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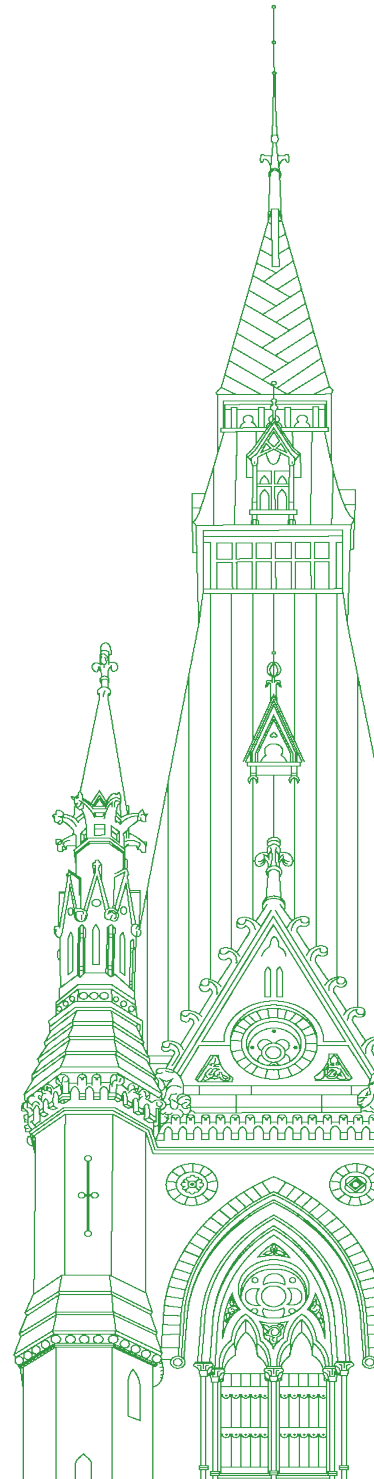
Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

EVIDENCE

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Wednesday, June 10, 2026

Chair: Hedy Fry



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• (1700)

[Translation]

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

Welcome to meeting number 43 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 begin its study of Atlantic salmon populations.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders.

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

I want to remind participants of the following housekeeping points: Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those on video conference, if you click on the little microphone at the bottom of your screen, you will be able to listen in the language of your choice.

Witnesses, I would like to remind you that committee members may ask questions in either English or French, so please put on your earpieces now so that you can be ready for that.

All comments should be addressed through the chair. Members in the room, if you want to speak, put your hand up, and we will recognize you.

I want to welcome our witnesses.

From Kingsclear First Nation, we have Chief Justice Gruben, Councillor Patrick Polchies and Chad Solomon.

From Fédération québécoise pour le saumon atlantique, we have Normand Fiset, president, and Myriam Bergeron, executive director.

We also have Paul White, an angler, by video conference.

Witnesses, you have five minutes for your group; you don't get five minutes each. The spokesperson for your group can start. We're clocking you. I will literally give you a shout-out when you have one minute left so that you can wrap up. If you don't get to finish

your full presentation, you have to wrap up, and then you can expand on it during the question and answer period.

We will start with the witnesses' opening statements of five minutes, and we'll start with Chief Gruben.

Justice Gruben (Chief, Billijk (Kingsclear First Nation)): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Honourable Chair, committee members and fellow witnesses, *Kwey psi-te wen*. Hello everyone.

My name is Chief Justice Gruben. I'm the newly elected chief of Bilijk.

Today, I want to talk to you about salmon in the Wolastoq, known as the Saint John River, the homeland and waters of my people, the Wolastoqiyik. This river is the longest river and largest watershed in eastern Canada.

The six communities of the Wolastoqey Nation are situated along the banks of the Wolastoq, which in our language translates to "beautiful and bountiful river". The Wolastoq runs past my home and has fed my family, guided my ancestors and shaped every value I carry as a leader.

