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Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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• (1105)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (The Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 40 of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are gathered on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

[*English*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108, the committee is meeting to continue its study on the factors determining the opening and closing dates of marine harvesting seasons.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Pursuant to the routine motions, I want to advise the committee that all witnesses appearing today have successfully conducted the tests and are properly logged on.

I want to remind you of the following housekeeping points.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking.

For those of you appearing by video conference, please look at the little globe at the bottom of your screen. You will be able to click on the appropriate language for yourselves.

I want to remind witnesses that committee members are going to ask questions in either French or English, so make sure you have the interpretation ready, so that we don't have to wait for too long before you get your interpretation of the questions.

For members in the room, if you wish to speak, raise your hand. The clerk and I will see how we can pick up who was first.

Thank you.

I'd like to welcome all of our witnesses today.

From the Assembly of First Nations, we have Andrea Paul, regional chief for Nova Scotia, and James MacDonald, director of fisheries. They're both appearing by video conference.

From the Fisheries Council of Canada, we have Jason McLinton, president. By video conference, we have Grant Dovey, member.

From Icewater Seafoods, Inc., we have Alberto Wareham, president and CEO.

We will start with the witnesses' opening statements.

Witnesses, your opening statements are five minutes for the group, not per person, so those of you who are speaking for your group will have five minutes. I will give you a one-minute shout-out and then a 30-second shout-out. Ignore me when you hear "one minute" and "30 seconds". You don't have to pay attention, but it gives you an idea of when to wrap up, so I don't have to stop you mid-sentence.

We'll begin the opening remarks with Mr. Wareham for five minutes, please.

Alberto Wareham (President and Chief Executive Officer, Icewater Seafoods Inc.): Good morning, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

My name is Alberto Wareham, and I am the president and CEO of Icewater Seafoods, a family-owned seafood company based in Arnold's Cove, Newfoundland and Labrador.

Icewater operates the only food manufacturing facility in North America focused exclusively on North Atlantic cod. We focus on year-round operations and employment, with more than 300 employees during peak season supplying premium cod products to customers in Europe and North America.

My comments will focus on northern cod and the importance of timely, practical and predictable fisheries management decisions, particularly around opening dates.

Overall, the management of northern cod demonstrates that Canada can rebuild and responsibly manage fisheries over the long term. The return of the commercial fishery supported by a healthy and growing stock is a significant success story. Improvements in timing, process and the alignment of harvesting opportunities with the realities of the resource can further improve the economic benefits, operations and overall safety of fisheries.

Northern cod is a migratory stock. During the summer months, cod are concentrated in shallow waters close to the shore and accessible to small inshore vessels. In the fall and winter months, they migrate farther offshore, into deeper waters. That migration pattern directly affects when different fleets can safely and effectively access the resource.

Industry participants support the current spawning closure in place from approximately mid-April until the end of June. Given that the commercial fishery reopened only in 2024 after more than three decades under moratorium, that closure should continue until there is sufficient updated scientific information on spawning behaviour in today's climate conditions. However, with that spawning closure in place, timely opening decisions are critical.

Northern cod in 2025-26 was a good example. The annual management approach was announced on June 18, 2025, which was earlier than some past years, but still not as early as the June 1 date industry had requested. Additional delays followed, and the inshore fishery did not open until mid-July. Had the fishery opened July 1, immediately following the end of the spawning closure, there would have been an additional two weeks of productive fishing time during one of the best periods of the year for the inshore fleet. In July, the weather conditions are generally more favourable, cod are concentrated close to shore, product quality is excellent, and small day boats can fish more safely and consistently.

Last year, approximately 5,650 metric tons of the inshore allocation remained uncaught, roughly 20% of the inshore share. Although many factors can affect harvesting outcomes over the course of a season, timely openings help inshore harvesters have the fullest possible opportunity to access the resource under favourable conditions. For our operation alone, those 5,650 tonnes of uncaught cod represent more than \$3 million in lost income for plant workers. We could have paid harvesters more than \$12 million for additional catch, and that's not including the broader economic impacts across rural communities and local businesses. A notable portion of that uncaught fish could have been harvested had the season opened two weeks earlier.

Of the approximately 1,170 active licences in the inshore northern cod fishery last year, the vast majority were true day boats that depend heavily on summer access when fish are close to shore and conditions are safest. Larger inshore vessels, representing only about 50 active vessels, typically harvest in the fall when cod has moved further from shore. Local offshore harvesters then harvest during the fall and winter, when the stock is located in offshore waters.

Season timing and allocation decisions should reflect stock migration patterns, safety considerations, operational realities and market needs. For northern cod and for Newfoundland and Labrador, 2026 represents a particularly significant opportunity. The stock is healthy and growing. More than 70% of northern cod is now destined for premium markets in Europe, aligned with Canada's broader trade and export objectives.

Global cod supply has declined by approximately 40% over the past five years, and demand and prices for high-quality cod products have strengthened considerably as a result. The economic losses experienced in 2025 would pale in comparison to the losses this year if cod is again left uncaught.

On behalf of the 300-plus people at Icewater Seafoods and the town of Arnold's Cove, who, against the odds, remained committed to cod through the 32-year moratorium, I encourage the government to ensure that seasonal opening dates and management approaches reflect the realities of the resource. Doing so can provide

industry with the ability to safely and effectively optimize the economic potential of this historic resource.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear today, and I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you. That was very timely.

I will now go to the next person, who is from the Assembly of First Nations.

Chief Andrea Paul, will you please begin? You have five minutes.

• (1110)

Chief Andrea Paul (Regional Chief of Nova Scotia, Assembly of First Nations): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good morning and *weli eksitpu'k*, Madam Chair, co-chairs and members of the committee. Thank you for your invitation to appear today.

I want to begin by acknowledging that the committee is meeting on the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin nation.

My name is Andrea Paul. I am the regional chief for Nova Scotia, and I speak on behalf of the Assembly of First Nations.

The AFN is mandated by First Nations-in-Assembly to advance and protect first nations' inherent, treaty and aboriginal rights, including fisheries rights, and it is in that spirit that I am here today with you.

I want to focus my remarks on the following themes.

First, the AFN sees the timing of fisheries opening and closing dates as a complex interplay of a myriad of issues, not simply operational. Second, there is a clear gap between what is required by law and what happens in practice. Third, we believe that there is a path forward, but it depends on implementation.

First, fisheries timing cross-cuts jurisdiction, governance and management. From the AFN perspective, this is not simply about scheduling or administration. The timing of opening and closing dates reflects who makes decisions, how those decisions are made and whether affected first nations are meaningfully involved. What we are seeing across the country—delayed openings, misaligned seasons and inconsistent decisions—is not new. These issues are tied to a system that is still largely centralized, where decisions are made with limited shared authority and continued reliance on ministerial discretion. The result is that timing decisions often do not reflect ecological realities or first nations jurisdiction, governance or priorities.

First nations fisheries are grounded in inherent and treaty-protected rights recognized under section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982. The Supreme Court of Canada has been clear: After conservation, first nations fisheries have priority, but in practice, that priority is not consistently reflected, especially when it comes to timing. When fisheries open too late or not in alignment with migration, access is reduced in a very real way. This is not a question of policy gaps. The frameworks already exist. The issue is implementation, and this is what I mean by the “implementation gap”.

Canada has committed to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which affirms first nations' right to participate in decision-making and the principle of free, prior and informed consent, yet decisions about the opening and closing dates of fisheries are still made largely through centralized processes. That disconnect continues to drive the issues we are discussing today.

This current study is happening in the context of ongoing tensions around salmon allocation, particularly on the Pacific coast. We are seeing increased pressure from different sectors and growing narratives that frame fisheries access as a direct competition between and among user groups.

It's important to be clear here. First nations fisheries are not discretionary allocations. They are rights-based and in many cases are set out in modern land claim agreements as well as historical treaties. Timing decisions are one of the ways these broader pressures show up in practice, often in ways that limit access.

The impacts of these decisions are immediate to first nations. They affect access to food, social and ceremonial fisheries, commercial and communal fisheries and economic opportunities within communities. They also contribute to tension on the water, particularly where access overlaps and enforcement is uneven. These are concerns we continue to hear directly from first nations across the country.

