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Chair: Hedy Fry



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• (1115)

[*Translation*]

The Clerk of the Committee (Maxime Ricard): Honourable members of the committee, I see a quorum.

[*English*]

As members know, a vacancy has arisen in the office of the chair.

[*Translation*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(3)(a), I will, as clerk of the committee, preside over the election of the chair.

[*English*]

I must inform members that the clerk of the committee can only receive motions for the election of the chair. The clerk cannot receive other types of motions, cannot entertain points of order and cannot participate in debate.

[*Translation*]

We can now proceed to the election of the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 106(2), the chair must be a member of the government party.

[*English*]

I am ready to receive motions for the chair.

Mr. Weiler.

Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): I would like to nominate my neighbour and my colleague, the honourable Hedy Fry, for the chair position.

The Clerk: Mr. Weiler moves that Hedy Fry be elected as chair of the committee.

Are there any further motions?

Mr. Arnold.

Mel Arnold (Kamloops—Shuswap—Central Rockies, CPC): I'd like to move that Mr. Morrissey, having sat on this committee for over 10 years, be elected chair of the committee.

Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.): Mr. Clerk, I decline.

The Clerk: Are there any further motions?

Mr. Small.

Clifford Small (Central Newfoundland, CPC): Since the riding of Avalon has had such a history of having its member of Parliament be the chair of this committee and as Mr. Connors served

under that chair and is very familiar with the workings of the committee, I nominate Mr. Connors.

Paul Connors (Avalon, Lib.): I thank my colleague from across the way for his nomination, but I respectfully decline.

The Clerk: Are there any further motions?

[*Translation*]

I will now put the motion to the committee.

It has been moved by Mr. Weiler that Hedy Fry be elected as chair of the committee.

[*English*]

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

(Motion agreed to)

The Clerk: I declare the motion carried and Hedy Fry duly elected chair of the committee.

I invite Dr. Fry to take the chair.

The Chair (Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone.

What a terrible way to start as chair. I want to apologize profusely to all of you for being late. My cab was supposed to arrive; it didn't arrive. We called and called and had to get another one. Here I am, but I really do apologize for this. Thank you very much.

Thank you for electing me. I hope I will be worthy of filling Mr. Weiler's shoes. I have known him for such a long time. He's an excellent MP, and I know he was an excellent chair because I sat in the last meeting and watched how he chaired.

I want to congratulate this committee on being a committee that is respectful and collegial and that wants to get the things done that it wants to get done, which are to make sure that fisheries on both coasts work well and that your reports mean something.

Thank you again. I hope I can do justice to this committee.

Mr. Arnold.

Mel Arnold: Welcome, Madam Chair. Congratulations on being elected as chair.

I'd like to take just a couple of short moments to thank Mr. Weiler for his fair and judicious chairing of this committee for the past months.

As a vice-chair, it was good to work with you.

I look forward to the same openness and collegiality that we've experienced on this committee over the 10-plus years that I and Mr. Morrissey have been on this committee. I think we've done a lot of good work across party lines in efforts to improve the fisheries. When I say "fisheries", that means fish stocks and the fisheries, the people who participate in harvesting those stocks. I think we can continue to do that work.

Regarding your vision and statement that you would like to see the congeniality that takes place in this committee continue, I very much hope for the same thing.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Morrissey.

Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Chair.

I would just like to support the comments from my colleague Mr. Arnold, which reflect well the work of this committee.

The Chair: Thank you.

I just wanted to say, Mr. Morrissey, that I've known most of you for a long time, and I think I'm looking forward to this.

You wouldn't believe that being a very urban Vancouver Centre MP, I have one of the largest fisheries in my riding. Actually, it's on Granville Island. There's a lot of shellfish, and a lot of fishers live there. I depend on fishers to vote for me at the end of the day, so I thank you.

This is going to be a learning curve for me. I know I will learn from all of you about what is what, etc., I know salmon, sockeye.... That's all I have to say. Thank you.

Now, I would like to invite the witnesses to the table.

[*Translation*]

Welcome to meeting number 36 of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans.

[*English*]

I want to acknowledge that we are gathered here on the ancestral lands of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108, the committee is meeting to continue its study of the factors determining opening and closing dates of marine harvesting seasons. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders.

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

I also want to remind participants of the following points: Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon—you will see a little globe—and that will give you the language you wish to speak and participate in. I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair. For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the "raise hand" function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses.

From the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, we have Bernard Vigneault, director general, ecosystem science directorate. We also have Todd Williams, senior director, resource management, operations; and Neil Davis, regional director, fisheries management branch, Pacific region.

We will start with the opening statement of Mr. Vigneault.

You have five minutes for your opening statement. I will literally give you a shout-out when you have one minute, and then another one at 30 seconds, just to orient you.

Thank you very much.

Begin, please, Mr. Vigneault. You have five minutes.

• (1120)

Bernard Vigneault (Director General, Ecosystem Science Directorate, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll actually ask my colleague Todd Williams to read our remarks.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Williams.

Todd Williams (Senior Director, Resource Management - Operations, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you very much.

Good morning, Madam Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Fisheries and Oceans' processes for determining the timing of fishing seasons.

My name is Todd Williams. I am the senior director of fisheries management operations. I am joined here today by Bernard Vigneault, director general, ecosystem science directorate; and Neil Davis, regional director, fisheries management, Pacific region.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which I speak is the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe.

Safety is our non-negotiable priority. Opening day for competitive fisheries is often characterized by a race to fish.

[*Translation*]

In setting season opening and closing schedules, the department prioritizes the safety of harvesters while balancing scientific and environmental considerations, fisheries management objectives and the economic viability of the fishery.

[English]

In many Atlantic and northern fisheries, sea ice often delays openings. We monitor ice thickness and movement in real time to ensure safe fleet and search and rescue operations. We work closely with Transport Canada, the Canadian Coast Guard and harvester representatives to discuss opening date possibilities.

The maintenance of our small craft harbours is also vital to ensuring safe fishery operations. We recognize the importance of dredging in many of our facilities, particularly in the spring.

Science and environmental factors are also critically important. Seasons are often timed to avoid such sensitive periods as spawning and moulting. This ensures that we are not harvesting species when they are most vulnerable or when the quality of the catch, such as soft-shell crab, would be suboptimal. We also account for the broader ecosystem, including the presence of species at risk. For example, the migration of the North Atlantic right whale necessitates dynamic closures to prevent entanglements.

Fisheries are a business. The timing of a season can be the difference between a profitable year and a loss. We work with industry to identify market windows—periods when global demand and prices are highest. If a season opens too late, Canadian harvesters may miss out on a lucrative holiday market or international buying cycles. We also avoid supply gluts. Strategic timing helps prevent supply gluts, ensuring predictability for processing plants and helping to keep prices stable.

[Translation]

The management regime itself influences our approach to setting opening and closing dates.

As I mentioned earlier, in competitive fisheries, precise opening times are essential for fairness, as each harvester competes at the same time on a given date. In cases where that is not possible, we work with harvesters to find a date and time that work.

In individual quota fisheries, where a harvester's share is more or less guaranteed, we can offer much wider seasonal windows. This allows harvesters to “fish the market” and choose their own best time to go out, significantly reducing economic pressure and improving safety.

• (1125)

[English]

No one knows the water better than the people on it. Our advisory committees provide a collaborative forum for harvesters to offer real-world intelligence on water temperatures, fish quality and local conditions. We hear this through our advisory committee processes and in many of our deliberations before the season opens. To stay responsive, we use variation orders, allowing us to adjust openings and closings on short notice.

