at the table, Environment and Climate Change Canada is a partner in this jointly led program, working in close collaboration with Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

[Translation]

Our primary responsibility within the program is to assess and monitor the sanitary quality of shellfish harvesting waters. This includes shellfish growing areas of Quebec, including the Baie des Chaleurs, within the broader Gulf of St. Lawrence. This work is one of several essential elements towards reducing risks and maintaining public confidence in shellfish safety.

Our activities begin by identifying potential sources of sanitary pollution. This involves comprehensive coastal surveys to identify both point and non-point sources of sanitary pollution, such as waste water discharges, agricultural runoff and failing septic systems.

These surveys are supported by ongoing water quality monitoring, where we measure levels of fecal coliform bacteria—an indicator of sanitary pollution that may pose a risk to human health.

Based on this evidence, ECCC makes recommendations to our CSSP partners on harvesting areas according to risk of sanitary contamination for bivalve shellfish.

[English]

As an example, when water quality deteriorates, whether due to heavy rainfall, infrastructure failure or other sanitary or pollution-related emergencies, Environment and Climate Change Canada provides recommendations to our partners regarding temporary closures to protect human health.

The Canadian shellfish sanitation program was originally designed with commercial harvesting in mind. Its structure reflects the need to support both food safety and international trade, including alignment with the United States. Like other food safety systems, it relies on multiple layers of protection to minimize risk; however, as your study highlights, shellfish harvesting in Canada is not limited to commercial activities. Recreational and indigenous food, social and ceremonial harvesting are also vital, and they present distinct needs.

In recent years, Environment and Climate Change Canada has taken important steps to improve program delivery.

• (1645)

[Translation]

Through budget 2024 funding, ECCC has expanded its engagement with indigenous communities to support safer harvesting practices and remove barriers to access shellfish harvest areas for food, social and ceremonial purposes. These efforts have strengthened relationships and improved information sharing.

Looking ahead, enhanced and improved program delivery will require continued collaboration with partners, provinces, indigenous communities and harvesters themselves.

ECCC remains committed to its role in providing timely, science-based information on sanitary water quality of shellfish harvest areas to help reduce risks to human health and support the sustainable use of shellfish resources for all Canadians.

Thank you for your attention.

We look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Volk.

We will now begin our first round of questions.

Mr. Arnold, go ahead for six minutes, please.

[English]

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

I want to thank the witnesses for being here.

I want to start off with this question, though I'm not sure who might be able to answer it.

From the time that Environment and Climate Change Canada identifies a possible or potential source of contamination, how long would it take for a sample to be collected and taken to the lab and for it to be determined whether an area is safe or it has to go through CFIA's testing of clams or mollusks? It sounds like DFO makes a decision based on that.

How much time would elapse?

Arash Shahsavarani (Director, Emergencies and Marine Science Division, Department of the Environment): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the question. I'll try to answer briefly.

When a pollution source is identified, it doesn't necessarily mean sampling will be required. For example, if there is a failure in a waste-water treatment system and our modelling indicates that the risk is great, we may immediately advise DFO that there is a risk and an emergency closure is required. It's not automatic that a source of pollution equals sampling; that process is determined based on the risk.

For sampling times, we have 30 hours from the time we take a sample to get it to the lab and analyze it within 24 hours, and we get the data after that.

Mel Arnold: From that data, are you able to recommend that DFO close the area? Who makes that decision?

Arash Shahsavarani: If the data suggests that the levels are extremely high and an emergency closure is required, we would provide that recommendation to DFO right away.

Mel Arnold: If an area had been closed, how long would it take for the sampling to go through that process and for a recommendation to be made that DFO open the area?

Arash Shahsavarani: This highlights the complexity of the process. A single sample cannot determine whether an area is safe or not. When we detect a high level of contamination, we have some degree of certainty in terms of the risk level. However, for an area that hasn't been tested or has been closed for a long time because of testing, it may take up to two years of sampling before we can be certain that the area has a consistent, safe pattern for reclassification and opening.

• (1650)

Mel Arnold: It literally takes less than three days to shut down an area but up to three years to reopen an area, even if the testing is clear. Is that correct? That doesn't seem proportionate.

Arash Shahsavarani: Again, that highlights the complexity, because when we detect a bacteriological presence, that's evidence of pollution. However, if we don't detect a bacteriological presence, that doesn't equate to the absence of potential pollution from an area that can have collections two or three weeks later.

For an opening or a classification, we need a series of datasets that cover a variety of environmental conditions so we can have that assurance of safety. An example could be an area where there could be sporadic outflows or runoffs. If we don't have that pattern of sampling over time, we may miss the opportunity to detect those risks.

Mel Arnold: It sounded like you said you could identify a potential area and test it within 36 hours, or less than three days—72 hours—to be able to close a site.

What I'm getting at is the complexity that seems to be involved here. There are three different government departments and agencies involved that all have to work together. They can shut down an area within hours or days, but it takes them three years potentially to open up an area.

Can somebody square that circle? You just said it could take up to three years of testing, but if an area tests clear for six months or a year, why would it take another two years before that area could be opened?

Joanne Volk: I'll try to clarify.

When an area is monitored in a consistent fashion and is normally open, and let's say there is a storm and we close it because emergency runoff pollutes the area, we know it would typically happen that way owing to the pollution source work I mentioned, in which we understand where the sources are in a particular sector.

We model it numerically to understand where the pollution will go, and we have a fairly good idea of how long it will take to clean itself. This is an area that is being managed or monitored in a consistent fashion and would be opened and closed due to an emergency.

Those areas are opened fairly quickly after the events occur. My colleague can correct me, but I believe that in areas where we have consistent monitoring, they can open as soon as seven days after the event or 21 days after the event.