There are also broader management issues that need to be acknowledged. We continue to see gaps in data and monitoring, limited use of indigenous knowledge, and enforcement capacity that is stretched thin. For example, the impacts of catch-and-release fisheries, especially in warmer conditions, are not always fully reflected in decision-making. These pressures add to the challenges of managing already declining stocks.

The path forward is not about creating new policies. It's about doing the work that already has been committed to. That means recognizing first nations as right holders and government partners, moving toward co-developed decision-making and ensuring decisions are predictable, transparent and aligned with section 35. We already are seeing this practice through rights reconciliation agreements and other co-governance approaches.

In closing, the timing of fisheries openings and closures is not an isolated issue. It reflects broader, long-standing challenges in how fisheries are governed in Canada. These challenges have been identified repeatedly, and they remain unresolved. Without a shift toward co-jurisdictional, rights-based management, the same issues will continue to surface, including those related to timing and access.

• (1115)

The AFN encourages the committee to focus on these underlying governance issues and to support approaches that ensure that first nations' rights are fully recognized and implemented in practice.

Wela'liog. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I now go to the next witness, who is from the Fisheries Council of Canada: Jason McLinton, president.

You have five minutes, please, Mr. McLinton.

[*Translation*]

Jason McLinton (President, Fisheries Council of Canada): Madam Chair, members of the committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak as part of your study.

The Fisheries Council of Canada, or FCC, represents the Canadian fishing and seafood industry and promotes a healthy resource and a prosperous industry, which plays a vital role in the Canadian economy.

[*English*]

In most cases, Canada has a track record in how it determines marine harvest seasons. My comments are meant in the spirit of continuous improvement. Processes for opening and closing dates must be predictable and timely, and they must be based on robust core fisheries science. To achieve this, the Government of Canada must invest in core fisheries science, partner with industry to make full use of industry science, and provide ample notice of opening and closing dates.

As with any sector, Canada's fisheries must have predictable and timely processes in place. Our sector faces enough uncertainty in wild fisheries with respect to fluctuating stocks, weather, input costs and so on. Some of these variables are outside of our control, but government decisions about when and who can go fishing must be made predictably and in good time. While this is very often the case, when decisions are made outside of these frameworks and when decisions are made with short notice, significant challenges arise for harvesters and processors.

Robust core fishery science must underpin all of government's decisions in this space. Canadian fisheries would benefit from additional investments in core fishery science, which government can draw upon for its decision-making. In order to minimize unnecessary and unintended negative impacts on our sector and the communities they serve, seafood harvesters and processors must be part of any and all discussions where external considerations are being considered.

Industry is a reliable partner that has the capacity and capability in many fisheries to aid in the collection and analysis of fishery science. With many fisheries, industry is already investing in surveys being used to inform Government of Canada decision-making. There is additional opportunity here. The FCC has had positive initial discussions with Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and we look forward to making further progress in this space.

[Translation]

In short, the FCC and its members believe that the processes for determining fishery opening and closing dates must be predictable and timely, and based on robust core fisheries science. To achieve this, the Government of Canada must invest in core fisheries science, partner with industry to make full use of industry science, and provide ample notice of opening and closing dates. In most cases, Canada has a strong record, and it has the opportunity to improve it.

Thank you once again. I would be pleased to answer your questions.

[English]

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

Now that the witnesses have presented, I will open this up to the question and answer session. The first one is six minutes. The six minutes include questions and answers, so I would like everyone to be as concise as they can.

Beginning with the Conservatives, we have Mr. Arnold for six minutes, please.

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

I thank all the witnesses for appearing today.

This study has come to light as being very important to harvesters of all types, due to safety, access and so on.

Mr. Wareham, I'll start with you. You mentioned that the delays in openings have caused significant loss of prime harvest time and so on. What would be a typical time for the season to be announced, and how much of a delay did you see in some of these?

• (1120)

Alberto Wareham: Thank you very much for your question.

Given what happened in 2025, we tried to improve on that in 2026. The science for northern cod was announced in late March. I think the technical briefing was made public on April 1 or 2. DFO then had a groundfish advisory meeting earlier than normal. They had it on April 8, working toward the decision the next week or so. We did move it up this year to try to get.... Everybody was around

the table. After we had the science, they gave their opinions on what the quota should be and how we should manage the fishery.

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans in Newfoundland—specifically for northern cod—issues paper licences today. I don't know if they do that everywhere, but they do it in Newfoundland. It's a two-week process. Even if we get a decision in the next week and then the industry agrees that we're going to open on July 1, we have to go back two weeks.

DFO requires two weeks' notice to actually issue the licence conditions to the fishermen. There's a minimum of a two-week delay from the day the quota is announced to when you can have an opening date. We have a spawning closure, as I said in my opening remarks, in place through June 30 right now. The earliest that northern cod can open is July 1. To do that, we need a decision in the next week or so.

Mel Arnold: Are harvesters willing to move to an electronic notice? What are the impediments to going to a faster, more efficient process?

Alberto Wareham: It's hard for me to speak on behalf of the harvesters. I would think that's more of a question for the department. Can the department get there?

Mel Arnold: You're unsure whether the department has the capacity to move away from the paper type of licences?

Alberto Wareham: That would be my question.

Mel Arnold: We have seen over the years, when seasons were closed basically at the drop of a hat, that harvesters who were on the water harvesting found out that the season was closed. That didn't take two weeks to happen. Why is there a difference, in your understanding?

Alberto Wareham: I can't answer that question on why it's a paper licence requirement today, in 2026. I do know that in terms of closing dates, the catches are monitored very closely, and the system is updated within 48 hours in Newfoundland. We're keenly aware of when cod closures will happen, based on the catch.

Mel Arnold: The department is able to issue closure notices electronically, by hailing boats and so on. It can happen quite quickly.

Alberto Wareham: Yes.

Mel Arnold: They aren't capable of doing the same process for opening.

Alberto Wareham: That's my understanding today.

Mel Arnold: You mentioned that harvesters missed the best opportunities to harvest. Can you elaborate a little on that?

Alberto Wareham: As I said, northern cod is a migratory stock. It spends its winter in the offshore. It comes in late June or early July to feed, spawn and eat capelin, and then it goes back out for its life in the winter again. It's physically in the inshore from late June through early September. That's when it's physically there.

If we're going to have the maximum catching ability for inshore cod in Newfoundland, we need to get it open on July 1. That's the earliest it can open today.

Mel Arnold: We've heard some suggest that if it is late in opening, the season should be extended. Is that as valuable as those prime times at the early opening date?

Alberto Wareham: No. For me, it would be better to open it as soon as we can, because that's when the fish are there and the weather allows fishermen and inshore day boats to fish. When you extend into the fall, then you're pushing the weather, you're pushing safety and the fish move into deeper water. It's not the same. A delayed closure is not as good as an early opening.

Mel Arnold: Mr. McLinton, are you able to elaborate any further on this, from what you heard from harvesters?

Jason McLinton: Thanks, Mr. Arnold.

I've heard this from other witnesses, and certainly from my perspective and from everything I've been hearing from members, we need to be meaningfully consulted on things that have an impact on us. In terms of moving, in 2026, from a paper-based system to an electronic-based system, I think that is definitely worth exploring. We want to make sure that we do that in such a way that it doesn't have unintended negative impacts on somebody's systems or processes that may be built around that. We should absolutely have a meaningful discussion around that.

• (1125)

It's about predictability and transparency in terms of opening and closing dates. If something is having an impact on an opening date—I think, for the most part, Canada has a very strong track record for this, but if there is an impact—it would be good to know what legitimately triggers that and how industry can contribute. The more predictable and timely it is, the better. We'd like to avoid late openings, late closures and that sort of thing to the extent possible.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now I go to Mr. Connors from the Liberals.

You have six minutes.

Paul Connors (Avalon, Lib.): Good day and welcome to all the witnesses here today.

I just want to get a bit of a clarification from Mr. Wareham.

When you mentioned the paper licences, is that for inshore, mid-shore and offshore?

Alberto Wareham: There's the paper licence for the inshore for sure, and for offshore, yes, we have paper licence conditions as well.

Paul Connors: Okay.

Mr. Wareham, I want to talk about the economic impact of a two-week delay or delayed openings.

Can you give us some more details on what the economic impact is?

Alberto Wareham: Sure. I'll use as my example, from my remarks, 5,650 tonnes of inshore cod left in the water last year. That would be \$12 million paid to inshore fishermen, and it would be \$3

million in work at Arnold's Cove, in wages, but it is also product for our customers in markets that are desperately needing cod right.