My community of Bilijk lives in the shadow of the Mactaquac Dam, an enormous structure built in the late 1960s that has drastically changed the Wolastoq. When the dam was constructed, DFO and NB Power agreed to mitigate its impacts by establishing the Mactaquac Biodiversity Facility. For most of the past century, this building has helped protect the genetic diversity of the Wolastoq, including the unique species of wild Atlantic salmon in our river.

In February 2026, DFO abruptly announced that this facility would close because of budget cuts. I want to be extremely clear: The closure of this facility represents the extinction of salmon in the Wolastoq watershed. For approximately \$150,000 in annual operating costs, DFO is risking the full extinction of a genetically unique species of wild Atlantic salmon on the Wolastoq.

This is urgent. The full closure is planned for October 2026. Programs, people and the salmon have already been impacted.

The salmon above the Mactaquac Dam are functionally isolated. Before industrialization, more than 100,000 Atlantic salmon returned home every year. Today, only a few hundred make it back.

The Mactaquac Biodiversity Facility is not a luxury. It is a lifeline. It raises Tobique River salmon. It has been the bridge between extinction and survival for decades.

This year, thousands of young salmon are expected to be released into the Wolastoq from this facility to help restore the population above and below the dam. If this facility closes before alternative measures are in place, they will likely die. The end of a critical species in the Wolastoq will have ripple effects across the region.

What is happening here is not only a conservation failure: It is a legal one. Section 35(1) of the Constitution Act of 1982 recognizes and affirms “aboriginal and treaty rights” of indigenous peoples in Canada.

The Supreme Court of Canada, in *Haida Nation versus B.C.*, established clearly in 2004 that the “Crown has [a] “duty to consult” indigenous people when it contemplates actions that may adversely impact our rights. It's not after the fact or as a courtesy, but a constitutional obligation. The decision to shut down the last facility standing between the Wolastoq salmon and extinction is exactly the kind of decision that demands that consultation.

The Wolastoqiyik have held treaty rights to fish the Wolastoq since the peace and friendship treaties of the 18th century. We also hold inherent aboriginal rights to harvest and manage salmon, which are rights we have held since time immemorial. These rights are supposed to be protected by Canada's Constitution, but we have not had access to salmon fishing for decades.

Our ancestors and elders stopped fishing as a gesture to help restore the species. This is a future-generation-oriented sacrifice because salmon, *polamuwok*, is not just a food source for us but a cultural keystone featured in our creation stories, our ceremonies and our relationship to our homeland. They sacrificed to preserve *polamuwok* for the future.

We and Wolastoqey community members all along the Wolastoq have done our part to keep the salmon alive.

• (1705)

The Chair: You have one minute.

Justice Gruben: DFO's decision undercuts all of those efforts.

To threaten *polamuwok* is to threaten our culture and our legacy, and this decision for closure of the biodiversity centre was made out of the reductionist position of the government. However, western economics does not consider the distinct relationships indigenous people have with our first mother, her children and our homelands.

In the same breath that the federal government proposes this cut that removes the most important mitigation efforts surrounding Mactaquac Dam, there is a \$10-billion refurbishment plan. This extends the life of the project for 50 years.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Justice Gruben: How can DFO justify these critical mitigation efforts when the dam's impact will be extended?

We are asking DFO to reaffirm Canada's commitment to Wolastoq salmon—to *polamuwok*—and if DFO can make this decision to cut this program on the Wolastoq when times get tough, they can do

it anywhere, including on the Restigouche, Fraser, Margaree and Miramichi rivers.

The health of the Wolastoq is not just an indigenous issue. It is a test of the country's environmental and reconciliation commitments to see if they mean anything at all.

Woliwon. We cannot let this species go extinct. All my relations.

The Chair: Thank you, Justice Gruben.

I'll now go to the next speaker, Myriam Bergeron, executive director.

You have five minutes, please.

• (1710)

[*Translation*]

Myriam Bergeron (Executive Director, Fédération québécoise pour le saumon atlantique): Madam Chair, on behalf of the Fédération québécoise pour le saumon atlantique, or FQSA, I thank you for giving us the opportunity to contribute to this important reflection on the decline of wild Atlantic salmon in Canada.