[Translation]

Finally, we manage these seasons within the framework of our constitutional and legal obligations to indigenous peoples. This includes prioritizing food, social and ceremonial fisheries, as well as working with first nations to implement the right to fish in pursuit of a moderate livelihood.

[English]

In summary, determining a fishing season is a multi-dimensional puzzle. We must ensure the safety of the fleet, protect the stock and position the industry to be globally competitive. As climate change makes our seasons less predictable, the department is committed to a management approach that is as adaptive and resilient as the harvesters we serve.

We'll be happy to take your questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will begin with Mr. Arnold for six minutes, please.

Mel Arnold: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll start my questioning with Mr. Davis, who is online.

Last year, Mr. Davis, in 2025, the Fraser River sockeye salmon season was extremely challenging for harvesters in all sectors, with abundance coming back multiple times higher than what was initially predicted. The department seemed to be either reluctant or restrained in opening up access to commercial and public fisheries during that time.

What organizations actually have input and influence into the decisions and direction of the Pacific Salmon Commission in directing this binational stock?

Neil Davis (Regional Director, Fisheries Management Branch, Pacific Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Good morning. Thank you for the question.

We have both pre-season and in-season processes to ensure engagement with all affected or interested users.

Pre-season, beginning early in the calendar year or in December, we begin our consultations on developing an integrated fisheries management plan for salmon. We are consulting with advisory bodies that include representatives of commercial and recreational harvesters and first nations. Over the months of the winter and the spring, we begin to develop a plan specific to sockeye in the Fraser. We have an obligation under the Pacific Salmon Treaty to develop an escapement plan. That plan defines how many fish we want to escape to spawning grounds and then the rules we will use to try to achieve that outcome.

Once the season arrives, an important body that plays a role in the management of both Fraser sockeye and pink salmon fisheries on the Fraser is the Fraser panel. This is a body convened under the Pacific Salmon Treaty with U.S. and Canadian representatives. On the Canadian side, we have representatives from commercial, recreational and first nations sectors, which we're consulting with to ensure that we're getting their feedback on how to make decisions as more data rolls in over the course of the season.

Mel Arnold: Do any of these organizations feeding up through this chain of recommendations have binding authority on what the final decision will be?

Neil Davis: The short answer is no. We have commitments to engage with all of those groups. We have bilateral relationships with first nations organizations. All of that becomes advice to the department, and the department takes it all into consideration before making decisions to implement fisheries.

• (1130)

Mel Arnold: No one has the power to veto, if the science is there, that there should continue to be expanded fisheries. Would that be correct?

Neil Davis: There is no group with a veto power. The department, as delegated by the minister, has the authority to make the decisions over the opening and closing of fisheries.

Mel Arnold: Last year, when there was this incredible abundance that came back.... I believe it was the highest on record for that brood stock cycle. We understand that there are different brood stock cycle years, but this was incredibly high for that brood stock cycle year. It was a record number, yet when the U.S. panel members on the Pacific Salmon Commission were recommending an opening, the Canadians were opposed and did not provide any rationale for opposing it.

Why was it that the Canadian side didn't provide any rationale for not supporting the opening of the fishery?

Neil Davis: They are important questions. Thank you.

I'll begin by stepping back to one point. The return that was forecast was well within the range the department had set out pre-season, which was between three-quarters of a million fish and 13,000 fish when it came to sockeye. I assume that's the species we're talking about. The run returned at around nine million in the end, when we tallied up all of the returns and made our final estimate.

There were points in season when the U.S. proposed to undertake fisheries, and Canada disagreed. The key reason for that is that when we manage Fraser sockeye, there are many stocks within that species that are returning, and we manage all of those stocks in four management units. Not all of those management units return at the same levels of abundance. As a result, the ones that return at lower levels of abundance—in particular, the late summer management unit—constrain opportunity for the other, more abundant management units that they comigrate with. They're moving through the system at the same time.

In the case of the fishery the U.S. proposed, which I think you're referring to, Canada was concerned about the impacts the fishery would have on the total allowable mortality that we were trying to achieve in the late summer run—

The Chair: Can you please wrap up? You're over time, but finish your sentence. Thank you.

Neil Davis: That is the main reason Canada opposed it, and Canada's opposition was borne out. The U.S. did harvest more than its share of the late summer run, and that was the basis for Canada's concern.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

It's over to you for six minutes, please, Patrick.

Patrick Weiler: Thank you, Chair.

I want to thank our officials for being here in person and also by video conference to answer questions.

I want to pick up on a very local concern for me and my constituents. In this study, we've heard from witnesses who have pointed to some localized science and monitoring in Howe Sound, indicating a very low interaction risk of stocks of concern. They referenced a DFO stock assessment in 2022, which found that encounters of Fraser River stocks of concern were very rare, posing near zero risk in Howe Sound. They pointed to a DFO-led reference fishery in 2024, which sampled 354 adult chinook in April and May and found that none identified as originating from the Fraser River stocks of concern. Obviously, a limited mark-selective fishery in this area would deliver significant social and economic benefits, and it's been a big frustration for folks locally that there haven't been retention opportunities.

Given the testimony and the available data, what is the primary factor currently preventing DFO from authorizing any retention opportunities in Howe Sound? To what extent is the current non-retention decision driven by biological risk specific to Howe Sound, versus the application of the broader precautionary principle or other management constraints?

• (1135)

Bernard Vigneault: Thank you for the question.

Yes, in fact, the department has conducted testing in Howe Sound to look at the possibility of future opportunities for a mark-selective fishery. The results are encouraging, as the member mentioned. A significant proportion of the catch were the targeted species, the marked chinook salmon—around 30% to 40%. There are a limited number of stocks that we aim to protect, so that's all encouraging. However, we cannot just extrapolate. We have to continue to analyze. In this case in particular, these data are all from our own science work. We also need to do the correlation with the data that's collected from the creel survey and to do the extrapolation of those numbers during a full recreational harvest under a mark-selective scenario.

The Government of Canada announced the future expansion of a mark-selective fishery in the Pacific region. That would certainly be a candidate, with the signs that have been collected and the analysis ongoing on the creel survey extrapolation. We'll be able to provide advice on that.

Patrick Weiler: Thank you, Mr. Vigneault.

That's some encouraging testimony to hear. I was wondering whether you might be able to speak to what specific evidence, thresholds or changes in conditions would be required for DFO to consider opening up a limited controlled-retention fishery in that area?

Bernard Vigneault: I will ask my colleague Neil Davis to add information about that. It depends on the science. He'll also describe the capacity to mark fish, which is increasing as well.

Neil, go ahead.

Neil Davis: Thank you for the question. I think you have the gist of it, in that in doing that extrapolation and assessing all of the data we have, we'd be looking at a few things.

The first is that conservation risk: What would the encounter rates of any stocks of concern be? That's not necessarily limited to just Fraser-bound stocks. I believe there have also been some questions about the ability to collect sufficient brood stock for local chinook stocks in Howe Sound, which we would also be assessing.

As my colleague mentioned, we would also be looking at moving forward. If we were to contemplate fisheries here, what kind of capacity do we have to mass mark, such that it could facilitate mark-selective fisheries? In a fishery we permit, would the rate of capture of marked fish be high enough such that our concern for the catch of unmarked fish—and the subsequent release of those fish and any associated mortality—is low enough that we think it doesn't pose any risks to those unmarked stocks that would be caught and returned to the water? Those are examples of some of the factors we would carefully assess.