The areas that remain closed for extended periods of time—some of them have been closed for years—are the ones where we would have to go back in and re-evaluate the pollution sources, because they may have changed within that period of time. We would do additional work to understand the flow of the pollution when it comes in and we would resume a monitoring routine. It takes a while for the monitoring routine to build up a sufficient dataset, again, to be able to statistically say with confidence that we understand what is going on in the area.

There is a difference between those.

Thank you.

Mel Arnold: Thank you.

The Chair: Next, we're going to Mr. Cormier for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us today.

I apologize to the interpreters, but clam digging is something we've been doing back home for many years. I started this activity with my grandfather and father. I do it now with my kids. For some people in my region, I can understand that it's hard to accept that, on a nice summer day, they can't engage in this activity. It's also difficult for some people who earn a small income from it from one year to the next.

Ms. Volk, I'm glad you clarified the issue of the opening of harvesting areas. So it doesn't always take three years and, in some areas, it can take less time.

Let's try to clarify this so that people in my area—I know that some of them are listening to our debates—really understand what's happening. When a decision is made to close an area on the Baie des Chaleurs, for example, in my region, it's done mainly for the safety and health of the people who will consume those shellfish.

Ms. Gaudet can probably answer my question, since she knows the region.

Is testing done systematically in all the small bays along the Baie des Chaleurs, for example, or is it done randomly? For example, it may be one day in one region and another day in another.

My question is more about testing. Where are these tests done?

Thank you.

• (1655)

Céline Gaudet (Regional Director General, Gulf Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Mr. Chair, I thank the member for his question.

In terms of the Baie des Chaleurs and my region, the Gulf of St. Lawrence region, there are about 27 harvesting areas. In the so-called classified areas, our colleagues at Environment and Climate Change Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency conduct tests and give us recommendations. We then act on those recommendations.

There are also areas that are unclassified. They are generally untested, and they remain open. They aren't no-take zones. However, we make recommendations through public awareness campaigns. Sometimes there are signs on beaches. Harvesting is not recommended in those places, because there are risks and we don't know exactly what's there.

Serge Cormier: I want to talk about the type of contamination.

As you know, on the coasts, in our regions, there are a lot of cottages and houses. Some were built many years ago. They certainly have septic systems that are no longer adequate. Also, when big storms or heavy rains happen, water flows toward the coast and carries other types of contaminants, such as the ones we mentioned earlier.

Given that the water warms up along the shores of the bays, are there more contaminants in those areas?

Are contaminants more prevalent now than they were in recent years?

The question is for Ms. Gaudet or any of the other witnesses.

Céline Gaudet: Thank you for the question.

I will direct it to my colleagues at Environment and Climate Change Canada, since they are the ones doing the testing.

Arash Shahsavarani: Mr. Chair, I thank the member for his question.

Yes, there are more and more emergency closures because of rain-related events. There is also the issue of septic tanks in poor condition.

Yes, because of climate change, there's more rainfall and, as a result, we have more emergency closures.

Serge Cormier: I'm going to talk specifically about my region, but this could happen elsewhere.

Have there been any deaths or cases of poisoning in recent years?

Have people who consumed shellfish from certain regions where the test results were negative been poisoned? Have there been any deaths related to this?

Do you know if there's any data on that?

[English]

Evelyn Soo: I can speak about the biotoxin closures that may have happened.

In Chaleur Bay, we have not had any biotoxin closures in the area in the last five years.

For some statistics, in 2025-26, over 9,000 samples were tested, and 26% of them were from around the Quebec area. As a result of the testing for marine biotoxins, there were over 1,300 recommendations to open or close in the Pacific region, 42 in Quebec and 81 in Atlantic Canada.

Serge Cormier: My question was this: Did we have any mortality in people, or any cases of intoxication that we know of, in an area that was open or closed? Did that happen in some regions?

Evelyn Soo: During this time in 2025-26, I believe we had one recall, which would be a contamination issue that was impacting human health.

[Translation]

Serge Cormier: Okay.

Ms. Gaudet, do the provinces have a role to play in these tests? If not, is it strictly the federal government's role?

Do you deal with third parties, for example?

You are probably familiar with the Institut Valores in Shippagan, which conducts tests.

• (1700)

The Chair: Please be brief.

Céline Gaudet: Thank you for those questions.

We work with the provinces, but strictly our colleagues at Environment and Climate Change Canada do the testing.

Serge Cormier: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

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

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here. I'd like to thank the witnesses in the room who travelled to come here.

I am very happy that we're talking about clam digging on the Gaspé peninsula and Baie des Chaleurs.

A few days after our first committee meeting at the end of March, a resident of Bonaventure organized a gathering. About 150 people from Bonaventure and Saint-Siméon came out to demand that clam harvesting sites be opened. This is a really important activity for us in the Gaspé. It's our culture, it's our tradition. The first nations, the Mi'kmaq, are also calling for sites to be opened up.

During this session, we have received resolutions from the municipalities of Escuminac, Bonaventure, Carleton-sur-Mer and Gaspé. The reeves are all asking that we find a solution to open more shellfish sites. My goal is to see how we can achieve this. Currently, all requests are categorically denied. We're just being told that there are no resources.

First, let's talk about sanitation.

I'll start with Environment and Climate Change Canada.

Ms. Volk, have any tests been conducted recently in the southern Gaspé peninsula, in the Baie des Chaleurs area, that would show the water is unsuitable for harvesting clams?

Joanne Volk: Thank you for the question.

I'll turn it over to my colleague.

Arash Shahsavarani: Thank you for the question.