The FQSA brings together the key stakeholders involved in the conservation and management of Atlantic salmon in Quebec: salmon river management organizations, outfitters, fishers, researchers, environmental organizations, municipalities, first nations partners and other Canadians. Our mission is to ensure the sustainability of Atlantic salmon and the ecosystems on which they depend.

The meagre runs observed since 2023 are a major warning sign. In 2024, Quebec experienced its worst salmon run since modern data collection began. While some improvements were observed in 2025 and the outlook for 2026 is more encouraging, the situation remains a cause for concern and requires greater mobilization from all partners.

Available scientific data show that the main losses now occur at sea, and there are many theories as to why. However, the majority of investments made over the past few decades have been directed toward freshwater habitats. These efforts have been essential and must continue, but they must now be complemented by an ambitious strategy for research and intervention in the marine environment.

In that regard, the Strait of Belle Isle is a strategic area. Most juvenile salmon use this corridor when migrating to the North Atlantic, but our understanding of the losses that occur during this stage remains limited. The FQSA is currently working with various partners to recover and analyze juvenile salmon, particularly those from bycatch, which is not the cause of the current decline. This work aims to better understand their overall health and the causes of mortality that are affecting their survival.

A collaborative work plan is already in place among various stakeholders from a working committee coordinated by the Government of Quebec, in which the Department of Fisheries and Oceans participates. It is essential that these initiatives receive long-term support to prevent a situation where our rivers are in excellent health but there are no salmon left to run and spawn in them.

At the same time, conservation efforts in Quebec's freshwater habitats have helped maintain the quality of many rivers. The out-migration data show that smolt production remains relatively high, reflecting the remarkable work carried out over several decades in Quebec.

As a matter of fact, we're currently updating the provincial Atlantic salmon management plan. Several conservation measures, scientific monitoring efforts and related restoration projects could benefit from federal government funding dedicated to this issue. Better coordination of these efforts would help maximize the impact of investments made on the ground.

Climate change also poses a major challenge in freshwater ecosystems. The importance of thermal refuges—areas of cooler water that allow salmon to survive during periods of high water temperatures—is growing. Although adaptation measures have already been implemented—particularly in fisheries management—there remains a need to accelerate the acquisition of knowledge about river temperature regimes and to invest more in protecting and restoring these habitats.

In terms of the impact of striped bass on Atlantic salmon, I would say that the population in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence, which spawns in the Miramichi River and subsequently inhabits Quebec waters, has grown significantly in recent years. Some studies show that predation on smolts during their migration can be considerable in certain areas, particularly in the Miramichi River, but the situation is a little different in Quebec. The FQSA nevertheless believes that it's essential to continue scientific monitoring in all rivers where the population of striped bass is growing. However, any intervention must be based on a thorough understanding of the dynamics of this species, whose populations can also experience rapid declines. Particular attention should be paid to assessing the impact of the new commercial fishing quotas in place and to the specific situation in the Miramichi River.

We also wish to draw the committee's attention to the striped bass population in the St. Lawrence River, which currently cannot be fished, although doing so would be desirable before more significant impacts are observed.

Lastly, seal populations have increased significantly in several areas of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the estuary, and concerns have been reported to us for several years. Although scientific

knowledge remains incomplete, the available evidence justifies continuing and intensifying research efforts.

Atlantic salmon is much more than an iconic species. It serves as an indicator of the overall health of our rivers and marine ecosystems. Its current situation reminds us of the urgent need to act collectively. It's a canary in a coal mine. We must strengthen our collaborative efforts, improve our scientific understanding and implement concrete measures that will support the recovery of this species for future generations.

● (1715)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will now go to Mr. White, who is online.

Mr. White, you have five minutes.

Paul White (Angler, As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Where the wild Atlantic salmon thrive, life thrives. They are a key indicator that we have clean air, clean water, healthy people and pristine ecosystems. This magnificent creature is a symbol of hope and resilience for all of us.