Patrick Weiler: Thank you.

I'm going to switch gears and bring up a point that was brought up earlier, which is the rush to get to these fisheries as they're opening up and some of the challenges with in-season decision-making and communication.

I was hoping you might be able to speak to how Fisheries and Oceans is improving the timeliness, predictability and communication of in-season opening decisions, particularly for small commercial harvesters who oftentimes, and certainly this is the case for harvesters from my riding, face long travel times and financial risk from uncertain or late announcements.

Todd Williams: Fisheries and Oceans has a number of processes in place, both formal and informal. Formally, it's through our advisory committee process, which meets annually.

In addition to that, we have frequent communications through email and through other communication notices to harvesters, which are much more timely and are able to get that information out faster for those in-season decisions. This is critically important, particularly for salmon fisheries on the west coast.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Weiler.

I now go to Mr. Champoux for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Martin Champoux (Drummond, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I also want to thank the witnesses for being here today.

What I would like to talk about is the material resources and operational capacity available to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, or DFO, and the Coast Guard. According to the testimony we've heard, that seems to be one of the main things holding up the opening of the snow crab fishery in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence.

A while ago, the committee heard testimony from Daniel Desbois, the president of the Association des crabiers gaspésiens inc. He made it abundantly clear that, while the process has improved over the years, the system doesn't seem to be keeping up. It's ready on paper, but not at sea.

For example, this year, the icebreaker was due to arrive in early March, but it came a month later, in early April. The tugboat was unavailable in Paspébiac for a month. Specialized equipment like frogs and hovercraft weren't available, so the icebreakers had to come back several times because the ice had time to build up again and again. Mr. Desbois also explained the impact it had on crab harvesters.

Just a few days' delay in the spring delayed harvesting days in June, which resulted in extra fuel costs and relocating harvesting operations during a period when the risk of right whale interactions increases significantly.

That's what I want to discuss with you. You work with the Coast Guard. Perhaps this would be an opportunity to explain why the Coast Guard regularly lacks equipment, such as frogs and hovercraft.

Is it a budget issue? Is it a fleet availability issue? Is it the way operations are prioritized at this time of year? Is it an annual planning problem?

I'd like to hear what you have to say about that.

• (1140)

Todd Williams: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

In terms of our approach with the Coast Guard, there are a couple of points.

First, the Coast Guard is no longer a part of Fisheries and Oceans. That is known. However, we do work very closely with the Coast Guard, as I noted in my opening remarks, with respect to those opening dates and making sure, to the best of our ability, that we have the equipment in the right place at the right time.

The honourable member is absolutely correct in that there is a greater risk of whale interactions with North Atlantic right whales later in the season. One of the best mitigation measures is to actually start fishing earlier in the season. With that, there is a greater chance of ice interactions and ice preventing harvesters from getting out.

We do work very closely with the Coast Guard. On a daily basis, we interact with the Coast Guard, Transport Canada and the harvester associations to keep them informed if there is going to be a delay. I can't speculate, and I won't speculate, in terms of the finances or availability in a particular case with respect to the Coast Guard, but I can say that the relationship is very strong and we work together on a daily basis.

[*Translation*]

Martin Champoux: I don't doubt that relationship, but some issues are more unpredictable than predictable.

For example, this year, obviously, there's the delayed opening due to ice and the equipment shortage, but there's also the fact that a whale was detected in area 12 much earlier than usual. That factor has to be taken into account too.

At the end of a season like the one that's starting now, which is particularly difficult for crab harvesters, I would imagine you're working closely with your collaborators. As you said, the Coast Guard co-operates with you.

Are measures being taken to prevent similar events in the next fishing season?

For example, in 2027, will DFO take concrete action to ensure that every effort has been made to allow harvesters to start the season earlier, or at least as early as possible, to avoid the kinds of situations we don't always have control over?

Todd Williams: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

Indeed, at the end of every season, there is a debrief and a recap of the season in terms of what went right and what we could do better in terms of our integration with the Coast Guard and collaboration in that regard.

At the same time, there are a number of natural environmental elements that we don't have control over from year to year, whether that's the ice conditions or the appearance of whales, which result in closures. We understand the negative impact that has on harvesters. We also realize the importance of having these closure measures in place from a market access perspective and in ensuring a comparability finding with the United States market under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

We do try, certainly, to work with the harvesters post-season and with the Coast Guard to identify where improvements could be made.

• (1145)

[*Translation*]

Martin Champoux: Would it be possible to set a target date for harbour de-icing at the end of March or the beginning of April, rather than basing it solely on general ice conditions in the gulf?

Is that an approach your teams could consider?

Todd Williams: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

Indeed, we do have ice reports generated daily, and we do provide that information to harvesters in collaboration with the Coast Guard.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Champoux.

I now go to the second round, which is a round of five minutes, five minutes, two and a half minutes, five minutes and five minutes.

I'll start with Mr. Small for five minutes, please.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Madam Chair. Welcome to this committee as our chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being available to us today for this study.

Monsieur Vigneault, Americans are fishing mackerel right now. They've set a quota of nearly 11,000 metric tons. Will Canadian harvesters have to sit idly by this year and watch Americans fish mackerel while their mackerel fishery stays closed? Will that happen?

Bernard Vigneault: Thank you for the question.

We're aware of the change in decision for the mackerel fisheries in the U.S., which we discussed at our previous meeting. What we have undertaken to address this is to do science advice for Atlantic mackerel a year before schedule. It's now scheduled for May 2027. That will allow us not only to use the most recent egg and larvae survey in our observation, but also to include in our calculation the removals that have been decided on in the U.S. That will feed into the advisory committee meeting. We'll be able to share the information—

Clifford Small: How about if your scientists go to sea and they don't find the eggs and larvae, as has been the experience in the past? Will you consider the experience of the fishers who are on the water?

The Prime Minister, in the April before last, was in Newfoundland and Labrador and said that he'd make decisions based on what he heard on the wharves. Are you going to go along with what the Prime Minister said when he made that statement? Are you going to consider harvester observations this year?

Bernard Vigneault: Yes, and there are different components to the decision process. For the science advice, we'll continue to work with the harvesters to do the updated science with the best information and science data available. There will be representatives from the industry participating and that will be presented to the advisory committee. From a departmental perspective, the stakeholder inputs are considered specifically in parallel to the science. That's part of the advisory committee process.

Clifford Small: Under this current Minister of Fisheries, is it the current policy of DFO to match the American quota pound for pound, as has happened for decades in the past? Is that still the policy? Please answer yes or no.

Bernard Vigneault: I can't speak to that.

Clifford Small: Why can't you speak to it? You're the director of science.

Bernard Vigneault: My role is to advise the minister through the best science available based on scientific data collected in the water and so on. It's not based on any policies or assumptions for the decision in terms of the management—

Clifford Small: How can the American science vary so drastically, when it comes to Atlantic mackerel, from the science of Canada? How can there be such an offset?

Bernard Vigneault: It's because the Americans are doing overall assessments for two different components, which isn't the same as in Canada, where we assess only the northern component. In fact, the Americans have used our Canadian data for their assessments. The difference between the two is that they look at the overall mackerel, both the northern and southern—

Clifford Small: Are the Americans fishing the northern component right now?