When the cod fishery was open last year, and all the processors were buying, we were buying 2,300 metric tons of quota weight per week, so in two weeks we could buy 4,600 metric tons.

It's very important to get a timely opening for northern cod.

Paul Connors: You mentioned processing capacity. That would not be an issue or concern from your perspective.

Alberto Wareham: No.

Paul Connors: You're capable of processing what can be caught?

Alberto Wareham: Yes.

Paul Connors: The market is there for....

Alberto Wareham: The market has never been better. The world cod supply is down 40% in the last five years. Northern cod, Canadian cod, is the only cod stock that's growing in the world. The world is watching right now. Everybody is eager for the Canadian cod quota to increase in line with science, and we have the markets.

Paul Connors: Okay.

I wanted to just talk about stock migration too, and you said that it's inshore, offshore. I know the northern cod is back, but what other areas around the island or around Atlantic Canada do you see as improving?

Alberto Wareham: Cod spends its winter in 2J primarily, and then it comes into the inshore areas in 3K and 3L in the summer months. Then it goes back.

We have a fisheries improvement project that we've been doing for 10 years now in the process of getting northern cod MSC-certified. We announced in Barcelona, at the seafood exposition several weeks ago, that we have entered MSC full assessment.

Part of that work is migration patterns and tracking the migration patterns. We've tagged 1,100 northern cod. For some of the tags, the batteries operate for five years. We have 75 transponders in the ocean on the northeast coast of Newfoundland. We are monitoring the migration patterns.

The ecosystem has changed since the early 1980s and 1990s. We need to study the migration patterns, so we understand the movements of the cod to be able to manage the fishery better, based on current management science.

Paul Connors: Thank you very much.

Last year, some of the total allowable catch of the inshore fishery went uncaught. Do you know why that was uncaught, why that was left in the water?

Alberto Wareham: The delayed season was a contributing factor to that. As well, unfortunately, for the first time in Newfoundland's history, we had the wildfires, as you know, in Conception Bay. Some of the fishermen had to evacuate, so they couldn't fish.

The fish moved out of Conception Bay, interestingly, two weeks earlier last year than the year before. Whether it was environmental conditions or whatever, the fish moved. The fish weren't there for the fishermen, so they couldn't catch them.

I guess it was a combination of a multitude of things. We had delayed opening, we had evacuation and we had fish moving. After Labour Day in Newfoundland, as you're aware, the weather patterns change, and it's not safe to go on a dayboat out in Bonavista. You mightn't come back. The weather plays a very big part in the dayboat fishery.

• (1130)

Paul Connors: How do you think the industry can be more involved in the decision-making on the opening and closing? I mean more the opening, I guess.

Alberto Wareham: I think we're involved today. We're in the groundfish advisory meetings. We meet with the department on a regular basis.

The decision just seems to take a little longer. In the industry, we are actively engaged on a regular basis. We are making these points. They're aware of the situation. We just need to make the decision and get the quota announced.

Paul Connors: You think that all of the information is there.

Alberto Wareham: All of the information is there.

Paul Connors: Do you have any idea of the reason it would be delayed?

Alberto Wareham: No, that's for the department to.... Obviously, there are procedures. We got together on April 8 for a groundfish advisory meeting in Newfoundland, with all sectors there—inshore, offshore, indigenous and DFO science—and then that takes a process.

The Newfoundland region had to report back to Kent Street, and then at Kent Street they have to do their thing, so it does take some time. It's not going to happen overnight, but we are actively involved in the process.

Paul Connors: Okay. Thank you very much.

I have a couple of seconds left, but I'm good.

The Chair: Thank you, Paul.

I'll now go to Monsieur Champoux.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor for six minutes.

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

I thank the witnesses for being present today.

I want to revisit some of the questions from my colleague Mr. Connors as I address you, Mr. McLinton.

There's a lot of talk about the opening and closing dates for the period in question. I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about the current consultation process that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans uses to determine the appropriate opening dates according to the fishing zones.

Do you think this work is done early enough? Is it well structured?

Are the consultations conducted adequately and do they allow the industry and various stakeholders in the field to have some influence on the decisions that are made?

I'd like you to say a little more about that.

Jason McLinton: Thank you, Mr. Champoux.

[*English*]

I'll start by underscoring what I mentioned in my opening remarks, that, for the most part, what I'm hearing from members is that the processes are working well. My comments are meant to be taken in the spirit of continuous improvement.

What I am hearing, for the most part, when I speak with members, is that most of the challenges with regard to opening and closing dates come from our members on the Pacific coast, on the west coast, so I'll invite FCC member Grant Dovey to comment on his experience in a second. That's where most of the challenges are, but what I'm hearing is that the more transparent and clear the processes are, the better, and it is better when the government actually adheres to them.

I'll ask Mr. Dovey to comment on his experience.

Grant Dovey (Member, Fisheries Council of Canada): Thanks, Jason.

I could use the Pacific prawn fishery as an example. This fishery typically opens in mid-May. The managers did a good job of conducting the advisory committee meetings and putting the IFMP up for review, but we still didn't get a sign-off on the IFMP until the end of April.

There were indications that the fishery would start mid-May, but then we needed the official fishery notice to come out before that opened, and we didn't get that fishery notice until six days before our May 13 opening. You can imagine the difficulties around logistics, with teeing up crews, buyers, ice, grub and everything around that situation. It's really untenable. It's the latest we've seen in the fishery on the west coast.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

Martin Champoux: These can sometimes be unforeseen circumstances, as we saw in the case of ice on the Atlantic coast, a region that is geographically a bit closer to the riding of my colleague, Alexis Deschênes, whom I am replacing today, than to mine. In such cases, do you consider that the communities and groups of fishers in the various sectors affected by these conditions are sufficiently taken into account in the consultations prior to the opening?

Is there some degree of flexibility or agility to adapt to unforeseen circumstances that may arise at the beginning or before the start of the fishing season?

[*English*]

Jason McLinton: As I said, for the most part, I'm hearing from members that things are generally working well.

I would also underscore anything to do with safety. Safety is an absolute top priority for Fisheries Council of Canada members.

There are other factors that one must consider when making decisions around opening and closing dates. I think the opportunity lies in more clarity and openness around what the process is and making sure in all cases that everyone understands that, that the process is adhered to and that timely decisions are made.

For the most part, what I'm hearing from members, particularly on the east coast, is that the decision-making processes are generally working well, so my comments are meant for continuous improvement.

[Translation]

Martin Champoux: Among your most experienced members—let's put it that way—do you hear comments that over the years, more and more new criteria are being added to the evaluation for the opening of fisheries, as well as for the monitoring and protection of stocks?

Do you hear people complaining that many criteria have been added over the years and that some of these criteria are a bit exaggerated?

[English]

Jason McLinton: I haven't been hearing a lot about new criteria being added for members. What I am hearing a lot, particularly from members on the west coast, is that there are so many other things being thrown at them at the same time. We're talking right now about opening and closing dates, but marine protected areas and all kinds of other things are being thrown at them.

It's a tough business at the best of times. There are so many variables that we don't have control over, but let's try to be as predictable and timely as we can with the things that we do have control over.

The Chair: Thank you.

We now go to a second round of questioning, and that's a five-minute round.

I will begin with Mr. Gunn for the Conservatives. You have five minutes, please.

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

Mr. McLinton, I have a question that pertains to fisheries on the west coast. Can I address that to Mr. Dovey?

Mr. Dovey, across B.C. we've had a number of examples of indigenous groups, be they first nation band councils or hereditary chiefs, unilaterally declaring an area closed to fishing to non-band members. Have you had any experience with these pronouncements?

Grant Dovey: Predictable protocols where commercial fishing is meaningfully engaged are key.

We have had experiences of IPCAs being declared mid-season or the IFMP being released. When the IFMP is released, DFO needs a protocol to ensure that the areas assigned to that IFMP will be accessible.

We've had situations of DFO saying an area is open, but a nation has declared an IPCA and says it's not. Then we're left with conflict on the water, and it's hard for the fishermen to have the capacity to sort those situations out in order to access an area.

Aaron Gunn: We've been told repeatedly at this committee, by DFO officials and the minister herself, that only the federal government has the ability and the right to close areas to fishing. Does DFO clarify this and defend the rights of fishermen to access these areas when the status of these areas becomes uncertain?