Newfoundland and Labrador has approximately 70% of the rivers in Atlantic Canada, as well as 70% of the salmon stocks. If we can't get it right here, then I think the rest of the provinces, and probably the world, are doomed.

There's a mental health aspect. I'm an educator in the school system, and I've been an angler for 40 years. We're teaching the young kids about how to raise baby salmon and release them into the river. There's a mental health aspect to being in nature. There are so many factors. So much positivity comes from the wild Atlantic salmon that it's invaluable.

It's culturally authentic in Newfoundland and Labrador. My great-grandfather and grandfather were commercial salmon fishers on the North Atlantic Ocean. The indigenous folks relied on the wild Atlantic salmon for centuries. The cold-water salmon is probably the healthiest food you can eat.

Now, we know that Mother Nature bats last all the time. She's the final cleanup hitter, and she's in trouble. She needs our help. In recent years, there has been a decimation of the wild Atlantic salmon globally, and especially in Newfoundland and Labrador. I can see the numbers and the counters. I talk to anglers on the river. We're in trouble. I guess that's why we're all here—to try to make a difference.

I think we need a multipronged approach with everybody. There are enough smart people in Canada, and definitely in the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and around this room, to get the job done.

Madam Chair, I want to thank you for this opportunity. I don't have all the answers, but having a boot on the ground in nature and studying it for decades, I'm sure I've got some.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now go to the question and answer period. The first round is six minutes. That includes the questions and the answers, so I'd like everybody to be as concise as possible.

We begin with Mr. Small for the Conservatives.

You have six minutes, please, Cliff.

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today to take part in this very important study.

Mr. White, have you had experience angling in southern Labrador in recent years?

Paul White: Yes, I have, Mr. Small.

Clifford Small: With regard to striped bass, what have you observed and what have been the observations of your fellow anglers as far north as Mary's Harbour, for example?

Paul White: In terms of Mary's Harbour, I think the furthest-noted striped bass were at Port Hope Simpson. The herring nets were full two or three years ago for the commercial fishermen. They were full of striped bass, not herring.

On the Forteau river—I don't have the video, but I heard about it from anglers—the striped bass were coming in like predators, like sharks. They were driving the big two- and three-pound trout up onto the beach. They were beaching themselves to get away from the sea bass. They're total predators. I've done a bit of research on the Miramichi too. DFO called them a success story at one time, but they're probably getting out of hand.

• (1720)

Clifford Small: Let's get back to the recommendation from a 2019 FOPO study to remove the slot size on striped bass and to enable anglers to retain striped bass over 65 centimetres. What would be the impact on controlling the bass population of removing more of the larger fish?

Paul White: The big spawners produce the most eggs. If you remove them, then your bass population has no choice but to come down.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. White.

Mr. White, in British Columbia there's a big effort with salmon enhancement. They have quite a number of hatcheries that support their \$1.25-billion sport fishing industry. How do you feel about salmon enhancement in Newfoundland and Labrador, in the broader Atlantic region and in Quebec?

Paul White: In B.C., they have what's called citizen science. I was reading that somewhere. They do some in Alaska too, as well as in Ontario for trout. They have 75 or 77 hatcheries—something like that—in B.C.

I think they would work, with the best available science, but you have to do it right. Take the genetic strain from, let's say, five or six rivers—Exploits, Gander, Terra Nova...where there are counters because the scientists can get the fish, incubate the eggs and then get the hatchery going.

We need numbers. The numbers tell the story. The numbers don't lie, and our numbers are low. There's a place that I think is called Noel Paul's Brook, upper Exploits. They got that one going when the population in the Exploits River was down to 5,000. Then, the numbers went up to 39,000 or 40,000 one year, so we know it worked. The seeding capacity of the Exploits River is 300,000-plus fish, but then it just got cancelled. It does work.

I totally agree with hatcheries. We need our numbers back.

Clifford Small: I heard from a constituent who would like to get the Black Brook enhancement facility reinstated. That was shut down in the 1990s. DFO told him that the only way they would approve salmon enhancement on a river is if that river's run was in danger of being extinct.