Yes, tests have been done in some areas. In two of the regions mentioned, analyses were performed on waste water discharge. Some data has been generated. This data is either already public or will be made public shortly.

Alexis Deschênes: You say that analyses have been performed in certain areas.

In what areas, exactly, were these analyses performed?

Arash Shahsavarani: I'll have to send you the data for those specific areas later.

Alexis Deschênes: You're saying that Environment and Climate Change Canada is currently conducting water tests, even in areas where there is no clam harvesting?

Did I understand correctly?

Arash Shahsavarani: Environment and Climate Change Canada is conducting tests in areas that have already been designated. That doesn't mean tests are being done everywhere, but only in those areas.

Alexis Deschênes: As I understand it, tests are being done in Miguasha, where there is a site where harvesting is permitted. Sometimes, tests are conducted in Saint-Omer, right next door, in Port-Daniel, where there is a site, and in Douglastown.

In places where harvesting is currently prohibited, there are nevertheless beds of clams.

Are you conducting tests in those places?

Arash Shahsavarani: I'll have to send you the data for those specific areas later.

Alexis Deschênes: The subject of the study is the opening of the softshell clam fishery in the Baie des Chaleurs. I would have liked you to come prepared with the necessary data on what's happening in the Baie des Chaleurs. My understanding is that you will respond to us in writing to inform us about the tests.

Ms. Soo, has the Canadian Food Inspection Agency done any tests on softshell clam meat in the Baie des Chaleurs to determine whether it has been unsafe to eat in recent years?

[English]

Evelyn Soo: In Chaleur Bay, we have full monitoring stations for biotoxins.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Where are these stations located?

[English]

Evelyn Soo: They are the ones on the harvest sites that have been classified as open or for harvesting. I don't know exactly which regions they are in, but there is a map.

Over the past five years, we haven't had any biotoxin concerns in that area.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: You did tests at four sites in the Baie des Chaleurs. In the past five years, no test has shown that the shellfish meat was unsafe.

Is that correct?

Evelyn Soo: That's correct.

Alexis Deschênes: My question is for the Fisheries and Oceans Canada representatives, but the representatives of the other organizations here can answer it as well.

A final report was produced in 2022. It's called "Horizontal Evaluation of the Canadian Shellfish Sanitation Program".

In 2022, it was found that the program lacked resources and that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and Environment and Climate Change Canada had reached their maximum capacity.

Is this still the case?

I would first like to invite Mr. Vézina to answer my question, given that he's responsible for the Quebec region.

• (1705)

Sylvain Vézina (Regional Director General, Quebec Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): As far as our region is concerned, the resources at our disposal allow for the implementation of the program.

On our end at Fisheries and Oceans Canada, once Environment and Climate Change Canada verifies water quality and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency confirms that there is no toxicity in the shellfish, we open or close the harvesting areas.

Alexis Deschênes: In December, I submitted a written request to open a softshell clam fishing site in Carleton-sur-Mer and another in Bonaventure. The answer I got was that they didn't have the financial and material resources to conduct the tests.

Sylvain Vézina: You're referring to the addition of new harvesting sites, aren't you?

Alexis Deschênes: That's the subject of the study.

Mr. Vézina, I'm going to ask you my question again, because we misunderstood each other.

Do you still lack the resources to open new softshell clam fishing sites in the Gaspésie?

Sylvain Vézina: Based on Fisheries and Oceans Canada's mandate, which is really to open or close harvesting areas, we don't have a problem in terms of resources or enforcement. Certainly, opening up new areas requires more research on water quality or things like that.

I will let my colleagues from other departments talk about their mandate and answer your questions.

Alexis Deschênes: I understand, but has the Canadian Food Inspection Agency or Environment and Climate Change Canada submitted any recommendations to you in recent years regarding the opening of new softshell clam fishing sites in the Gaspésie?

The Chair: Please answer briefly, Mr. Vézina.

Sylvain Vézina: No, we have not received any recommendations regarding the opening of new areas recently.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Deschênes.

[English]

That completes our first round of questions.

We're going to start the second round of questions with Mr. Small for five minutes.

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for taking part in this valuable study.

My question is for Mr. Struthers.

We had witnesses for this study previously who said one of the main problems with accessing new clam harvesting areas is that there are three federal departments involved in the process. In the province of Quebec, there's a fourth provincial department that's involved in the decision-making. How efficient can the process be with all of these government departments that have to communicate to the public? They have a reputation of not communicating. I'm not sure; I'm not in the bureaucratic system.

How efficient can this possibly be?

Alistair Struthers: I believe each department has its own specific mandate to be able to address.... At Fisheries and Oceans, we're responsible for the management of the fisheries and the enforcement. Our colleagues are responsible for water quality sampling and biotoxin sampling. They each have the necessary expertise within their departments to be able to conduct those.

No expertise rests with a single department to be able to manage the entire process.

Clifford Small: When one of the departments is slacking and not bringing forward its sampling on time or whatnot, who's in charge? Who dishes out the penalties and gives a few slaps to get people moving?

Alistair Struthers: As our colleagues mentioned in their opening statements, there is no one single department that is the overall lead for the CSSP. Each department has a role to play.

Clifford Small: Your department determines the openings and closings, so you have to deal with your colleagues to your left and your right. How often do you talk to Ms. Soo or Ms. Volk in the run of a year?

Alistair Struthers: In the run of a year, we actually speak to them fairly often. In particular, I speak with my director-level colleagues at the agency and Environment Canada at minimum every two weeks.

• (1710)

Clifford Small: Ms. Volk, 50 years ago, there was no need for this bureaucratic nonsense. People who lived on the coast knew when the clams were safe to eat.