• (1140)

Grant Dovey: The DFO, in my experience in the geoduck fishery, has maintained areas as open to the fishery, but IPCAs need to be discussed ahead of the release of the IFMP. DFO, the nations and stakeholders need to be at the table to discuss those potential IPCAs. Otherwise, if the department is saying an area is open and the nation is saying it's not.... The department has only so many resources available on such a remote coast, and it leads to situations of our not being able to complete the quota.

Aaron Gunn: It seems like a situation that would be bad for everybody: first nations, fish harvesters and the rule of law.

Do you have a specific example of this happening, how it affected a fishery and what the consequences of this uncertainty have been?

Grant Dovey: There's an example from this past season on the central coast, where the IFMP included quota in Kitasu Bay. The Kitasoo Xai'xais Nation had declared Kitasu Bay an IPCA. Once the IFMP was released, I contacted the UHA about coming up with an alternative to harvest in Kitasu Bay. That was a really difficult situation for industry to be put in. We really didn't have any conversation with all three parties until really late in the game. It was toward the end of the season, when we ended up with biotoxin issues and weather issues. It ended up that the area wasn't able to be fished due to potential conflict and other external factors.

Aaron Gunn: Just to clarify, was this closure of Kitasu Bay a unilateral declaration? If so, do you have evidence of that—a letter or an email from the band—that you can submit as evidence to this committee?

Grant Dovey: I'm sorry, Mr. Gunn. You broke up a bit, but I think I got the gist of it.

The Kitasoo Xai'xais have declared Kitasu Bay as a priority for a number of years now, including the 2023 and 2026 rotation. We're asking that these IPCAs be incorporated into the existing NSB implementation regulations. For example, there's a central coast NMCA that's on the board for this area. The Kitasoo declared that area as closed outside of that process, which makes it next to impossible to prosecute the fishery.

Aaron Gunn: Chair, I think I must have cut out or something—there's a technical issue—because I made a specific request. I need to repeat it.

The Chair: I'll give you 30 seconds.

Aaron Gunn: Mr. Dovey, was there a unilateral pronouncement from the band about this closure? If so, do you have evidence of it that you could submit to this committee?

Grant Dovey: The Kitasoo have released a management plan for Kitasoo Bay, yes. I can submit that.

Aaron Gunn: Yes, please submit that to me. Thank you.

The Chair: I now go to Mr. Klassen for the Liberals, for five minutes.

Ernie Klassen (South Surrey—White Rock, Lib.): Thanks to all the witnesses for appearing here today.

Ms. Paul, the Fisheries Act requires the minister to consider impacts on indigenous rights when making fisheries decisions. Can you give an example of when indigenous observation is different from DFO science? How should these differences then be reconciled?

Chief Andrea Paul: Thank you.

I'm just wondering if my technician, James MacDonald, made it on the call.

The Chair: No.

Chief Andrea Paul: I will try my best to answer this question.

You were asking about indigenous observation versus western science.

• (1145)

Ernie Klassen: That's correct—versus DFO's decision-making. Is there a difference of opinion, and how is that reconciled?

Chief Andrea Paul: Based on the information I would have known.... I was chief for my community for 12 years. We're a fishing community. The best example I can give is, when we would have conversations or consultation—whatever you may call it—with DFO, we were able to come together and have meaningful conversations with regard to fisheries in our area. The piece I really liked was that they did listen to what the historical context of our fisheries looked like and to how we could come together to align the priorities of DFO and the community to figure out the best path forward.

There have been instances when we have come together to have that conversation and to respectfully listen to the nation with regard to the science that they've held since time immemorial. It's something that would have been passed along over the years.

As a chief who was not a fisher, it was absolutely interesting to be in the room to hear those conversations and to hear the respect from both parties as to moving forward on decisions.

Ernie Klassen: Thank you very much.

My next question is for—

The Chair: Excuse me, Mr. Klassen. I think Mr. MacDonald is on now.

Thank you.

Chief Andrea Paul: Okay, thank you.

Ernie Klassen: It's okay. I'll move to another question for Mr. McLinton or Mr. Dovey.

You talked about the prawn decision coming quite late. I couldn't remember if you said when the committee met. The decision was made mid-May, and I'm wondering if you can talk a bit about the delay and why there was about a two-month delay from the time the committee met until the decision was made.

Jason McLinton: If it's all right, Mr. Klassen, I'll defer to Mr. Dovey on that, but I will underscore that these impacts have very real consequences. I thank Mr. Dovey for speaking to his specific experience, but it's negative on harvesters, it's negative on their employees, and it's negative on the communities they serve.

Mr. Dovey, I'll defer to your experience on that specific question.

Grant Dovey: Thank you, Jason.

Thank you, Mr. Klassen.

The advisory committees were completed in the fall as per normal, and usually the IFMP is released some time closer to the beginning of the new year.

The fishery opened May 13. Prior to that, the IFMP was released at the end of April, and then we didn't have an official fishery notice confirming that date until six days before the opening. That's the timing, which is really unworkable for coordinating your crew and activities leading up to an opening.

We don't know why it took so long. It seemed like the IFMP and the target date were never changed from the fall meetings, but the process needs to change within DFO. I'm not sure what's happening in the background that delays things.

Ernie Klassen: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ernie.

Now I go to Mr. Champoux for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Martin Champoux: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Wareham, I imagine that in your industry, having predictability is a challenge. I imagine it's difficult to get organized based on the variables we discussed earlier, such as the different dates for the opening of fishing seasons, which is often late, and for the closing of fishing seasons, which is sometimes early, sometimes late, as well as the other factors that come into play.

How do you see this kind of uncertainty? Are things being done properly to try, at least as far as the government is concerned, to give your industry as much predictability as possible?

Do you honestly think it could be done better?

Are you critical of the way the Department of Fisheries and Oceans does things, for example?

• (1150)

[English]

Alberto Wareham: We could do a little better with the opening date of northern cod. As I said, we are working on that this year. The government has heard our concerns of last year. They moved the advisory meeting ahead, as I said.

At the same time, we have workers who are expecting to come to work. We have customers who are expecting product. I had an email this morning about when the first load of northern cod for 2026 is going to arrive in Europe. I don't know when it's going to open yet, so I can't explain to people when it's going to arrive. There's packaging and there are many other things that you have to get ready for.

All you do is the best job you can. Working with the department as best we can to get the fishery open is the solution.

[Translation]

Martin Champoux: Do you feel that the communication is effective? Do you sometimes feel like you are the last to be informed about decisions that are made, or do you feel like you are in the loop early enough?

Does this allow you, at best, to be prepared or to anticipate things?

[English]

Alberto Wareham: We're in the loop early, but then it sort of takes on a life of its own. I don't know how to explain it, but as I said, in the region in Newfoundland, they have to write their report. They send it to Ottawa. Fisheries management looks at it. Science looks at it. There are multiple people who look at it, so we're definitely in the loop early, but getting the decision made seems to take the time. That seems to be the issue.

[Translation]

Martin Champoux: Do you feel that the measures taken for species protection, in particular, are restrictive for certain types of fishing? Is that something that should be improved?

In general, do you agree with the processes in place?

[English]

Alberto Wareham: The only constraint right now, which we do agree with, as I said in my opening remarks, is the spawning closure. The ecosystem is very different in 2026 from what it was in 1980 or 1990. Once we understand the updated spawning time of northern cod from a science perspective, then we could adjust the spawning closure. That may allow the fishery to start earlier. Maybe the fish are migrating earlier. That's what our study on the fisheries improvement project should be able to tell us.

In general, we do work very well with fisheries management and science. We're involved early, but we have to speed up the process in between. That is my answer.

[Translation]

Martin Champoux: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank the witnesses for coming, for presenting and for helping us with their expertise.

I'm going to suspend until we get the second round going.

• (1150)

(Pause)

• (1155)

The Chair: I call this meeting to order.

I want to make a few comments for the benefit of the new witnesses.

Please address your comments through the chair. You have what looks like a globe at the bottom of your screen. You can use that for translation into whatever language you're most comfortable with.

Each witness has five minutes to present on behalf of their group.

I'd like to welcome Claire Mavin, who is appearing as an individual, as well as Ghislain Cyr, who is a retired fisherman.

We'll begin with Ms. Mavin for five minutes, please.

• (1200)

Claire Mavin (Commercial Harvester, As an Individual): Thank you, Chair and honourable members of Parliament.