With the environmental factors that salmon are facing these days, especially with high temperatures in July and August, how do you feel about that attitude towards enhancement?

Paul White: Salmon come in five-year life cycles. We cannot wait until it's too late. They have to start now.

In my opinion—and I've been around and know a lot of the old, retired officers—once the commercial salmon fishery shut down in Newfoundland and Labrador, it's almost like DFO gave up caring or gave up taking it seriously in Newfoundland and Labrador, in White Hills. I'm probably biased in that regard because I've seen so much of what doesn't work. That's a bad attitude, because we can't wait until they're endangered or extinct before we do something about it.

Clifford Small: Let's talk about the existing brood stock of Atlantic salmon and how important it is to conserve what we have left.

What can you tell us about the river guardian program? Is it adequate?

Paul White: The fishery guardian program needs help. I know that the minister just announced \$81 million or \$82 million. I would take \$1 million of that and give it right to the contractor who watches the nets for overtime. There's heavy poaching in Newfoundland and Labrador, on the coasts and in the rivers.

The guardians are the boots on the ground. They're doing the best they can with what they have. They need some serious help. I think they should be either federally funded or provincially funded, not contracted out, but they get the job done.

Clifford Small: Mr. White, when would you like the beginning and ending seasons to be for their operations?

• (1725)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Paul White: They would be February 1, when ice fishing opens in Newfoundland and Labrador, and probably the last of October or the first week of November, after the salmon have spawned.

Clifford Small: What do you think about the accuracy of the numbers of salmon being reported as caught in Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, which is a French colony?

Paul White: We have to question those numbers. I don't think they're accurate.

The Chair: Thank you. Your time is up.

I now go to Mr. Cormier for the Liberals.

You have six minutes, please, Serge.

[Translation]

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today.

This is a study that I put forward. I'd like to thank all my colleagues who supported me in this effort to conduct a study on the decline of Atlantic salmon and find solutions.

I think you are aware that urgent action is needed. There are a number of factors at play, and I hope we'll find answers to our questions, but also solutions to ensure the future of this species, which, in my opinion, is very important to everyone here today.

I don't recall if I said this earlier, but I've been fishing Atlantic salmon recreationally for nearly 25 years. I've made so many wonderful memories over the years and have met so many people in this field. Today, seeing the state of the species breaks my heart a little. We want to learn from you; we want to know what we can do better to turn things around.

I'll start with you, Ms. Bergeron or Mr. Fiset. I know you talked about the causes of the decline earlier. In your opinion, what are the three main causes of the current decline in Atlantic salmon?

Normand Fiset (President, Fédération québécoise pour le saumon atlantique): There's a very important nuance to keep in mind. As you mentioned, there may be a host of factors, but what we experienced with the return of smolts—the young salmon—in 2023 and 2024 was a sudden and abrupt decline. Since then, we've certainly come to believe that there is a primary cause. Everyone agrees that it's probably related to climate change. That said, that's the indirect cause.

What's the direct cause? Is it a lack of food? Is it early migration due to water temperatures? There's a lot of information to consider.

One thing is certain: We have extremely productive rivers that have seen excellent smolt runs. The problem is that they don't return the following year.

Serge Cormier: There are three main causes. There would be climate change, as you say. What are the other causes?

Normand Fiset: There's mortality at sea. Certainly, we need to continue studying predation very closely, whether it is caused by striped bass or by seals, whose population is exploding.

In addition, we must naturally continue to improve the productivity of our rivers, especially in terms of temperature, that is to say, the warming of the water in summer. We need to better identify, protect or restore thermal refuges.

Serge Cormier: If we look at some of these three causes, they all require further research to observe the effects of what you just mentioned.

In Quebec, if I'm not mistaken, management is handled by the Government of Quebec. Is enough research being done? Is there enough collaboration to study the causes you just mentioned and find solutions to help this species' population recover? Do you feel your concerns are being heard as part of these efforts?