How would you rate the quality of the water in terms of a lack of toxins, bioagents or whatnot? How has the water quality changed in the last 30 to 40 years, to your knowledge?

Joanne Volk: I come from Atlantic Canada, and I'm very proud to have harvested shellfish most of my life, as well as being a recreational fisher.

I would defer to my colleague on the quality of the water and the change specifically. He has already noted that we see a frequency of extreme events related to storms, owing a lot to climate change. We can point to indicators like that. That would point to—

Clifford Small: We've had some extremely dry, drought years in the last five years. Probably four out of the last five years had much less rainfall or precipitation than normal. Is that not fair?

Joanne Volk: Climatologically, year to year, we have variability, but we know that over time, owing to things like climate change, the number of incidents that promote a closure are increasing. Certainly, there would be annual variation within that general trend, but

for more specific information, I would turn to my colleague, if we have time, to address the question further.

Clifford Small: Okay. Go ahead.

Arash Shahsavarani: Mr. Chair, as I indicated, we have an increased number of emergency closures due to rainfall. There's densification that is contributing. There are also the challenges with waste-water treatment and septic systems that are aging.

There isn't a specific study that I know of that has monitored and quantified that over time, but in general, that's what we are seeing.

Clifford Small: That data, though.... You have a world of AI and quantification available to you. Can't you plot that on a chart?

One would think the water quality in Atlantic Canada has gone way up with the increases in standards, the new treatment centres and whatnot that went in all over the place, based on new environmental laws.

Arash Shahsavarani: Mr. Chair, it is something we are actually looking at as we improve our data management system to also look at the patterns over a longer period of time, while our focus is specifically on responding to emergency closures at this time.

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

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

Chris d'Entremont (Acadie—Annapolis, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. It's a pleasure to join the committee once again.

I want to underline one person who is here who we didn't mention. Mr. Melillo is also here, joining us. It's good to see Eric here as well.

In Nova Scotia, I got to be the minister of fisheries and aquaculture for a number of years. The agreement we always had with DFO and maybe the CFIA—maybe less with the Department of the Environment—was that when there were a number of closed beaches identified, they were qualified as aquaculture sites. Companies that had depuration capabilities were the ones that came in and managed the leases, per se. I wouldn't say they permitted the harvesters, but the harvesters normally worked for the company that had the depuration, so they were able to sell the product back and forth.

Is that experience used across Canada, or is that something that's used specifically in Nova Scotia?

Alistair Struthers: The process of depuration is not used very widely. It is used somewhat in Nova Scotia and it's also used a bit in B.C., but it is generally not a very widely used process.

Chris d'Entremont: That brings me to the question of why.

We have a couple of very successful companies in Nova Scotia, with Innovative Fishery Products being one of them in my constituency of Acadie—Annapolis. I'm just wondering why that wouldn't be used in places where we're trying to start up a fishery. Why wouldn't we come up with the same kind of partnering agreement with the provincial government?

• (1715)

Alistair Struthers: Certainly, from an aquaculture perspective, most of the aquaculture sites are located in waters that are cleaner and, therefore, don't require the process for relay and depuration. From a recreational or commercial wild capture perspective, I'm less familiar with those harvest volumes, but I suspect they're probably based on the volume of product that's going through and whether or not it's economically feasible.

Chris d'Entremont: I invite you all to come and check out the process we have in Nova Scotia, because it is one that really works. They have their own partnership with the CFIA. Of course, it's a CFIA-inspected plant. I don't know exactly who does the testing or how the testing is done to make sure that the products coming out of that fish plant are appropriate, but they are shipping their products to the U.S. and other parts of Canada, so their process is working from a testing standpoint.

Some of what I would call the “closed bays” that they're working in are areas that were contaminated and were brought back in some cases. Maybe in the Chaleur Bay or in the Gulf of St. Lawrence there's some opportunity to use some of that technology across the system, which I hope the fisheries would take on.

My next question is not quite as friendly, because I kind of agree with some of the questions Mr. Arnold was asking. There seem to be three different groups involved in this.

This comes from an instance I had a number of years ago when I was an MLA for the areas of Barrington Bay and Cape Sable Island. In those areas, there was a bait clam fishery. In order to go and get the bait clams...they weren't able to, because it was closed, even if it was used for bait, because of Environment Canada. Environment Canada wasn't testing those waters at that time, and it took us almost 10 years to get them identified again.

How do we square that circle? Having three organizations involved in a fishery is difficult at best. How do we fix or streamline that process?

I don't know who wants to take that one.

Joanne Volk: Perhaps I'll start and my colleagues can jump in.

First of all, I want to say how much I appreciate the frustration of people who want to harvest shellfish with the inability to do that everywhere, as people would like. At Environment and Climate Change Canada, we do the best we can, honestly, with the resources we have and we are trying to work creatively with the provinces—Nova Scotia would be an example—to understand how we can work collectively and differently to enable others to help us expand our ability within the program. That is a work in progress and something that we are committed to doing.

I will say as well that working with our partners collectively to try to balance where the resources are applied against the three con-

stituents that harvest, namely the economic sector, the recreational sector and the food, social and ceremonial sector—

The Chair: I have to jump in. We're over the time. If you can, complete that answer. We'll have to go to the next—

Joanne Volk: I'm done. Thanks so much.

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

[*Translation*]

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

Alexis Deschênes: Mr. Vézina, we'll continue our discussion.

What we're trying to understand is why there aren't more soft-shell clam fishing areas opened in Chaleur Bay and Gaspésie. The demand is very high. My understanding was that there was a lack of resources. We'll see. I'm trying to get things straight. It seems more complicated than I expected.