My name is Claire Mavin. For over 10 years, I have fished commercially alongside my father, Doug Mavin, harvesting halibut, salmon, groundfish and prawns. I'm the fourth generation of my family to rely on this industry to sustain our livelihood.

Being raised in commercial fishing has shaped who I am. It has taught me determination, perseverance, patience and work ethic, all while allowing me to financially support myself through my university education.

Running a fishing operation requires immense preparation, complex logistics and capital investment. Every decision we make is entirely dependent on timely opening and closure notifications from DFO, and it's important in managing costs and running a fishing business efficiently.

DFO's current trend of delayed management has had severe consequences for harvesters. We saw this clearly last prawn season, when the fleet was given only a few days' notice for a closure. Boats were caught in logistically challenging situations, which increased costs for many harvesters. It impacted fishing productivity and challenged sustainable fishing practices.

This year, the pattern inverted. We were given incredibly short notice for an opening date that has historically been consistent. This lack of predictability creates immediate and unnecessary financial and physical hardships for all fishery participants.

Of deepest concern to me, however, is the management of our salmon troll fishery. Due to the incongruity of opening dates and the run timing, the majority of the stock has migrated past our area before we are granted access. This leaves approximately half of our allowable quota unfulfilled, resulting in significantly reduced earnings for the fleet, earnings that make up our livelihood after we have recovered the costs of operation.

These reduced earnings are not a result of fleet competency or skill but of departmental policy. This policy has severe personal costs. To avoid losing vital income, I am forced to miss the first few weeks of university classes each year. Meanwhile, my siblings have missed out on crucial earnings as the fishery is pushed later and later into the fall.

Due to the late opening timing, each day is precious, and we are forced to fish through unsafe weather and adversity to maximize a window that is far too narrow.

While our commercial fleet is heavily curtailed, we watch other user groups increase their harvest levels on the very fish we are prohibited from catching. Our fleet is forced to fish last, after every other user group has already been granted access.

This policy of preferential access, where the commercial sector is starved of opportunity, is unacceptable. It diminishes our industry and actively pushes the next generation out. Maintaining a professional crew is virtually impossible under these conditions, forcing captains to rely increasingly on students and part-time workers. Managing this high turnover availability is already a significant challenge for harvesters, and the department's lack of timely notice only compounds this difficulty.

I am one of four siblings. None of us plan a life in commercial fishing. We want to, but we cannot, because current policy trends give younger generations absolutely no hope for a viable future.

• (1205)

I urge this committee to hold the department accountable, demand transparent, standardized timelines for openings and closures, and restore equitable access to the commercial troll fleet.

Thank you, and I gratefully accept your questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Before we go to Ghislain Cyr for his five minutes, I want to remind everyone that we have bells at 12:30 for votes at one o'clock, so I'm getting unanimous consent for us to go an extra 15 minutes at the 30-minute bell. I think I have it from everybody.

I also wanted to suggest that we've sounded you out and everyone has agreed to come back at 1:30. At 1:30 we begin an in-camera session to deal with the Fisheries Act.

It's just to give you that piece of homework.

Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Cyr.

[*Translation*]

Ghislain Cyr (Retired Fisherman, As an Individual): Madam Chair, members of the committee, I want to thank you for allowing me to speak to you about issues that are important to me.

My name is Ghislain Cyr. I'm a retired commercial groundfish, pelagic fish and crab fisher, and a seal hunter.

As a committed fisher and citizen, my interest in practising sustainable, environmentally responsible fishing was grounded in an ecosystem-based vision and an understanding of the marine environment. Fishing could never be separated from the health, well-being, safety and food sovereignty of our communities. To advance these objectives, I became involved and sought out researchers in the fields of marine science, health and the social sciences. This close collaboration led to my receiving an honorary doctorate, *honoris causa*, from the Université Laval Faculty of Medicine, and to my becoming an ambassador for planetary health.

Drawing on these various areas of expertise, I will examine the factors that determine the opening, reopening and closing dates of marine harvesting seasons. It's a very broad topic. It requires an understanding of the specific characteristics of a species and a solid grasp of the marine system and its interactions. Decisions must be carefully analyzed and considered in a comprehensive and integrated manner. We must ensure that large spawners are preserved in order to maintain the long-term viability of a stock, as is done in the lobster fishery. We must also consider the spawning period. For example, for mackerel, it runs from May until mid-July.

Over the past ten years, everything has been changing rapidly—with temperature, predation, depredation, the absence of ice, increased food availability in certain areas, geographical shifts and so on. We are seeing changes in the patterns of several resources. Since 2017, the arrival of great white sharks, for example, has also been a contributing factor. Halibut has been in decline around the îles de la Madeleine. Sharks prey on marine mammals and fish. They are driving grey seals closer to shore, into other areas, and they will have a negative impact once again. We can expect to see the effects on salmon, beluga and other species. However, as grey seals move, this displacement contributes to the increase in cod biomass in our region.

We must also learn from past mistakes and avoid reopening under the same conditions, as happened with the three cod moratoriums. We must also identify the most appropriate and most sustainable fishing gear, based on the specific characteristics of each resource.

Mackerel is another example. Although Fisheries and Oceans Canada considers it a low-value species, it remains vitally important for coastal communities for local culture, for its exceptional nutritional value—notably, its high omega-3 content—and for its affordability, especially in the current economic context.

Why consider prioritizing this resource, currently under moratorium, solely for bait, when it can be a high-quality food source for people?

Mackerel is a fragile species. No mackerel should be released, as post-release mortality is close to 90%. Fish quality is higher and keeps better when caught on a hook, allowing this resource to meet everyone's needs, both for human consumption and for bait. This approach allows science to obtain more accurate data, providing a better overall picture of the biomass.

Gill nets used for mackerel result in unrecorded losses of large spawners due to suffocation. This species is of lower quality and poorly suited for human consumption.

Authorizing a mackerel fishery solely for bait and not for human consumption, using gillnets rather than hooks as many fishers and members of the public had requested, and doing so during the spawning period, is deeply problematic; moreover given that the species is under moratorium. The decision is difficult to understand, if not unacceptable.

Fishing is a privilege, not a right. The resource belongs to the community, not only to fishers. I would like fishers and decision-makers to reflect on bait sourcing. Currently, I am extremely concerned about the astronomical quantity of resources being used for bait. Reducing bait use is essential. The impact on the health of our resources and our oceans can be significant.

• (1210)

[English]

The Chair: Can you please wrap up? Finish your sentence. Thank you.

[Translation]

Ghislain Cyr: My experience has shown that very small amounts of fish can be used as bait without reducing the harvest. In some cases, reducing bait use can actually lead to higher catches. Fish residues, such as redfish or turbot carcasses, can be added to bait for certain types of fisheries.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I now go to Mr. Barron, president of the Cape Breton Fish Harvesters Association.

You have five minutes, Mr. Barron.

Michael Barron (President, Cape Breton Fish Harvesters Association): Good afternoon, Chair and honourable committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. It is always an honour to present the harvester's perspective on issues affecting the fishing industry in Atlantic Canada, especially in my home region of Cape Breton.

I currently serve as president of the Cape Breton Fish Harvesters Association, and I am also an independent owner-operator of a commercial fishing enterprise. That gives me not only the responsibility of representing harvesters but also first-hand experience with the realities facing our industry every day on the water.

This study comes at an important time, as we've recently seen adjustments to lobster harvesting seasons in eastern Nova Scotia, with openings in some areas moving approximately seven to 14 days earlier. These decisions are not made lightly. They involve ongoing discussions among harvesters, port representatives, scientists and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans through both spring and fall advisory meetings.

One point I want to emphasize today is that every lobster fishing area, or LFA, is different. What works in one area does not necessarily work in another. Even within Nova Scotia, weather patterns, ocean conditions, harbour access and fishing realities can vary from port to port. For example, LFA 27 is one of the largest lobster fishing areas in the province, and that alone creates challenges. Certain wind directions may prevent safe fishing in one harbour while having little impact on another. Ice conditions, storms, sea state and harbour infrastructure also influence when it safe and practical for harvesters to fish.

Safety must remain top priority in any season-setting discussion. Harvesters are prepared to work hard, but no one should be placed in unsafe situations because of rigid timelines that do not reflect actual conditions on the water.