Myriam Bergeron: Yes. In recent years, precisely because of what we've been through, there's been some real momentum and increased collaboration between the provincial and federal governments, which is a positive development. There's also been greater engagement on the part of community organizations like ours and non-profits. Furthermore, some academic circles are getting more involved.

Things are improving. There's still a lot of work to be done, and that's why we need to keep moving in this direction. Clearly, given the scale of the situation, we currently lack the tools to help all the stakeholders achieve their goals.

Serge Cormier: I'd like to talk more about at-sea mortality because it's a very important issue. Many groups and organizations dedicated to salmon, like yours, are talking about it. I know there were studies done at one point. I believe researchers even tagged some salmon to determine where they were dying and why they were dying in certain locations. Did you participate in any of these studies on salmon mortality at sea?

• (1730)

Myriam Bergeron: Yes. We worked with government and non-governmental researchers who participated in the salmon tagging studies. The goal was to identify the migration routes in detail. We also wanted to identify where high mortality rates are most likely to occur. We wanted to know where these losses are taking place. There appears to be a concentration of oceanic conditions and causes of mortality just before and after the Strait of Belle Isle. Further research is needed.

Serge Cormier: Do these causes have anything to do with warming waters or predation, say? Have the causes been identified?

Myriam Bergeron: No. At this point, we have hypotheses. Obviously, there's global warming. It's not just global warming; abnormal cooling can also be problematic. As you mentioned, there's also predation, which can be a significant factor. Disease is another factor.

Could there be factors we're not aware of? Could changing river conditions mean that smolts completing their migration are less healthy than they used to be? We're currently focusing a lot of our work on this. We have these four hypotheses, but we don't have any answers. We need to keep looking for those answers.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll now go to Mr. Deschênes for six minutes.

Go ahead, Alexis.

[Translation]

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

Good afternoon, everyone. I would like to thank the witnesses for being here.

My question is for the representatives of the Fédération québécoise pour le saumon atlantique.

Clearly, everyone agrees that there is cause for concern about Atlantic salmon in Quebec. Their population has declined significantly, and you've identified a number of causes, including migration at sea and predation. I'd like to hear your thoughts on how we should address this issue and, ultimately, save the Atlantic salmon.

Let's talk about predation at sea first. We have worked together to ensure that you have access to data on juvenile salmon bycatch in the Strait of Belle Isle. Where are you on that?

Normand Fiset: This is the second year we've tried this. We really need help from Fisheries and Oceans to recover the bycatch of juvenile salmon. Just so you understand, I'd say that the vast majority of smolts converge on the Strait of Belle Isle over a period of five to 10 days. We need to find a way—a cheap way—to capture these fish so we can assess their health and, as my colleague mentioned, better understand the high mortality rate and why these salmon aren't returning.

Alexis Deschênes: We actually did ask for that, and the minister's response seemed favourable. Are you able to run tests on smolts this year?

Normand Fiset: At this point, it looks like we have the green light in Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec. It remains to be seen how effectively this will be carried out. Still, I'm hopeful that we'll be able to collect a few samples this year.

Alexis Deschênes: What do you think the samples will tell us?

Normand Fiset: They'll give us an indication of their overall health. As my colleague mentioned, they'll allow us to see if there are any viral loads that might originate from places like open-net pen aquaculture farms. Do they have a nutritional deficiency? We

know the gulf is changing. Is there a marked decline in food availability for smolts? They spend several weeks in the gulf before migrating to the Strait of Belle Isle.

The goal is to study the entire process over several years, not just this year. We need to build up time series data, year after year, to better understand when there is a significant decline, as was the case in 2023–24. We need to be able to pinpoint an event and say that some particular thing happened in that particular year.

Alexis Deschênes: According to the 2016-2026 Atlantic salmon management plan, the main cause of the decline is mortality at sea, but we hear a lot about other causes as well, particularly predation.

Do you have a recommendation with respect to the striped bass population, which is quite large in the southern part of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and in Baie-des-Chaleurs, where I'm from?