Despite the high demand for fishing areas, you're telling us that you haven't received any new recommendations regarding the opening of new areas. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency just told us that, over the past five years, it has conducted tests in Chaleur Bay and has not found any problems with toxins. In fact, it has allowed oysters to be raised in Chaleur Bay.

Environment and Climate Change Canada officials also told us that they conducted tests.

Mr. Vézina, you say that you don't lack resources to deliver on the program.

Why aren't more softshell clam fishing areas open in Chaleur Bay?

• (1720)

Sylvain Vézina: In Chaleur Bay, there are about 65 separate softshell clam fishing areas. However, only four remain open for shellfish harvesting. All the others have been closed over the years because of pollution that made shellfish unfit for consumption.

After that, testing was halted in all of those sectors. The tests that continue to be done are done for areas that are already open, not for new ones.

Alexis Deschênes: The reason new areas aren't being opened is that tests aren't being done in Saint-Siméon, Bonaventure, Carleton-sur-Mer and Escuminac.

Is that correct?

Sylvain Vézina: That's right.

Alexis Deschênes: What I understand is that there are not enough resources to do tests.

If we want testing, we should allocate resources to Environment and Climate Change Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Is that correct?

Sylvain Vézina: Yes. I'll pass the question on to my colleagues, because it's up to them to confirm, but that's more or less it.

Alexis Deschênes: Ms. Volk, how much more money do you need to conduct tests so that we can open areas in Chaleur Bay?

Joanne Volk: Thank you very much for your question.

I'm going to pass it over to Mr. Shahsavarani. He will be able to provide you with details.

Arash Shahsavarani: Altogether, we are currently spending about \$1.6 million a year on surveillance sampling throughout the region. That amount has increased over the past few years.

It's hard to say how much more should be invested in a single region, given that it's going to take several years of testing. There is no certainty that the data collected will make it possible to open new areas in any case. As a rule, we spend about \$50,000 a year in each region where we start working.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Deschênes.

[*English*]

We have time for some short last rounds of questions here for four minutes each, starting with Mr. Arnold.

Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to bring to light here that in 2012, the Conservative government introduced waste-water treatment standards for municipalities, and those standards were to take effect in 2020 to require at least minimal treatment for waste water from municipalities. Then, in 2020, the then minister of environment and climate change, Jonathan Wilkinson, introduced amendments to the waste-water treatment effluent regulations that allowed the extension of deadlines for municipalities to upgrade their sewage treatment standards. Some of those extensions reach out to 2040, 20 years later than originally planned.

Would improved waste-water treatment standards reduce the risk of contamination and the risk to human illness and death, if those standards had been implemented?

Joanne Volk: Not being an expert in waste-water technology or infrastructure, I could say there is a correlation between infrastructure that's degrading or older infrastructure and pollution sources—

Mel Arnold: Okay. If you can't answer the question, I'll ask Ms. Soo.

Would you have to sample fewer sites, or would you be identifying fewer potential contaminant sites, had those waste-water treatment standards been applied?

Evelyn Soo: For the CSSP program, we're monitoring marine biotoxins, which are a different—

Mel Arnold: Who's monitoring waste water, Mr. Shahsavarani?

Arash Shahsavarani: Mr. Chair, it wouldn't have reduced our sampling frequency, because we have to meet certain standards in

terms of the number of samples we collect over time to meet international standards to be able to maintain—

Mel Arnold: Would it have reduced the number of potential contamination sites that you identify?

Arash Shahsavarani: Again, Mr. Chair, I—

Mel Arnold: You started out with a statement at the beginning of the meeting. You said that you identified potential sites of contamination. If those waste-water treatment sites had their standards applied, would those have been applied, and would it have reduced the potential sites that you have to identify?

• (1725)

Arash Shahsavarani: Mr. Chair, it would not have reduced the number of samples we would have to take in order to meet the standards to do exports to international markets.

Mel Arnold: I will turn the rest of my time over to Mr. Gunn.

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

Mr. Struthers, could you give us a rough estimate of the value of aquaculture to the Canadian economy and, possibly, a breakdown by coast?

Alistair Struthers: I can get back to you in writing on the exact numbers.

At the risk of running an error or giving you the wrong number, we will get back to you with a detailed breakdown.

Aaron Gunn: Do you have a rough estimate of percentages—obviously, we are talking a lot about clams here—regarding salmon aquaculture as a proportion of the entire aquaculture industry?

Alistair Struthers: It is a very significant amount. It is 70% to 80% of the overall value of the—

Aaron Gunn: The reason I ask is that, obviously, there is a lot of concern in my riding. I am out in British Columbia. What is going on with the transition plan, I think, just generally.... Whether it is salmon or other forms of aquaculture, we need to ensure that decision-making at DFO is being driven by science, not politics and ideologies.

Do you have an update on what is going on with this transition plan and what I should be telling the 4,000 people wondering if they are going to have a job in six months?

Alistair Struthers: The Government of Canada recognizes the importance of salmon aquaculture for the B.C. economy. On September 20, 2024, the government published a draft salmon aquaculture transition plan. This plan served as a basis for consultations and engagements. Since then, the government's interdepartmental task force has conducted over 120 engagements with first nations and stakeholders. The work has provided us with a deeper understanding of the industry and the regional economy, as well as diverse views on the transition.

The government is reviewing all the different perspectives and considering how it can best move sustainable aquaculture forward in British Columbia.

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

We are going to complete this panel with four minutes for Mr. Cormier.

[*Translation*]

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us today.

I want to take the rest of my time to move a motion. It's not a surprise. The motion is on Atlantic salmon, which I put on notice a couple of weeks ago.

Would you like me to read it again, Mr. Chair?