• (1150)

Bernard Vigneault: They're fishing mostly the southern component, which is the one that has seen signs of improvement recently. They are fishing a portion of the northern component as well right now. That's part of the science advice to come. We'll do projections based on different assumptions on the rate of—

Clifford Small: Are you certain where the mackerel that migrate through Canadian waters overwinter?

Bernard Vigneault: That's part of the uncertainty for the science advice. When we give advice, we use a range of hypotheses explicitly to account for the fact that, right now, we don't have the right tools to be able to separate the fish—

Clifford Small: Why don't we have the tools?

The Chair: Thank you. I think we're coming to closing this session.

Did you finish what you had to say, Mr. Vigneault?

Bernard Vigneault: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Just quickly, it's ongoing research. To date, we have not been able to develop the genetic and analytical tools that will help us separate the fish on U.S. grounds.

The Chair: Thank you.

I now go to Mr. Klassen for the Liberals for five minutes, please.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for being present here with us today.

Mr. Davis, there was, as you know, a lot of talk around fishers in 2025 and the overabundance of a return, which was unprecedented from my understanding. You talked about organizations that were

involved in the decision-making process, in-season especially, and I'm wondering what factors are considered when making those decisions.

Neil Davis: Thank you for the question.

I'm going to work with the assumption that we're talking again about Fraser sockeye here and the in-season process associated with that fishery, but please correct me if I'm off base.

In terms of factors that would go into considering what kinds of fishing opportunities we provide, first and foremost, our job is meeting our conservation objectives. I mentioned that we develop an escapement plan each year for Fraser sockeye. That escapement plan will define what our conservation objectives are and how much of each management unit for Fraser sockeye we're attempting to get back to the spawning grounds. Once we can assess what kinds of choices might support our conservation objectives, we would also be considering the priority of providing opportunity for first nations food, social and ceremonial fisheries and then also providing commercial and recreational opportunities.

The other thing I'll mention is that this is a fishery that's managed under the auspices of the Pacific Salmon Treaty, so another consideration is how we manage in a way that is consistent with the treaty in terms of providing opportunities for both Canada and U.S. harvesters.

Then one other thing is that, particularly when it comes to in-river fisheries, we're conscious of the fact that, number one, we want to manage the rate at which catch is happening when we know that catch will need to be constrained. If, for example, we had all fisheries opened at once, the rate of catch might be something higher than we think would be appropriate to ensure that we don't overshoot the allowable catches we set.

Number two, [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] there are some operational and practical constraints of having [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] open at once in a constrained waterway. We often assess some kind of sequencing of the opening so that each sector, when it has an opportunity, can effectively undertake its opportunity without interference or the potential for conflict with other sectors on the river.

Those would be examples of some factors that we would consider.

Ernie Klassen: I have a second question that's not really related to that but related to the salmon run of the Fraser River. I have a lot of colleagues who have raised the issue of dredging. Does that have an impact on the opening and closing of the season?

Neil Davis: There is dredging that can occur in the Fraser River. In considering when dredging would happen, part of that is assessing when it is best to avoid or reduce, to the greatest extent possible, impacts on fish and fish habitat so that we are doing our best to mitigate any negative implications for fish or for fisheries.

• (1155)

Ernie Klassen: Thank you.

Mr. Vigneault, our government recently announced a move to increase mass marking for hatchery-raised salmon. This has been a major ask from the recreational fishery in B.C.

How will this impact sport and recreational fishing, as well as the opening season and the tourism sector in B.C.?

Bernard Vigneault: Yes, mass marking is a tool to enable selective fisheries. It's used to a small extent now in southern B.C. and the ongoing science work to look at the details of the interception in areas that have ongoing mark-selective fishing or where it is proposed, like in Owen Sound, as we discussed. All that science work will support a decision to enable larger access of mark-selective fisheries.

The other component of it is to have the science and capacity to mark the fish, because having a large proportion of the aquaculture fish marked depends on that capacity. It allows the opportunity for the mark-selective fishery. It allows records to be kept for whether targeted fish are kept, which are those raised from the hatchery, or are put back in the water, like the salmon stocks that we want to protect.

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

I now go to Mr. Champoux.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Martin Champoux: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Williams, we ran out of time earlier, so you weren't able to answer my question. I was talking about the possibility of setting an opening date earlier, as requested by gulf crab harvesters.

If we had a fixed opening date decided in advance, would DFO and the Coast Guard be able to work with that? They would know the fishery opens on that date, so they would take the necessary measures and make the necessary equipment, such as icebreakers and so on, available to ensure access.

We don't control the science. Obviously, we don't control the water temperature. Lots of different factors come into play. From a logistical standpoint, if the opening of the fishery was planned for a fixed, specific and predetermined date, would that be feasible and would it enable folks to anticipate the kind of problems that came up this year?

Todd Williams: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

Indeed, many of the dates that we have, not only for snow crab in the gulf but also for most fisheries that we manage, have set season dates, which are agreed to in advance and don't vary from year to year. There are others that are open all year long, through regulation, and then the regional director general of that region can vary, through a variation order, the opening date or closing date, based on the conditions at the time and in consultation with harvesters.

The short answer is yes, absolutely, and in most cases, we do that.

[*Translation*]

Martin Champoux: It seems like it's an equipment problem at this point.

Do you think something will be done this year to ensure that people don't find themselves in the same situation next year?

It seemed like there were equipment issues. It just wasn't where it was supposed to be so the fishery could be opened on the scheduled date.

Is this going to happen again? Are people looking at concrete measures to prevent this as of next year?

The Chair: Mr. Williams, can you answer the question in 10 seconds?

Todd Williams: Thank you.

[*English*]

Indeed, we look at this in advance of the season and study it after the season—if there have been issues—to try to make sure equipment is available so we don't repeat issues like that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Gunn, go ahead for five minutes.

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

My question is for Mr. Davis, but someone else can feel free if they feel more adequately prepared to answer.

Outside of an emergency, do the government and DFO require sign-off or consensus from the Musqueam band when making decisions regarding the fisheries, including pre-season, in-season and post-season decisions, such as opening and closing dates in the relevant area?

● (1200)

Neil Davis: Thank you. I can take that question.

As I was describing earlier, it isn't the case that any group has a veto, per se, over opening and closing decisions.

There are Musqueam fisheries that could be undertaken. Fisheries may occur in areas where other sectors can participate. I would say that we try to collaborate very closely with the Musqueam and take their input very seriously. In the case of their planning their own fisheries, we would try to work with them in the best way possible to define a plan for opening those fisheries—one they support.

In the case of other fisheries, it may be occurring in—

Aaron Gunn: Mr. Davis, I will jump in here to try to get more specific.

I have the text of the Musqueam agreement in front of me. What I'm trying to zero in on are the effects on recreational and commercial fishers with respect to what the government identifies as the traditional territory of the Musqueam nation. The word used throughout the agreement is “consensus”. I feel you dodged Mr. Arnold's question on caveats whereby the minister is allowed to exercise discretion in the case of an emergency.

Outside of an emergency case, do you require sign-off or consensus from the Musqueam nation regarding fisheries decisions being made in this area? It's a pretty clear question.

Neil Davis: I think the intent is that we would strive for consensus. We acknowledge that we may not get it in all cases.

In those cases, we would move forward with a decision that takes into consideration what we heard from the Musqueam and other users when opening or closing fisheries.