Another important issue is communication and consultation. The department often relies heavily on port representatives to communicate with harvesters and bring feedback forward. While the system plays an important role, it is not without challenges. You frequently hear concerns from harvesters who feel they are not properly represented or adequately consulted. In many cases, representatives are doing their best, but communication can break down in large, diverse fishing areas. Information is effective only if people trust the process behind it. Building and maintaining trust is critical.

Climate change is also becoming a major factor in DFO decision-making, and harvesters are witnessing those changes first-hand. Warmer ocean temperatures are affecting lobster movement, molting periods and the overall condition of stock throughout the season. In some areas, warming waters in the season are also creating concerns around the handling and protection of egg-bearing and buried females. Conservation measures must continue to evolve alongside the environmental changes if we want healthy and sustainable stocks for future generations.

Science absolutely plays an important role in the season-setting decisions. DFO considers stock assessments, water temperatures, conservation targets and long-term sustainability objectives. Harvesters understand the importance of protecting the resource, because our livelihoods and communities and the future depend on it. At the same time, local knowledge and practical fishing experience must continue to be respected alongside scientific advice. Harvesters spend their lives on the water, and their first-hand observations provide valuable insight that should remain part of the decision-making process.

Economic pressures are another reality that cannot be ignored. Fuel prices remain extremely high, bait prices are at an all-time high, and the price of lobster itself has not changed significantly over the last four years. Meanwhile, costs for crews, maintenance, insurance and day-to-day operations continue to rise.

This is why access to local bait sources is important. Reasonable bait conditions can help alleviate some of the financial pressures to reduce operating costs during an already difficult season.

• (1215)

In LFA 27 specifically, bait conditions for the upcoming season were not released until May 27, despite the lobster season already being into its third week. By that point, many of the larger mackerel had already moved on.

This is another example of why industry knowledge on the water and experience need to be relied upon more heavily in the decision-making process. This is traditionally the time of year when gaspereau and mackerel move through the area, and harvesters missed an important opportunity to help offset some of the operating costs.

The Chair: Thank you.

I think your time is up.

Michael Barron: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Now I go to the final person, and that's Mr. Fisher from the Fraser Salmon Management Council. Mr. Fisher, you have five minutes.

Aidan Fisher (Co-Chair, Joint Technical Committee, Fraser Salmon Management Board): [*Witness spoke in Halq'eméylem and provided the following text:*]

ey swayel, siyamthelaltel tel skwi.

[*English*]

Hello, and thank you, Madam Chair and standing committee, for hearing me as a witness to this study.

I'm Aidan Fisher. I'm Stó:lō from the community of Tzeachten in Chilliwack, B.C. I'm participating today from the *s'ólh téméxw* territory in Vancouver. As mentioned, I work for the Fraser Salmon Management Council as a fisheries biologist. Through this role, I co-chair the joint technical committee to the Fraser Salmon Management Board.

The FSMC—Fraser Salmon Management Council—serves as the secretariat for the Fraser Salmon Management Board and as the convener of Fraser and marine approach area first nations, to ad-

vance nation-to-nation collaborations in decision-making for first nations governance and management of Fraser salmon fisheries and their conservation.

The Fraser Salmon Management Board and the joint technical committee were created to support the implementation of the Fraser salmon collaborative management agreement. The CMA was signed in 2019 between Canada and 76 first nations from the Fraser and marine approach areas. Work to begin the process of establishing the CMA started in 2012 between Canada and 60 first nations. Now, the FSMC has 81 signatory first nations communities.

The purpose of the Fraser salmon CMA is to create, promote and support government-to-government, nation-to-nation structures for the collaborative governance, management and conservation of Fraser salmon. The CMA provides guiding principles, roles and processes for the executive—the Fraser Salmon Management Board and the joint technical committee—to support Fisheries and Oceans Canada and FSMC in their respective decision-making authorities, responsibilities, laws and jurisdictions as they relate to Fraser salmon. The CMA provides a framework for government-to-government decision-making by the parties, which are Canada and first nations, at the migratory route scale on prioritized Fraser salmon fishery management concerns identified in the Fraser Salmon Management Board's annual work plan.

The joint technical committee is a technical review committee appointed by FSMC and DFO. The JTC has participation from 10 appointees: five from the Fraser Salmon Management Council on behalf of first nations and five appointees from DFO. The JTC is tasked with reviewing and providing recommendations to the Fraser Salmon Management Board on technical aspects of Fraser salmon fishery management for the board.

Since 2019, the FSMB and the JTC have been working to develop operational processes to implement the collaborative management agreement. There is no handbook on how to implement the salmon fisheries co-governance agreement between first nations and Canada. FSMC and DFO are still actively working on processes to implement the collaborative management agreement.

More recently, the Fraser Salmon Management Board has made some consensus recommendations to Fraser salmon fisheries management. Examples are the potential for increasing the first nations food, social and ceremonial harvest targets for sockeye during an abundant year, which was 2022, and the Fraser sockeye escapement plan for multiple years, which occurred more recently.

The Fraser Salmon Management Board, however, has not been able to implement the collaborative management agreement on other aspects of the Fraser salmon fishery. There has been a substantial amount of work done through the joint technical committee and the Fraser Salmon Management Board on Fraser chinook management for years, but it has not resulted in the Fraser Salmon Management Board making recommendations on Fraser chinook management. The Fraser Salmon Management Board has entered into the official dispute resolution process, laid out in the collaborative management agreement, multiple times on this topic.

It is important to recognize the scope of the Fraser Salmon Management Board and the Fraser Salmon Management Council. The DFO structure to manage fisheries is very much still in place. Openings, allocations, licensing, etc., are all still part of the DFO structure, and they are predominantly still handled by pre-existing DFO structures and processes. The Fraser Salmon Management Board is operating at a broader or higher level, with discussions and decisions on overall management objectives on conservation and escapement or harvest objectives.

• (1220)

The collaborative management agreement and associated processes, like the Fraser Salmon Management Board and the joint technical committee, are still very new. So far, the joint technical committee has been able to work effectively and produce consensus, technical recommendations and reviews to the Fraser Salmon Management Board. The Fraser Salmon Management Board, however, has been more challenged with consensus recommendations. We have seen some progress with DFO to respect the spirit of the CMA, but there does appear to be hesitancy to fully commit to the collaborative management agreement, with the board going through dispute resolution multiple times.

Thank you for your time this morning.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to go to a question and answer session. It's six minutes. That includes questions and answers.

I will begin with Mr. Arnold from the Conservatives. You have six minutes, please, Mr. Arnold.

Mel Arnold: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll start with Mr. Fisher, if I could.

Mr. Fisher, the Fraser Salmon Management Board operates under the auspices of the Fraser Salmon Collaborative Management Agreement. I believe that's what you said. Is that correct?

Aidan Fisher: Yes, that's correct.

Mel Arnold: That agreement was finalized in 2019, correct?

Aidan Fisher: Yes.

Mel Arnold: Last year, in 2025, did the Fraser Salmon Management Board set escapement goals for Fraser sockeye?

Aidan Fisher: The Fraser Salmon Management Board provided principles for DFO to set the escapement targets for Fraser sockeye. They didn't provide the final recommendations. This year, however, the Fraser Salmon Management Board did put forward joint recommendations on the escapement targets for Fraser sockeye.

Mel Arnold: Then the Fraser Salmon Management Board didn't put escapement goals forward? Were those put forward by DFO?

Aidan Fisher: The final numbers were put forward by DFO, with principles that had been agreed to by the board, such as descriptive principles.

Mel Arnold: It was the board as a group that came up with the escapement goals. Is that correct?

Aidan Fisher: For this year, yes. Last year we did not do so for the final numbers, but the principles behind selecting those final numbers were recommended by the board collaboratively.

Mel Arnold: Then were the escapement goals for last year set before the unexpected large return of sockeye?

Aidan Fisher: Yes, they were.

The statement of "unexpected large return", I think, requires some more discussion.

Mel Arnold: In 2025, the pre-season forecast for all sockeye runs was approximately 2.9 million fish. What actually returned was nine million sockeye, more than three times greater than expected. Why didn't the board, or the joint board and DFO, adjust the escapement goals to allow for harvest opportunities, despite this return being three times greater than forecasted?

Aidan Fisher: The Fraser sockeye escapement plan is variable. Therefore, it does allow for and react to larger or more abundant returns. The actual implementation of the plan is often on a sliding scale.