I'd like to read it again, if I could. I believe the clerk has the motion on Atlantic salmon, which he can share with the committee members.

Is that okay?

The Chair: Yes, you can read it. The clerk has emailed it to all committee members.

There are some new members on the committee, so I think it would be good to repeat it, and people can read it at the same time.

Serge Cormier: That's great. Here's my motion.

I move that,

- (a) the committee recognize that,
 - (i) Atlantic salmon populations are in critical and ongoing decline in several rivers in New Brunswick, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland and Labrador,
 - (ii) Atlantic salmon is an iconic species essential to the balance of aquatic ecosystems and to the economic, cultural and social vitality of many coastal and indigenous communities,
 - (iii) despite conservation efforts undertaken in recent years, salmon returns remain at historically low levels,
 - (iv) the rapid and unprecedented growth of the striped bass population in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence, particularly in the Miramichi River, has resulted in increased predation pressure on smolts and juvenile salmon, raising serious concerns about the survival of Atlantic salmon in adjacent rivers,
 - (v) predation by seal populations in eastern Canada is also a concerning factor affecting the survival of Atlantic salmon, both in estuarine environments and at sea,
 - (vi) without timely and appropriate management measures regarding predator populations, this could compromise efforts to restore Atlantic salmon stocks;
- (b) pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake an urgent study of no more than four meetings on the decline of Atlantic salmon, with particular consideration given to the impact of the current striped bass population in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence and predation by seals, the available scientific data, existing management measures and concrete options that could be implemented rapidly to restore Atlantic salmon populations;
- (c) as part of this study, the committee invite to appear representatives from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, salmon conservation organizations, outfitting operators, recreational fishing guides, affected indigenous communities and independent scientists specializing in population dynamics;
- (d) the committee report its findings and recommendations to the House; and
- (e) pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee request the government to table a comprehensive response to its report.

Mr. Chair, this study is extremely important, not only to me but especially to the people who have been trying to save this species for many years. In my region and across New Brunswick, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Atlantic salmon is not just a species of fish, but a part of our identity. It's been in our DNA and our culture for hundreds of years.

• (1730)

[*English*]

Take fly-fishing for Atlantic salmon as an example. This fishery supports the local economy. It brings visitors from around the world. It sustains outfitters, guides and local businesses. It creates jobs in rural regions. When we talk about salmon, we're also talking about livelihoods.

[*Translation*]

I've been fishing salmon for 25 years. I've had the opportunity to fish in rivers all over New Brunswick, Quebec, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, and I can tell you that the experience changes your life. It is a tradition that is passed down precisely because of the nature around us, our rivers and the land.

[*English*]

What we are seeing today, Mr. Chair, is deeply concerning. The Atlantic salmon population is in critical decline. Returns are historically low. At the same time, we are seeing increased pressure on this species, including from the rapid growth of the striped bass population, for example, in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence, and particularly in the Miramichi River, as well as from predation by seals. Of course, there are a lot of other factors.

[*Translation*]

We can't stand idly by. If the salmon disappear, Mr. Chair, we wouldn't just lose the fish; we would lose the jobs and the traditions that are part of our culture and our history. We've been doing this for a hundred years. Therefore, I think this study is very important. It's essential.

I would like the majority of committee members to move forward with this study and find solutions to help the salmon population, which I feel is an iconic Canadian species.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

[*English*]

I will confirm for committee members that this was put on notice a couple of months ago in order for this to be moved.

We have folks who want to get involved in debate, but I first want to confirm with members that they're in agreement that we can excuse the witnesses while we continue this debate.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Great.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today and for taking the time to meet with us to provide your testimony on this study, which will help inform the recommendations. I would note that there were a few requests for some follow-up information on the monitoring and mapping. If there is other information you can share with the committee, that would be much appreciated in terms of our finalizing that report.

With that, thank you very much for your time today.

We are keeping a speakers list on the motion. I have Monsieur Deschênes first.

[*Translation*]

Next, we'll go to Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Deschênes, you have the floor.

Alexis Deschênes: I welcome my colleague Mr. Cormier's motion. It's a great idea, and I support it. I would ask the clerk to immediately send you a few amendments that I propose.

I grew up in Cascapédia—Saint-Jules, right near the Grande Cascapédia River. It's a legendary salmon river. I've seen the importance of this fishery to the culture, as my colleague was saying.

I applaud the initiative of this study on the decline of salmon and the fact that, together, we can find ways to protect the species, our culture and our economy. I recently had a discussion with Pierre D'amours, who is a well-known guide in the Restigouche River area. He was telling me about the importance of striped bass, particularly in the river, and made a suggestion to consider a commercial fishery for striped bass. We'll see if we can get there.

The purpose of the amendments that I am proposing and that have been sent to you is to have a study that is as broad as possible on the potential causes of the decline of Atlantic salmon. We are actually seeing striped bass. Many people would see that as the factor. We see seals. People think they are the ones eating the salmon. However, we can see that, in areas where there are no striped bass or seals, there is still a decline in Atlantic salmon.

In this study, I propose assessing what is happening in the Strait of Belle Isle, between Quebec and Newfoundland, because we know that there will be runs. Some salmon will go as far as Greenland. The Fédération québécoise pour le saumon atlantique thinks that that is where there is a high mortality rate.

I therefore move that the motion be amended by adding the following after the word "Labrador" in subparagraph (a)(i): "including throughout the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Strait of Belle Isle region".

After subparagraph (a)(iv), I propose that a new subparagraph be added as follows: "(v) the decline is also observed in areas where striped bass are scarce or absent, such as in the Strait of Belle Isle, underscoring the importance of examining mortality factors during marine and estuarine migration more broadly,".