Aaron Gunn: Okay. Outside of an emergency, you are not required to reach consensus with the fisheries working group identified in the Musqueam agreement. That's what I was reading in the agreement. If that's the clarification you're providing, that's great. That's what I'm asking about.

Neil Davis: I don't think I have anything further to add. Thank you.

Aaron Gunn: Can you provide clarity? I'm asking the questions here.

Neil Davis: Yes, of course I can.

We strive to reach consensus. We acknowledge that we may not achieve consensus on all decision points. When we don't, we move forward with making a decision that takes into account everything we've heard from the Musqueam and other user groups, where those user groups are relevant to the decision.

Aaron Gunn: Okay. Thank you.

Again, this might be for Mr. Williams, but feel free, Mr. Davis, if you'd like to jump in as well.

You said, in your opening remarks, that you work with industries and harvesters to set opening and closing dates. However, this past summer, I was inundated with complaints from commercial and recreational fishermen in my riding and throughout British Columbia about how slow the department was to open the sockeye fishery on the Fraser River, despite early results from test boats that showed, for example, returns being much higher than originally anticipated.

Do you share the conclusion of many commercial and recreational fishermen that the department was too slow in opening the fishery?

Todd Williams: Thanks for the question. I will refer that one to Mr. Davis.

Neil Davis: Thank you. This is a very important question, so I appreciate the chance to speak to it.

The decision-making process is constantly responding to updates to in-season information. The Fraser panel meets twice a week in-season to review updated stock assessment information and make new decisions about whether there should be adjustments in our total allowable catches for different species. In that process, we engage with representatives in the Canadian delegation—recreational, commercial and first nations users—to make those decisions in as timely a way as possible, and then turn around and publish something like a fishery notice so that people beyond our representatives at the panel know what's going to happen.

One thing we did this year, after all those concerns were raised last summer, was to start that discussion process with our domestic advisory bodies sooner in order to leave more time to talk about how we set out our options for defining that escapement plan and how we engage with people in-season. This is so people have the most timely information possible when we're making adjustments to in-season data.

● (1205)

The Chair: Thank you.

That's the end of the round.

I will now go to Mr. d'Entremont for five minutes, please.

Chris d'Entremont (Acadie—Annapolis, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thanks, folks, for being here today to answer our questions.

We'll go to districts 33 and 34 of the lobster fishery for a minute on the opening and closing of seasons. Probably for the last 10 years, except for this year, every single opening of that season has been put off to a future date, most times because of weather. Weather has a big effect, of course, on our winter fisheries, which continues to happen. The lobster fishery in that area normally opens up on the last Monday of November every year, and of course that gets bumped off for weather reasons.

How does the consultation go with the industry to make sure everybody is on the same page? A lot of times this will affect sales of that product because you're trying to hit the Christmas season, as you said in your opening statement. Sometimes the decision on seasons happens with a consultation with the industry on product and when the market is best for it, and that's what happens in this particular case. I'm wondering how that discussion happens with the industry on weather and other events that continue to happen in and around it.

Todd Williams: Thank you very much for the question.

Indeed, as I noted in my opening remarks, safety is the number one priority in terms of establishing our season dates, our opening and closing dates. Looking at that, the process starts well before the opening of the fishery on any given date on the calendar. It actually starts much earlier by looking back at last year's season too see if there were issues with that opening date, if there were issues throughout the season in terms of safety or if there were other considerations in terms of landings, prices and the supply of that product. We debrief from that season, which has closed, and then move towards, as the season starts to approach, the advisory process.

In the days and weeks leading up to the opening date, there is very regular contact with representatives of those harvester associations, those indigenous groups and our regional officials. They're the ones making the call—the ones closest to the water—for those opening dates. If we have agreement to shift that, then by all means, we do so for safety reasons, recognizing—and harvesters, themselves, know—that there could be some economic considerations with that. That is something they're aware of.

Chris d'Entremont: Flexibility is probably a really good word here, where we have to roll with the weather. We have to roll with the product. We have to roll with the season. Flexibility is probably the big word here.

Todd Williams: That's correct, especially when we're dealing with a fishery such as lobster, which does not have individual quotas and is characterized as.... Well, it's a trap-based fishery.

Chris d'Entremont: Does quality come into the discussion?

Todd Williams: As a secondary factor, it does, absolutely. Quality has a direct relationship with the price at the wharf and the prices throughout the supply chain and products as exports. It is secondary to safety.

Chris d'Entremont: I think quality this year in districts 33 and 34 was a concern, especially in those first few weeks. Quite honestly, had we known everything we know now, we probably should have bumped it off a little bit. That, of course, would have been for the industry to make that decision.

If we're talking about quality and then we talk about.... We have the big commercial fishery in the winter in districts 33 and 34, and then we have the challenge of FSC and moderate livelihood that happens during the summer months. How does that affect the decision-making when we know there's a fair amount of product being taken out of those same waters but at different times of year?

Todd Williams: Certainly, with respect to moderate livelihood, that is a commercial fishery in the eyes of.... It's a rights-based commercial fishery for the department and for those who practise it. That is calculated in terms of our estimates and what we think is sustainable for the long-term use of that resource.

Chris d'Entremont: Is that even though the industry would probably be saying that the product isn't good during those times of the year?

• (1210)

Todd Williams: I can't necessarily speak to the specifics on the quality at given times, but that has been noted.

Chris d'Entremont: It could be a discussion. Okay.

The Chair: Thank you.

We now go to the third round, and that begins with Mr. Arnold for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mel Arnold: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll start again with Mr. Davis, if I could.

The issue around the Fraser sockeye opening, or late opening, last year came up directly to me again. As Mr. Gunn had mentioned earlier, there were calls from commercial fishers and recreational

fishers. I had a call from a former DFO management individual concerned with the fishery further up the Fraser River, one that he said actually should have been opened two weeks earlier than it was because there was confusion over which stocks were being impacted. They kept the Fraser closed above the confluence at Lytton. They weren't allowing a fishery further upstream at Lillooet because of a run stock that doesn't even go past Lillooet.

Can you explain why that fishery was so delayed? Do you perhaps have numbers on the millions in economic opportunity that was probably lost?

Neil Davis: I can speak to the kinds of things we are trying to assess in-season that might influence when we open and close.

The first key factor is—and I won't belabour it, because I did mention it earlier—the reality of these comigrating stocks. For fishery decisions, that means we have to assess how much risk we're willing to take in providing a fishing opportunity on the more abundant stock—

Mel Arnold: I'm going to interrupt you there because we understand the impacts of comigrating stocks, but past the point of Lytton, there were no comigrating stocks in those same waters that could have been opened two weeks earlier. Can you describe why they weren't?

Neil Davis: I don't know the specifics of this particular instance, so I can only describe the factors that would influence our decision-making across instances.

Mel Arnold: Somebody's not passing the communications up the chain to you, then, because this was highly communicated to me as a member and vice-chair of this committee. It was communicated to DFO staff regularly and repetitively, yet your department delayed and delayed. Basically, there were two weeks lost from the public fishery at Lillooet because of some confusion over which stocks might be there.

I want to go back to some of Mr. Gunn's questioning.

Are there any governing bodies that have veto power over the decision-making of the minister or the department?

Neil Davis: No.

Mel Arnold: Okay.