Mel Arnold: However, last year they didn't. They took forever to get that increase in the total allowable catch. Do you know why?

Aidan Fisher: I don't think that's a fair description of how the escapement plan, the harvest-control rule, works for Fraser sockeye. It's much more complicated than the way you described it.

• (1225)

Mel Arnold: Could you provide the committee with the 2025 escapement principles you talked about—

Aidan Fisher: The Fraser, or—

Mel Arnold: —not necessarily today, but could you provide the principles in writing?

Aidan Fisher: Yes, and there's lots of information on how the escapement harvest control rule works.

Mel Arnold: Thanks.

Are you familiar with the concept of over-spawning for salmon?

Aidan Fisher: I am familiar with the concept as it has been technically described, but I believe it is misconstrued in a lot of instances.

Mel Arnold: Was the management board aware of the risks of over-spawning that could basically have been predicted if the harvest were not increased last year?

Aidan Fisher: Yes, I would say the entire board is familiar with the concept of over-spawning as it's described in the literature, which is, as I said, misunderstood broadly by the public.

Mel Arnold: Good. Thank you.

I want to switch to Ms. Mavin now.

You talked about the immense preparation and investment in getting ready for a season. I think we understand that, but can you go a little further in depth on that? What's involved? How long does it take you to find crew? How long does it take to get gear? What kinds of dollars are invested to get ready for a season, when you don't know if you're going to get it or not?

Claire Mavin: Thank you so much for your question.

It depends, and it varies across fisheries. I can speak about the prawn fishery specifically. With regard to sourcing crew for that fishery, when you're working on a freezer boat.... Packing on a freezer boat is a skill set, and there's a limited number of people who possess the skill of packing for the prawn fishery.

As far as preparation ahead of the season goes, preparation typically lasts about two weeks. Obviously, there's work all around the off-season that goes into maintaining your boat and things like that, but in terms of preparation for the actual fishery, it's roughly two weeks long. Getting official notice only a few days before an opening date makes it very difficult to plan around when you have two weeks of work to do first.

Mel Arnold: You mentioned the prep work ahead of time and the packaging on the boat. Do you have to buy the packaging material and other pieces necessary for that process?

Claire Mavin: Yes, you absolutely do. We get those from our buyers. They supply us with all of our processing materials for the boat.

Mel Arnold: How long would that take?

The Chair: The time is up, Mr. Arnold.

We'll go to Mr. Cormier for six minutes please, for the Liberals.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Cyr, thank you for being with us today.

I'm a guy from New Brunswick. We probably greet each other at times from our respective shores.

You spoke about the opening and closing of fishing seasons, but also about an ecosystem that's changing a lot. There are many more predators in our regions, such as the seal, that I see at home and that I did not see before, the striped bass and so on. You even talked about great white sharks, which are becoming more and more common. I hope I won't be one of their prey when I swim near the coast, at home.

Joking aside, let's now talk about mackerel fishing. You talked about it a lot. You talked about food, but also about bait. It was the government that decided to close mackerel fishing in the 2000s. Do you think that at that time, it was a good decision to allow the stock to rebuild?

Ghislain Cyr: Thank you for the question.

It's never a good decision to completely close a fishery. As fishers, we often have many years of fishing experience and we follow mackerel and other species, such as flounder and cod, at the time, year after year, as well as seals or any other predators that are in the area. It's a whole.

In the case of the mackerel, it may have started to change its behaviour about 10 years ago. The mackerel spends the whole day completely at the bottom of the water. It looks like a rock in the probe's images. If I can't see it on the probe, I imagine that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the DFO, can't see it either.

• (1230)

Serge Cormier: As the son of a fisherman, I'd certainly like to see this fishery fully reopened one day, whether for food or for bait. Whether we like it or not, the need to obtain bait puts pressure on fishers.

However, you just said something that we haven't necessarily heard often during previous testimonies: You say that the mackerel stay deeper in the water. However, some fishers have told us that they've seen mackerel everywhere, from the bottom of the water to the surface.

What do you think about this statement? We're seeing a lot more mackerel, but do you think it's the juveniles, or the adult mackerel that are actually more capable of laying eggs?

Ghislain Cyr: For several years, there's been an increase in the number of mackerel in the water. I'm going to share an experience with you.

Last summer, we were caught by a big storm out on the water. We had about four miles to cover on the water, and the mackerel rose to a depth of about five fathoms. It was a continuous line. We fished in several spots and the mackerel was very nice.

Often, you don't see it during the day. It swims up through the water column to the surface just before nightfall, then swims back down in the morning. When the sun rises, it goes down to the bottom. In the evening, it comes up because its stomach is empty, and it goes down in the morning because its stomach is full. It swims in the water column to feed. For that reason, it's impossible to catch it at that time.

Serge Cormier: A certain quota has nevertheless been set for bait. If mackerel fishing were reopened with a larger quota or even for commercial fishing, do you think it would be harmful to the resource?

Ghislain Cyr: Frankly, if we wait until the end of the mackerel spawning period, around August, September, October and November, and fish with a line tomorrow, in my opinion, we won't change the mackerel biomass at all.

Serge Cormier: You're talking about fishing with a line, not with a net.

Ghislain Cyr: Yes. I fished with a net and I know what it's like. As I said earlier, when the mackerel is too big for the nets, it drowns. It suffocates. Then it falls to the bottom and isn't counted. These are also mackerel with gonads and eggs, so they are fish that spawn.

Everyone can fish with a line. If given a long enough period, fishers from almost everywhere will be able to catch mackerel, especially if they wait until September or October, when the mackerel is fattier and better suited for human consumption and bait.

In my opinion, commercial fishers should have a weekly quota and be able to sell mackerel to the coastal community, because we were born eating mackerel. It's the same thing for herring and cod.

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Cyr.

[English]

Ms. Mavin, first of all, thank you for being here.

I'm glad to see there are women in the fishery on the other coast. There are a lot of women in my area who are now captains, who own licences and are starting in the industry. I want to congratulate you on being, I think you said, the fourth generation in your family to do so. That's wonderful.

With regard to salmon, you said there were groups able to start first, while some others were last. Which groups were starting first, and which ones were last?

Claire Mavin: I'm sorry. I am having trouble with my audio.

Serge Cormier: Can you hear me now?

I know my English is not that good. Maybe that is also the problem.

Can you hear me now, Ms. Mavin?

• (1235)

The Chair: I think she's frozen.

Sorry, Serge.

Serge Cormier: Okay, I'm going to stop there.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: I will now go to Monsieur Champoux for six minutes, please.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Martin Champoux: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you very much to all the witnesses for being with us today.

Mr. Cyr, I found your answers to my colleague's questions very interesting, honestly. I was actually going in that direction by asking you if, in your opinion, DFO takes enough account of the fishers' experience and memory in decision-making. You were talking about mackerel, which is an excellent example.

I think you would agree that scientific methods are not necessarily complete. Some information is missing. For example, scientists say that the moratorium helps the mackerel, and what fishers are

seeing are mostly young mackerel, juveniles that are less than seven years old. You don't agree with that statement, if I understand correctly.

Ghislain Cyr: If you're talking about mackerel as such, I'd tell you that what we see all summer, in other fisheries, like recreational cod fishing, are large mackerel. They're caught accidentally. They stay deeper and are everywhere. That's what almost all the fishers in the area have seen. That shows there's no problem with the mackerel.

Martin Champoux: I'll return to my original question: Do you think that DFO has given enough consideration to the experience and expertise that fishers have gained on the water over the years?

If I understand you correctly, you find that all the importance and credibility are being given to scientific data, even though the collection methods are sometimes questionable.

Ghislain Cyr: I'd say that trust in scientists is decreasing more and more. I spoke with fishers who attended the last meeting held at the Maurice Lamontagne Institute. They told me they didn't understand anything anymore, so much so that they left the meeting at noon. They said that the scientists were not in the same field, that the fishers are the ones who go out on the water and have experience.

We've realized that, to the DFO, the fishers' experience is worth very little. The last thing I heard from someone in the upper echelons of DFO was that artificial intelligence would soon replace us. At least she was honest.

Martin Champoux: Artificial intelligence will replace fishers.

Ghislain Cyr: Yes.

Martin Champoux: You'll have to explain that to me. I have no doubt that it will happen one day, but—

Ghislain Cyr: It's hard to explain and it's hard to hear. When you have 50 years of experience in all kinds of fishing, hearing that is difficult.