In paragraph (b), I propose to delete the word "particular" and the words "the available scientific data" and, after the word "seals", add the following: "as well as general conditions, mortality factors

during migration and available scientific data throughout the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Strait of Belle Isle".

• (1735)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Deschênes.

Mr. Deschênes proposed an amendment. All committee members will receive it by email. I know there are a lot of changes.

We will now debate the amendment.

[*English*]

Mr. Arnold, you had your hand up. Would you like to speak to this?

Mel Arnold: No, not on this.

The Chair: Okay.

We'll go to Mr. Cormier, who I think wants to speak on the amendment of Mr. Deschênes.

[*Translation*]

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I completely agree with the changes proposed by my colleague Mr. Deschênes. We'll certainly study this and hear from witnesses anyway, but these changes strengthen the motion. Therefore, I support the changes proposed by my colleague Mr. Deschênes.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

Are there any other comments?

[*English*]

With that, are we in agreement with the amendment from Mr. Deschênes?

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: We have agreement around the table. The motion is now amended accordingly.

With that, we're going to go back to the speakers list. I have Mr. Arnold and then Mr. Small.

Mel Arnold: Thank you Mr. Chair. I'd also like to make a further amendment to the motion. I'd have to look closer to see where it should fit in.

I move:

That the motion be amended by adding, at the end of paragraph (c), the following ", and that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans be invited at the beginning of the study, to update the committee on actions taken in response to the report of the committee on wild Atlantic salmon in eastern Canada tabled in January 2017, as well as the reports of the committee on striped bass in the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence and Miramichi River tabled in May 2019, November 2020, and February 2022.

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

We do have, as part of this motion, a request to have representatives from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans appear. It's in there already.

Mel Arnold: It's in there already, but I would like specifically for them to report on actions taken in response to the recommendations in those two reports. The second report on striped bass is report number one from the committee in the 43rd Parliament.

• (1740)

The Chair: I'm assuming that this is a report that was done in the previous government.

Mel Arnold: These are reports that were done by the FOPO committee. The Atlantic salmon study was "Wild Atlantic Salmon in Eastern Canada". That was tabled in January 2017.

Paul Connors (Avalon, Lib.): Do you want them to present a written report—an update on it—or a verbal one?

Mel Arnold: I want the department officials to—

Paul Connors: Wouldn't that come out in the questioning?

The Chair: I want to remind members to wait until I recognize them before speaking.

We do have a speakers list here already. I know that Mr. Small wanted to speak on this, but now we're moving on to amendments.

I see that first we had Mr. Morrissey and then—

Clifford Small: I want to speak to this amendment as well.

The Chair: Okay.

First, let's go to Mr. Small, because he was next on the list, and then we'll go to Mr. Morrissey and Mr. Cormier.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think it's very important to have some answers on what's been done in relation to these previous two reports, because oftentimes we feel like we're wasting our time here making recommendations in these reports and nothing gets done.

There was a report that was published from this committee on Atlantic salmon, and there's been one on striped bass. There was one on mackerel. It's on and on and on, and we make these great all-party recommendations that we agree on, and it seems like the reports go out of here and nothing happens.

I certainly support my colleague's amendment to at least try to let them know that they need to be accountable to the people. We bring witnesses in here from our communities and stakeholders from various regions. It's their opportunity to have their say. They put their heart and soul into their testimony here at this committee, and they walk away and say two years later, "What a waste of time. There's no hope".

Anyway, at least Mr. Arnold's amendment, if it gets accepted, will let these government officials and the government know that we mean some sort of business here.

I don't know how Mr. Cormier feels, but I'm sure that he has to be a little frustrated coming from an area in New Brunswick that has a very dense population of striped bass. He has to be frustrated beyond all measure, and I see that he has his hand up, so that's it for me, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Small.

Next I have Mr. Morrissey and then Mr. Cormier.

Mr. Connors, I'm not sure if you want to get in on the speakers list as well.

First we'll go to Mr. Morrissey.

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

Chair, the same people were invited in the motion, so they will be here, and I agree that they should be questioned, but establishing the first meeting to have them in, that I cannot support. They're going to come, and Mr. Arnold will have his chance to question them on anything then. As well, the reference to the earlier reports are factual, and we would welcome them as well. Mr. Arnold and I were on the study that he referenced in 2017.

Rather than establishing that they come in the first meeting, I'd prefer to hear directly from the people involved. The department officials are coming in, and they can be questioned whenever they are scheduled, but supporting them coming in at the first meeting, no.

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

Next we're going to Mr. Cormier.

Serge Cormier: Well, Mr. Chair, Mr. Morrissey just basically summarized what I was about to say.

In my motion, we invite them. My colleagues, Mr. Small and Mr. Arnold, will be able to ask officials all the questions they want about the previous reports.

I want to hear from people on the ground and those outfitters. I want to hear from people we don't hear from sometimes at this committee on this topic. When the officials come, they will be able to ask all the questions they want of them.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

Next I have Mr. Connors.

Paul Connors: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Morrissey and Mr. Cormier summed up everything I was trying to say. If we have the officials here—and they're already invited—everybody will get an opportunity to be able to ask questions of them. I think that we should hear from the people who are involved in the industry before we talk to DFO.

• (1745)

The Chair: I have Mr. Arnold and then Mr. Small.

Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This motion is going to become public, and I think the public deserves to know that this committee studied the issue of Atlantic salmon previously and studied the striped bass issue previously. I think that they need to know that off the top.