I want to go to a quote from Mr. Griswold, who had been on the Pacific Salmon Commission for 40 years. He said, "I could no longer be party to and complicit in the panel process whose decision-making power, I felt, was countermanded by the veto power newly granted to the unrepresentative Fraser River Salmon Management Board." He left that panel after 40 years because he could not support what was happening there.

This was broadly communicated. Can you explain to the public listening to this committee what happened and why he was so disgusted that he left?

Neil Davis: As I described earlier, we define an escapement plan. In the development of that, we consult through our advisory processes with recreational, commercial and first nations users. We also have a collaborative agreement with the Fraser Salmon Management Council, which represents over 70 first nations in the approach and on the Fraser. All of that work is input into a decision that finally gets made by the department to finalize that escapement plan.

That escapement plan, defined before the season starts, is abundance-based. That means it's responsive to changes in abundance in salmon that we encounter in-season, and we apply that escapement plan as we get more and more information, day by day, about what kinds of fishing opportunities we would provide.

There is the opportunity in the development of that escapement plan for back-and-forth—here's what we're hearing from our advisory processes and from the Fraser Salmon Management Council discussions—so that people can be informed by one another's perspectives, and all of that informs the department's plan.

• (1215)

Mel Arnold: Why did one side of those discussions seem to outweigh all of the input from all of the other sides, including the science from your own department?

Neil Davis: I don't think I'd agree with that characterization.

I would say, post-Big Bar, we have made the escapement plan more conservative in order to get more spawners back to spawning grounds to try to rebuild those stocks that were impacted by the Big Bar landslide in 2019. That's one of the things that may have changed over the years and made our approaches more conservative, the other one being some of those constraining stocks that are at lower levels of abundance that we need to do more to protect.

The Chair: Thank you. We went a little over time there.

I'd like to go to Mr. Cormier for five minutes.

Go ahead, please, Serge.

Serge Cormier (Acadie—Bathurst, Lib.): Thank you and welcome, Madam Chair.

[Translation]

Mr. Williams, I'll start with you.

I'd like to briefly follow up on my Bloc Québécois colleague's comments. We've already discussed another meeting about the opening of the snow crab fishery. Once again, I'll be very frank with you. I'm disappointed with the ice clearing efforts this year, as I am every year when, unfortunately, things like this happen and equipment is not there on time.

I asked Mr. Desbois and other witnesses this question last time. We have the equipment we need, but some equipment is missing, such as the larger icebreakers that can go further into the gulf. They're there practically whenever we need them. The frog my colleague referred to is there. We have open contracts with the owners of that equipment, and that gives us access.

Once again this year, I had to step in to ensure that the frog was deployed to certain ports, but we're missing a crucial piece of

equipment, Mr. Williams, and you know what I'm talking about. It's a small icebreaker, one like the *Judy LaMarsh*, which is unfortunately never available because the Great Lakes take priority. We need a particular kind of icebreaker dedicated to our region to open the channels and the inner wharves because the water isn't deep enough, unfortunately.

Do you think that having equipment dedicated to the Acadian Peninsula, where we run into these problems every year, could go a long way toward resolving issues with opening the snow crab fishery each year?

[English]

Todd Williams: Thank you for the question.

Certainly, I can't speak to the availability of the Coast Guard's equipment, but I can note the importance of this fishery. Efforts were made. Unfortunately, we had some bad instances of ice and high winds this year, which made things difficult.

In terms of—

Serge Cormier: In some years, we don't have wind and we don't have those things.

Do you think that the proper equipment dedicated to our region—the gulf region—and its shallower waters would help the region to open the season earlier?

Todd Williams: Thank you very much for the question.

Having equipment on-site would invariably assist in that regard. However, Coast Guard—

Serge Cormier: I understand, but it's just that we don't have the equipment that we need. This is why I'm asking if you think, if we had equipment dedicated to the region, that we'd have....

Thank you for that.

[Translation]

My next question is for Mr. Williams or Mr. Vigneault. It's about the opening of the lobster fishery. In my region, people in subareas 23A and 23B went out yesterday to set traps. Subareas 23C and 23D will be delayed.

People often blame DFO and the government for process issues. They say we're the ones who decided not to open the fishery or to open it on a particular date. If I'm not mistaken, the process for opening the lobster fishery involves a representative at each wharf. The representatives provide their opinion and say whether they want the fishery to open.

• (1220)

Serge Cormier: If any of those representatives say they don't want it to open, the decision is made not to open the fishery.

Is that more or less how it works?

[English]

Todd Williams: In terms of the consultative process, yes, that is how it works. We do strive for consensus, and where we can have consensus and safety can be upheld, then yes, we would defer to those on the wharf making that call in collaboration with us. However, in times when we can't get a consensus and there are no safety concerns, we are forced as a department to make that decision.

[Translation]

Serge Cormier: Okay.

I want to double-check something. Representatives from each wharf participate in these calls and provide their opinion. If they don't agree with opening on a specific date, you would usually go by what those representatives and the industry want.

Is that correct?

Todd Williams: Thank you for your question.

[English]

I can't speak for every call and for every wharf. I do know that the associations play an important role here, like the Maritime Fishermen's Union and their representation with DFO.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

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

Martin Champoux: Thank you, Madam Chair.

What I find very troubling is that harvesters are raising very clear, well-documented, substantiated concerns, but they're not getting any kind of commitment or response. They offer solutions and lay out problems. Answers are provided, but there's no commitment from the government on solutions to prevent what happened this year from happening again next year. People need answers. Crab harvesters in New Brunswick, Gaspé and throughout the gulf need measures that will provide certainty. You can't have all these unknowns from one year to the next. There are already too many unknowns.

Mr. Vigneault, I'd like to talk to you about the scientific reports and recommendations sent to the department. I imagine these reports come with recommendations, not just observations.

Do fishers get this information and these reports too? At what point in the process are harvesters included in the conversation?

Bernard Vigneault: Thank you very much for the question, Madam Chair.

Harvesters are most definitely included in the scientific process that enables us to establish specific scientific recommendations that are published and available to everyone.

We usually hold meetings about the science advice before the advisory committees have their discussions. Some industry stakeholders are involved. In many cases, industry experts participate in the peer reviews used to prepare the advice. They also contribute their expertise in interpreting data, among other things.

Once we have a consensus on the science advice, that advice is published and is available to everyone. In addition, in most cases,

it's also presented to the advisory committee so that everyone in the industry has access to the data and the most recent science advice when they comment on the decision about the fishery.

Martin Champoux: You said that harvesters are an integral part of the process that leads to the recommendations, but we keep hearing that harvesters feel that they're not consulted enough and that their opinion is not properly taken into account.

Can you explain why that would be?

Bernard Vigneault: Fishers' contributions to science advice are based on sound scientific data and the consensus-based interpretation. In some cases, a recommendation may conflict with harvesters' observations, but they do have the opportunity to influence the decision.

As I said earlier, when the minister makes decisions, she takes the science advice into account along with other aspects, including harvesters' advice. The advisory committee gives harvesters an opportunity to share their point of view on stock management with the department.

Martin Champoux: It's about the feasibility—

[English]

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

I'm going to go now to Mr. Small.

You have five minutes, Clifford.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Harvesters in Atlantic Canada have practised extreme conservation when it comes to fisheries for pelagics, otherwise known as forage fish by foreign-funded activists who lobby DFO and the minister extremely hard to keep these fisheries at such a low level, or even closed, as is the case with mackerel.