• (1735)

Normand Fiset: In our view, it's important to continue monitoring the striped bass population in the southern gulf very closely. The striped bass population is exploding, and we're worried that their presence in our rivers in Baie-des-Chaleurs will increasingly impact the salmon populations. The earlier the striped bass arrive, the more they'll encounter smolts in their downstream migration, and the more problems this could create. We're concerned about this, so we need to continue monitoring the situation very closely.

Alexis Deschênes: After monitoring it, what then? Increase recreational fishing? Open the commercial fishery?

Normand Fiset: I'd say we have very little control. The entire southern gulf population comes from the Miramichi River spawning grounds, so what's happening there right now falls more within the purview of our colleagues at the Atlantic Salmon Federation. We have very little control over the population, aside from what we can do with recreational fishing.

Alexis Deschênes: Now let's talk about seals, which are another predator that feeds on salmon. What do you suggest? Could more seal hunting help restore the balance?

Myriam Bergeron: Promoting seal hunting would definitely be a good thing. It could also diversify and support certain local economies. Regardless of the impact on Atlantic salmon, this is an activity and an industry that deserve to be encouraged.

For the past few years, places like the Maurice Lamontagne Institute have been working to better understand the impact of seal predation on Atlantic salmon. We've had a very hard time obtaining seal samples. Hunting them to collect stomach contents and tissue samples is very complex, you see.

Alexis Deschênes: A strategy was recently announced, in March. It set out more than \$80 million to stabilize and rebuild salmon stocks.

You said that you didn't have tools that lived up to your ambitions. Why did you say that?

Myriam Bergeron: Funding is clearly very welcome, because many of the priorities are already known, and we know what to do.

Unfortunately, \$82 million is both a lot and very little at the same time. That means we need to optimize the work and the impacts. It's important to have a short-term vision. For example, we can take action, such as planning and stocking, and provide support to care for our rivers and populations. However, we also need to have a longer-term vision when it comes to climate change. It's important to understand that thermal dynamic so that, in 10 or 20 years, returning salmon can still have pockets of cool water where they can rest as they continue up the rivers.

These concrete examples demonstrate how we can both support on-the-ground actions with community organizations to promote the presence of salmon, and work with researchers and provincial or national organizations whose research already prioritizes identification with a view to making the best decisions in the future.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to a second round of five minutes. We will start with Mr. Bragdon for the Conservatives.

You have five minutes.

Richard Bragdon (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to each of the witnesses for being here today and for sharing your expertise and experience.

I want to direct most of my questions to you, Mr. Gruben.

Thank you so much, Chief, for being here and for taking the time to share the impact that this decision is having on your people, the Wolastoqiyik nation. We value your input and appreciate your insights.

I want to start off by asking this question: Were you, as the chief of a first nation, consulted or notified about the decision regarding the closure of the biodiversity centre in your community?

Justice Gruben: We were not.

Richard Bragdon: Did you find out, as the rest of us did, via a press release or the notification that went out publicly?

Justice Gruben: Yes.

Richard Bragdon: Have you had any meetings with, or the ability to communicate how you're feeling to, the government or the minister in order to encourage a change of course?

Justice Gruben: Yes. We had very productive meetings with Minister Thompson, one of the first ministers willing to meet with a list of chiefs on the east coast. We felt the meeting went very well and was very productive.

• (1740)

Richard Bragdon: I should ask you, Chief, what you feel needs to happen to make this right and get this decision changed or reversed. I would like to have your insights as to what you feel would help. Then we'll get into specifics around the salmon species.

Justice Gruben: Thank you.

Our ask is to extend the timeline of the closure of the Mactaquac Biodiversity Facility. Additionally, keep the supplementation program and live gene bank program, which are essentially keeping the inner Bay of Fundy Atlantic salmon species alive—a specific genetic and vulnerable species.

Our ask is to keep the programs running and extend the timeline because if the facility closes, as it stands, there will be no salmon above the dam and likely downstream in two or three years.