Martin Champoux: Yes.

Until recently, there was a consultation table, and the government ended it. Do you know why?

Ghislain Cyr: No.

Martin Champoux: Do you think it could be because there was a lack of understanding between the fishers and the other stakeholders around the consultation table, which might have made the fishers a bit—

Ghislain Cyr: Honestly, I admit that I did not attend all the meetings. The last meeting I attended took place in Moncton and was about groundfish. There were three fishers: two from Newfoundland and Labrador, and myself. The proof that it no longer works is that there were 100 coffee cups set out for 3 fishers. That tells you there's something wrong. You have to wonder.

Martin Champoux: Do you think it would be useful to set up a consultation table like that to facilitate understanding between the parties, as well as collaboration? If the connections are cut, it can't work and the fishers' voice can't be heard.

Ghislain Cyr: The problem is not with the scientists. I've always had a good relationship with them, regarding both marine mammals—which I've worked on with them for over 30 years—and groundfish. I fished for winter flounder for 25 years, and we worked on that very well together. However, in my opinion, the fishery was closed for no reason. The only reason they gave was that too many lobsters were being caught in the nets.

At the last meeting we had with them, they told us that the resource was doing better, that they needed fishers like me, who had been working with them for 25 years, to have baseline data, and that there had been an increase in stocks of 20% to 30% over the past year, with less fishing effort. However, they still decided to close the fishery. That's incomprehensible.

• (1240)

Martin Champoux: Earlier, you mentioned seal hunting. You talked about the migration of species, particularly because other predators had arrived in different areas. Seal hunting has been a social issue over the years. Now, I think we've moved past that troubled period and the seal is being highlighted again as a very interesting product.

In your opinion, is the regulation of seal hunting well adapted to the movement of species and to changes concerning the stocks in general?

Ghislain Cyr: We've been working on promoting seal hunting for 50 years now. For my part, the only thing I've seen DFO do is constantly create more regulations. Hunting opens in mid-September, when the storms begin, so we have far fewer opportunities to do it. It was also closed for part of the summer because they say there are tourists who go to see the seals. The tourists have stopped going to some places, yet they still don't open them up to hunting, which would at least give us the chance to have more stock to work with.

In short, there are more and more regulations. We are having difficulty adapting to the new rules because we went from hunting Greenland seals to hunting grey seals, which are really not the same species. It's not the same kind of hunt, but they don't want to adapt. The regulations are becoming increasingly strict.

[English]

The Chair: Thanks very much.

The bells began at 12:35. We can go until 12:50. I'm going to go to a second round. It's going to be a three-minute, three-minute, two-minute round. We can fit that in before we leave.

The second round begins with Mr. Gunn for three minutes, please, for the Conservatives.

Aaron Gunn: Madam Chair, I just want to enter into the record of evidence a press release from the Gitksan Hereditary Chiefs related to harvest seasons. I have a physical copy here to share with the clerk.

Ms. Mavin, from your experience, do you find that decisions over at DFO regarding the opening and closing of various fisheries are always driven by science and empirical data, or do they at times tend to be influenced, in your view, by politics and ideology?

Claire Mavin: I personally don't believe that they're driven by science and empirical data. I think that it's mostly departmental policy. There doesn't seem to be a lot of base on biology, abundance or fleet competency. I think that the policies systematically penalize the commercial sector.

Aaron Gunn: I know you mentioned it in your opening remarks, but if the department fails to open a fishery in a timely manner despite there being abundance, can you detail what the impacts are on fish harvesters and their families?

Claire Mavin: A lot of it comes down to reduced income for fishermen, especially when you're fishing in the salmon fishery. A lot of the fish—all of the fish—come through on a migration, so if your opening is delayed, you miss out on a lot of income, and it impacts all of the harvesters negatively.

Aaron Gunn: You spoke about both the quick closing of the prawn season last year and then the delayed notification that it was actually opening this year. Do you find that there's a lack of predictable communication from DFO regarding season opening and closing dates?

Claire Mavin: I do, absolutely. It's highly unpredictable at the moment. It doesn't seem to align with stock reports from actual fishermen.

All this does is create unnecessary hardships for fishermen. Running a fishing business is entirely dependent on timely notification. Lately, the notifications from DFO are late and erratic, and honestly, they're seemingly not based on stock strength.

• (1245)

Aaron Gunn: Mr. Cormier, did you want to ask your question that was cut off?

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Gunn.

You said there was a group that was able to go out fishing for salmon before some other groups. What group is allowed to go first, and then who is second, third and fourth?

Claire Mavin: Those would be the recreational fishery and certain indigenous groups.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gunn, for that courtesy.

I want to go now to Mr. Weiler. You have three minutes, Patrick.

Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. Thanks to the witnesses for being here today.

I have a number of questions for Mr. Fisher.

The Fraser salmon management documents emphasize that in-season decisions are made iteratively as the new test fishery and escapement data becomes available. In practice, how quickly can those updates be translated into changes in the recreational or commercial openings?

Aidan Fisher: It depends, based on which species of Fraser salmon you're talking about.

Fraser sockeye is managed through the Fraser panel, which is the international group, predominantly. That group meets multiple times a week. I attend five or six Fraser panel meetings a week on Fraser sockeye.

Chinook is done predominantly pre-season, and then there are maybe one or two in-season changes, potentially, based on unexpected information. Predominantly, the chinook fishery is set pre-season, before the fishery starts, and then it opens as scheduled.

Obviously there can be extraneous situations, but that's generally how it works.

Patrick Weiler: I understand how frequently they meet, but how frequently does the new data actually lead to changes in the fishery itself?

Aidan Fisher: For sockeye, it's within a week.

Patrick Weiler: Thank you.

In your view, should there be clearer thresholds or rules for when a concern over a particular stock justifies limiting access to other, healthier stocks—say, in a mixed-stock fishery—particularly in the Fraser, but also more broadly in B.C.?

Aidan Fisher: That's an enormous question that I think mixed-stock fisheries have been trying to grapple with for a long time.

Certainly, clearer rules around the acceptable limits to impact on stocks of concern would always be helpful. It's a large challenge that needs to be faced in salmon management.

Patrick Weiler: Thank you.

As my last question here, Fraser management is often described as requiring coordination among first nations fisheries, commercial interests, recreational fisheries and conservation objectives. When those groups have different interpretations of in-season data, how does that affect the speed of decision-making?

Aidan Fisher: For Fraser sockeye, it runs through the Fraser panel, which means that there's a third party between Canada and the U.S.—the Pacific Salmon Commission—that handles all the technical information. Then, through the tables developed in the Pacific salmon treaty, those discussions happen, led through DFO, with representatives from all fisheries sitting at the Fraser panel and informing the DFO chair of their positions, which are then brought to international negotiation on fisheries.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That ends that part of the session.

I'll go to Mr. Champoux for two minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Martin Champoux: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Two minutes goes by quickly.

Mr. Cyr, to conclude this round of questions, I'll simply ask you to give us recommendations that we could make to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. I know we can get some from your testimony today, but are there things you would like to say directly to the department about the upcoming decisions it will have to make?

Obviously, there's been a lot of talk about the opening and closing dates of the fisheries, but if you wanted to summarize a few recommendations, what would they be?

Ghislain Cyr: First, predictability is a good word.

Second, it's also about listening to the fishers. There's a lot of talk about the experience of fishers, but I feel like they're not being listened to. I see it's the same in the west, as well as in Newfoundland and Labrador, with certain decisions.

Even for species that are not necessarily lucrative, such as herring, mackerel and flounder, among others, we still need to recognize that they're very important for biodiversity.

Fishers are people who have spent so much time on the water. As I said, there are other people who might have a doctorate, like me. It's the scientists from Fisheries and Oceans Canada who gave me the privilege of having a doctorate. Basically, it represents all the experience I've accumulated from all over the gulf, whether it be off Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island or New Brunswick. Together, we've managed to gain great experience, thanks to the meetings and everything else. I'd like the managers of Fisheries and Oceans Canada to one day take all this experience into account.

• (1250)

Martin Champoux: In any case, thank you for sharing your experience with us.

Thank you, Mr. Cyr.

Ghislain Cyr: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to thank the witnesses for coming and for helping us with their expertise.

We have to leave, because we must vote. I will suspend the meeting until 1:30.

Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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