We look at herring, and we had openings not long ago in Conception Bay, Trinity Bay and Bonavista Bay. If you look at the areas that are fished in that herring fishery, you're looking at possibly 5% of the waters that are fished. That quota is getting taken in anywhere from 12 to 24 hours.

Would that indicate to you somehow, possibly, that the stock is so healthy and the quota is being cut so fast that you may have the quota set at a very low exploitation rate? Do you ever look at the speed at which the quota is caught when you look at the opening and closing of these pelagic fisheries?

• (1225)

Todd Williams: Thank you very much. I can certainly start.

Yes, the catch per unit effort is something that we do look at. We do know that with those pelagic stocks like herring or mackerel, and particularly with seining vessels, which are remarkably efficient, they can catch a lot of tonnage very quickly over the course of several days. It really depends on gear type as well, and there are other considerations.

Yes, we do consider that as part of the information that we collect.

Clifford Small: What other information are you leaning on in the herring stock assessment on the eastern and northeastern coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador?

Bernard Vigneault: The stock assessment is done with part of our science data.

As part of the stock assessment, we also look at the catch per unit effort. Cases where you would have extremely high catch rates could be an indicator of a healthy stock, but in several cases it cannot be used as the indicator of the stock status because the stock aggregates and there are fishing methods that are—

Clifford Small: Are you saying to me that high catch rates are not an indicator of high abundance in a stock?

Bernard Vigneault: There could be many reasons. You could have a stock that has been depleted and, despite that, has a very high catch rate. There are actually several examples of that, especially for pelagic stock, shrimp in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, mackerel and others.

It's certainly discussed as part of the science, but often it's better to use other sets of data to assess the overall stock.

Clifford Small: Thank you.

I'm going to look at some other species here on the continental shelf. There's redfish in 2GHJ and 3K. There's witch flounder and winter flounder. There haven't been assessments of these species in quite a few years, which limits fishing potential for harvesters and for processors. Why does it take so long to have an assessment of some of these species?

Fishermen talk about the abundance of these species, yet we can't get assessments to prove their abundance and give additional fishing opportunities to harvesters. Why are you holding back these assessments?

Bernard Vigneault: We're prioritizing the science work to make sure there are regular updates to the stock assessment in general. There are capacity limitations, especially for some of the stock that's in remote areas for sampling. There are other examples like redfish in unit 1 and unit 2, where we have increased the more recent stock assessment that enabled the opening of that commercial fishery.

Clifford Small: I'm talking about redfish on the northeast coast now.

The Chair: We're up to five minutes now. Thank you, Mr. Small.

We'll now go to Mr. Morrissey for five minutes, please.

• (1230)

Robert Morrissey: Madam Chair, through you, my question is for Monsieur Vigneault.

You provided good testimony. I want to focus on the mackerel stock on the east coast of North America.

We had testimony given earlier. Could you confirm and expand on the difference between the U.S. southern stock versus the northern stock that is shared with Canada? Are they two distinct stocks?

Bernard Vigneault: Yes. They are two different biological units. In fact, in Canada, the only stock that we assess and manage is the northern component.

In the United States, because they have a broader area where fishing occurs, they actually do an assessment of the overall combined stock, which is the northern stock that they share with Canada and the southern stock that is just fished in the U.S. The science for the northern stock is similar in our stock assessment and that of the U.S., but because the U.S. includes in its assessment the large southern component that has seen a recent increase, they have different overall science advice.

Robert Morrissey: How much of the quota that the Americans have set for harvesting mackerel is allocated north, and how much is for the southern stock? Do we know that?

Bernard Vigneault: In the U.S. they don't separate the stock. It's a single quota allocation for mackerel fish in the U.S., which de facto is—

Robert Morrissey: Historically, then, how much of that would come from the southern stock versus the northern stock?

Bernard Vigneault: Our estimate is that about 20% of the northern stock would be captured in the U.S., but that will be part of the science peer review committee that's—

Robert Morrissey: Just to be clear, then, whatever quota allocation they give historically, about 20% of it comes from the northern stock that's shared with Canada.

Bernard Vigneault: Yes. In the U.S., they have a single quota for the stock. In their calculation, they account for how much Canada is setting as a quota, and we do the reverse from a science perspective in terms of our projection of the possibility of growth given the fishing in both countries.

Robert Morrissey: Some fishers would be led to believe that the total American quota is coming from the northern stock shared with Canada. For the record, is that correct?

Bernard Vigneault: That is not correct, and we do a specific estimation of the smaller portion of it in our science process.

Robert Morrissey: Thank you.

Mr. Vigneault, we had an excellent presentation given explaining the difference, which speaks to the issue of what fishers see at sea. You can see an abundance of mackerel, but could you explain to the committee the significance of the size of the fish versus the impact on rebuilding the stock? It's my understanding that juvenile mackerel are in abundance, but they are not the size limit that the stock's future depends on.

Bernard Vigneault: We'll see what our updated science will provide, but in our latest science advice, yes, there was still, as we call it, a truncated population. We see much fewer large fish than we see in a healthy period. Those fish are important because they contribute more to reproduction and spawning.

Robert Morrissey: Could you elaborate on the significance of large mackerel on egg bearing, which is what the stock depends on? If we increase the quota and pick up a lot of the smaller mackerel, how could it negatively impact on the rebuilding of the stock, which everybody acknowledges is moving in the right direction?

Am I correct?

Bernard Vigneault: Yes. We've seen some signs of stock growth in our latest assessment. For this stock, we have a model that gives us a sense of, with any amount of fishing or including fishing reduction, what the related improvement will be in the probability for the stock to grow. That is directly related to the health of the population in terms of having a normal distribution of fish. We will be doing a research project this year to further work on the size and the reproductive status of fish, including around Newfoundland.

That's all very important information for our ability to project the efficiency of reducing the fishing effort in terms of promoting the rebuilding of the stock.

Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Mr. Vigneault.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Morrissey.

I think we have bells starting. It's a 30-minute bell.

I want to thank the witnesses for coming and giving us testimony.

Go ahead, Mr. Arnold.

• (1235)

Mel Arnold: Madam Chair, we quite often provided unanimous consent to go another 15 minutes, and that still gives us very good time.

The Chair: Do I have unanimous consent to go another 15 minutes? We have one small thing to deal with as well.

Robert Morrissey: We would agree with finishing one round.

The Chair: Finish the round, okay. Actually, you've just finished the round.

Robert Morrissey: No, I mean finishing another round, which would be 12 minutes.

The Chair: Is that okay?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay. We have only one speaker for that round, and that's Mr. Gunn.

Does anybody else want to put their hand up to speak? Is there anybody else?

Mr. Deschênes, Mr. Champoux has left. Would you like to be the next speaker? All right.

We have Mr. Gunn and Mr. Deschênes, and I think that will be it, because we do want to tidy up the little bit of outstanding stuff we need to deal with here.

We're going to start with Mr. Gunn for five minutes, please.

Aaron Gunn: Thank you, Chair.

The question again is for whoever is best suited to answer, but I'll direct it to you to start, Mr. Williams. It's about the recent decision taken after the International Pacific Halibut Commission reached a conclusion and I believe the Canadian government agreed with this. It was that, for conservation purposes, the total allowable catch of halibut on the Pacific coast should be reduced.

Why was the entirety of that reduction borne by Canada and none by the United States?

Todd Williams: Thank you.

Chair, I will defer the question to Mr. Davis in Vancouver.

Neil Davis: Thank you.