I would still support having those two studies in particular listed in the motion. Department officials from Fisheries and Oceans will appear to respond to questions on what actions have been taken on those two reports. The second report was tabled in the House on February 28, 2022, so there's no question as to which reports we're speaking about.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Small, please go ahead.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I know my colleague referenced the striped bass study from 2019 and the Atlantic salmon study from 2017. In 2023, we had the pinniped study, dealing with seals, sea lions and walrus. There's been a lot of work done by this committee to shed some light on the difficulties that salmon stocks are having in recovering, especially with predation.

We've just had an \$82-million announcement to help the health of Atlantic salmon. At the same time, the Mactaquac Biodiversity Facility in New Brunswick was shut down. If this government is serious, and if Mr. Cormier is serious, he should be using his influence with the minister to push on her and lean on her to get her going in the right direction. It's just not good enough.

This year, in Newfoundland and Labrador, our river guardians haven't yet received any notification of whether or not they're going to have their jobs. It's never gone this late before in terms of hiring river guardians. All of this is after the minister came out and made the big rah-rah announcement, "Oh, we're investing \$82 million in the survival of Atlantic salmon and to make Atlantic salmon more plentiful."

In a two-month period here, we've had the announcement that the Mactaquac Biodiversity Facility in New Brunswick is going to be closed, and we haven't yet hired our river guardians in Newfoundland and Labrador. If you don't protect the spawners and you don't stop the predation, the poaching and the habitat degradation, how in the world are we ever going to see Atlantic salmon stocks come back to prosperity? It's impossible.

However, you know, we can do another study. I want to do a study. Maybe someone will listen this time.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Small.

I have Mr. Connors and Mr. Morrissey.

Paul Connors: My only point would be that all of the studies that were just spoken about are all public documents. The public can access those documents whenever they want. If they want to get information, I'm sure they can also reach out and get that information.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Connors.

Go ahead, Mr. Morrissey.

Robert Morrissey: Chair, I would move that we vote on the amendment currently under debate.

The Chair: We need to finish the debate on this.

Go ahead, Mr. Arnold.

Mel Arnold: I stand corrected. It appears the striped bass report was actually tabled three times. Because of parliamentary prorogation etc., the final time it was tabled appears to have been in the 44th Parliament, on January 22. The government's response appears to have been on June 22, 2022.

These studies, which we've already done, need to be fully disclosed to everyone who is going to be considered in this study. Whether that's the public watching this committee.... I've seen the number of people following this committee grow exponentially over the last number of years because they know the good, congenial work this committee does. Time after time, we put partisanship aside so we can do the right thing for the harvesters and the fish stocks. We have done that repeatedly over the years. There's been good work across the aisles, on both sides. I'd hate to see that sidelined, at this point, because Canadians deserve the best that we can do.

Those two reports—the one on Atlantic salmon and the second one on striped bass—are very relevant to this proposed study. The public and anyone interested in this committee need to be fully aware that those two studies and reports took place. If they aren't aware of that, it would be shameful, and shame on us for not bringing that to light. Yes, it can come up in questioning, in one meeting with government officials, but by the time the word gets out that there were previous reports, it may be too late for people to send us questions we should be asking those officials.

This would be very relevant to why now—after four years on the one study and eight years on the Atlantic salmon study—we are still in the predicament of studying the plight of Atlantic salmon. If there are recommendations in those two reports that could have made a difference, why would we not want to have them come to light as soon as possible in this study? To hide this, I think, would be absolutely shameful.

• (1750)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arnold.

Mr. Small has his hand up.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I echo my colleague's comments. This committee has gotten along pretty well but, after hearing Mr. Morrissey's comment and Mr. Connors' comment earlier, it seems like, "The power is here now. We have the majority. We're going to use our muscle and vote this down and to bury the fact that extensive work has been done around this table, the results of which have been denied".

That report on Atlantic salmon is from eight years ago. That's eight years of decline. That's eight years of folks out there blaming the demise of wild fish on things like open net-pen salmon farming. The recommendations in that report from eight years ago.... The analysts are here, listening. They give their heart and soul as well, Mr. Chair, in producing great documents and helping us get recommendations out that reflect the will of the people.

Now we're going to a vote that will have the Liberal government vote down our recommendation to have an extra meeting to address the work that has or has not been done, in order to back up recommendations in previous reports. Maybe it'll encourage us to think that we're not wasting our time here.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Small.

With that, let's go to a vote. This is on the amendment to the motion as amended. This is on Mr. Arnold's amendment to the motion that was by Mr. Cormier and amended by Monsieur Deschênes.

(Amendment negatived: nays 6; yeas 5 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

• (1755)

The Chair: That takes us to the end of the public part of this meeting.

It would take us 15 minutes to go in camera, so maybe it's time for us to wrap up for today.

There are a few things we need to do next. We need to give drafting instructions for the clam study, but we want to make sure that we have Monsieur Deschênes for that. We also need to finalize the drafting instructions for the letter for the mackerel study, and we need to finish the report on the review of the Fisheries Act.

Those are not things we're going to be able to complete at this time, so maybe it makes sense that we adjourn the meeting now. We're getting to 6 p.m. in two minutes.

With that, the next meeting is going to be on Monday. We will have department officials appearing on the factors determining the opening and closing dates of the harvesting seasons.

Before we wrap up, I'll hand it over to Mr. Gunn.

Aaron Gunn: One of the other committees I'm on has worked on a bit of a plan of things that it wants to get done before the summer break. Is that something that is done on most committees and that we have any interest in doing here?

The Chair: Yes. If there's something we want to go through, we can go in camera and go through all of that, but I'm getting the sense that, just given the delays we had with the votes, we're not going to have the opportunity to do that. However, we will have some time in camera next week, and we're going to go through a number of the items I mentioned there. It's also a good time to plan ahead for the next weeks and months before we get to the summer recess.

With that, is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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