This is part of a much longer-standing issue between Canada and the U.S. in terms of allocations or how we share the resource. We did agree that there was some need to be cautious in setting TACs this year, but we could not agree on how to share or allocate between Canada and the U.S.

We agreed to take a small reduction in Canada's allocation this year, but also that we would have follow-up discussions to ideally reach a longer-term understanding around allocations.

Aaron Gunn: Is it the position of the department that if we can't agree on how the reduction of the allowable catch should be split between us and the United States, we should just bear the entire economic cost while the United States is allowed to continue fishing?

Neil Davis: That has definitely not been our practice. However, in the course of our negotiations there were consequences proposed by the United States if we were unable to reach some kind of understanding around allocation. Canada weighed that against the consequences of accepting a reduction in our share and came to the conclusion that—

Aaron Gunn: Were those consequences a form of economic coercion that would have prevented our seafood products from entering the United States?

Neil Davis: That's correct.

Aaron Gunn: Okay.

The question that I have is how... What has possibly changed going forward that will prevent that situation from just happening again? The Americans have clearly set the standard that if they use economic coercion on Canada and Canadian seafood producers, we'll just cave.

Neil Davis: We have a treaty relationship with the United States. We propose to take a rational, structured approach to how we arrive at understandings or agreements around allocations, which would look at the science and the history of how we've accessed the resource. It's a long-standing relationship that we would be looking to maintain to preserve a collaborative way of managing this shared resource and promoting those things as what should be the basis of arriving at allocations or a way of sharing halibut.

• (1240)

Aaron Gunn: Thank you. I want to go back to my previous line of questioning around the various co-management agreements that have been announced with first nations as they pertain to fisheries. I think one of the things that are genuinely confusing citizens—including some people on this committee—is that these agreements are.... Presumably, where there are no co-management agreements, you still take into account the opinions and desires of first nations as you would harvesters, as you would recreational fishermen.

Are these co-management agreements essentially creating more bureaucracy with no real power, or are you devolving power from the department and from the government to these shared working groups? I can't see how it's not one or the other.

Neil Davis: We're formalizing relationships with first nations in a way that defines how we will collaborate and how we will attempt to reach agreement, and also engage with others. We're putting those down in written agreements often as a component of an agreement that speaks to other topics as well. It also sets out a formal structure, committees that will convene at a certain period every year and then the things that we will collaborate on. It's assigning formality to that and is an attempt to reflect the seriousness with which we take our relationship with first nations.

Ultimately, if we can reach agreement on matters, great. If we can't, then we still have to make decisions, but they all result in advice to the minister on the matters that are under her regulatory authority.

Aaron Gunn: Is there a concern that, as we saw with the Fraser River sockeye fishery, the creation of this new bureaucratic step will slow decision-making at DFO from being rapid? What is the commitment to the department around transparency around some of these decisions?

The Chair: We have gone over time here. Give a quick answer please.

Neil Davis: We have to fit decision timelines within the biological timelines associated with the resource. For whatever commitments we make, we have to complete consultations in time to make decisions for when the fish return.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Weiler, you have five minutes, please.

Patrick Weiler: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to pick up on something that my colleague, Mr. Klassen, brought up about mass marking. With the announcement that was made almost exactly a month ago, what concrete changes should harvesters expect in terms of mark-selective fishing opportunities?

In what fisheries in particular, if there are particular regions in B.C., can we expect to see those changes first?

Neil Davis: First, mass marking will be ramped up, and that won't all happen at once. It will require additional equipment and additional staff to apply that equipment and do the mass marking. We expect the ramp-up to happen over several years.

Second, once the mass marking is complete, as I'm sure you know, it's about four years before those fish return. That period gives us time to scope out where additional opportunities for mark-selective fisheries might exist. I should be very explicit that it's not limited to just the recreational fishery. There may also be opportunities to consider terminal fisheries, for example, for first nations or for some form of economic or commercial fishery.

In terms of where we might expect those opportunities, the minister's announcement specified that our increase to mass marking will be for chinook and in southern B.C. I think we expect to be looking for where more opportunity might exist in the Strait of Georgia, for example, but it may also be relevant to the west coast of Vancouver Island. Those, in very broad terms, would be the two geographic areas we would be assessing in terms of additional opportunities.

Patrick Weiler: Thank you.

You mentioned terminal fisheries. Could you please elaborate what you meant by that?

Neil Davis: Sure.

This is a fishery that would happen at or near where the fish are arriving at their spawning grounds. One of the advantages of that is that typically you will have separated out different stocks, which may be at varying levels of abundance. At a terminal location, you may have a hatchery component of the return that are marked, and you may have a wild component of the return that are going to their natal streams in that same area. By virtue of increasing mass marking, there may be the scope for more fishing opportunity on those marked fish because we have the confidence that they won't have any undesirable impact on the wild stocks that may also be in that same area.

• (1245)

Patrick Weiler: That's very helpful.

You mentioned the lead-in timeline, the four years or so that we're looking at, once we have mass marking, for when some of those changes can be put into practice. What are some of the operational or regulatory steps that would need to take place before those changes are reflected in new opportunities?

Neil Davis: We go through an annual process of updating and then finalizing an integrated fisheries management plan. That's the document that essentially spells out all of the different fisheries that we would be planning. Procedurally, my expectation is that we will be assessing a variety of proposals for mark-selective fisheries in different areas, targeting different stocks. Through that annual integrated fisheries management planning process, which entails a bunch of consultation in the lead-up to its finalization, we would be engaging with different groups to hear proposals.

Then, internally, we have been developing an evaluation framework. Let's say we get a proposal. What kinds of indicators do we want to assess that proposal against to make a decision about whether or not we think it is appropriate to implement? We also expect to finalize that evaluation framework so that there is a consistent and transparent way that we are assessing all of the proposals from our selective fisheries and ultimately making decisions about when and where to implement them.

Patrick Weiler: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now, we'll go to Monsieur Deschênes for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Congratulations on being elected.

According to my notes, my colleague, Mr. Champoux, asked questions about the possibility of setting a specific date for the opening of the crab fishery. I wanted to double-check that with Mr. Williams.

Mr. Williams, I understand that, for most fisheries, specific opening dates are set. Do you think that going forward with the solution proposed by Daniel Desbois of the Association des crabiers gaspésiens inc. would give everyone predictability?

Todd Williams: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

Indeed, by working with harvesters over the years, we have identified an opening date for this fishery, which is more or less consistent every year. Key to that is flexibility, to ensure safety on the water and that they can operate effectively in the conditions that are present at the time.

Yes, while we have a date that is set, we also allow flexibility, in collaboration with harvesters, Coast Guard and Transport Canada, to adjust that date if required.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Actually, my question was about Mr. Desbois's proposal for ensuring the ice gets cleared. Before other conditions are considered, would setting a deadline for icebreaking that's not the official opening date for the fishery solve the problems we experienced this year?

Todd Williams: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

With any plan, such as setting an opening date, we have to ensure that we have contingencies. In some cases, we set a plan and we rely on the Coast Guard to provide a vessel for a certain date. We know that things can change, either with the vessel or with environmental conditions, which can necessitate changes to that plan. Therefore, flexibility with those plans in collaboration with industry needs to be maintained.

The Chair: Thank you. That brings us to the end.

I want to congratulate this committee. You must have built-in clocks, because we have exactly 15 minutes left to vote.

Thank you very much to the witnesses for being here.

We will adjourn for the votes.

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