Richard Bragdon: It's my understanding, Chief, that you folks work closely with the Tobique First Nation on the efforts they make on the Tobique River at a hatchery for the restoration of the salmon species there, and that there have been some encouraging signs.

Can you speak to that and to how the biodiversity centre in Mactaquac plays a role in that operation?

Justice Gruben: Yes.

I want to take this opportunity to introduce an elder from our community and village, Patrick Polchies.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to introduce Chad Solomon. Chad is a technician and our only personnel working at the Mactaquac Biodiversity Facility. I believe he'd be more able to answer that question.

Chad Solomon (General Labourer, Billijk (Kingsclear First Nation)): I'm sorry. Can you repeat the question, please?

Richard Bragdon: Sure.

Mr. Solomon, I know Tobique First Nation is doing a lot of work on the Tobique River with some hatchery programming and salmon species restoration efforts. It works in collaboration with your efforts at Kingsclear First Nation and the Mactaquac Biodiversity Centre. I understand there's been some encouraging signs—returns in Tobique First Nation. This is, in no small part, due to your efforts.

Can you speak to how important both are, please?

Chad Solomon: Yes. We work closely with the Tobique First Nation and with the hydro dam right there in the village of Kingsclear. We are the ones who are moving the Atlantic salmon above the dam and getting them to Tobique. If this facility closes, there won't be a way of transporting them up over the dam.

Richard Bragdon: Is your estimation, Chief and witnesses, that if this facility were to close—

The Chair: You have one minute.

Richard Bragdon: —it would lead to the demise of the salmon species in the Wolastoq/Saint John River?

Justice Gruben: Correct, it would be jeopardized.

I want to read a quote attributed to Chief Dan George, if I may. This speaks to our obligation and why we're here.

It reads, "The time will soon be here when my grandchild will long for the cry of a loon, the flash of a salmon, the whisper of spruce needles, or the screech of an eagle. But he will not make friends with any of these creatures and when his heart aches with longing, he will curse me. Have I done all to keep the air fresh? Have I cared enough about the water? Have I left the eagle to soar in freedom? Have I done everything I could to earn my grandchild's fondness?"

For us, this species is on the brink of extinction. If the Mactaquac Biodiversity Facility were to close, that would likely take place for this specific genome. That's why we're here today as Wolastoqiyik. We are people of the river. This was once a plentiful species that roared and thundered upriver. It is now facing extinction.

I would allow Patrick Polchies to close with a statement, if possible.

The Chair: The time is up. You can come back another time. There's going to be another round.

Next, we have Mr. Cormier for the Liberals.

You have five minutes, please.

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chief, thanks for being here.

Before talking about the Mactaquac Biodiversity Facility, I would like to ask the same question that I asked the other witness: In your opinion, what are the three primary causes of the decline of Atlantic salmon?

Justice Gruben: I think our partners here touched on that really well, but there is a missing link.

I'm Wolastoqiyik. A missing link to this is maybe the noise pollution from the decibels of large-scale shipping. I believe it is disrupting migratory paths, and that should be explored. A study should be done on how industry and shipping in the Bay of Fundy and in the oceans, specifically where we're seeing a lot of decline, might be impacting it through sound.

If we look at studies on how this is disrupting migration paths and communication, it's disrupting the salmon ecosystem, as well as other animals and marine life in those ecosystems. This is a factor that I would like to propose.

• (1745)

Serge Cormier: That's perfect. Thank you.

Coming back to the biodiversity facility that you have touched on, we want to hear from both sides. When I look at the decision that the government made about closing the biodiversity facility, one of the reasons the DFO gave was that, despite over 25 years of investment in the facility, salmon returns remained very low.

What do you think of that observation or the reason DFO gave?

Justice Gruben: I think they're highlighting and trying to draw the justification of the closure. However, the biodiversity facility was designed to.... It's now a mitigation effort. It's specific to us now, because it's preserving and protecting that specific genome and that specific species. That's why it's important to us, especially as Wolastoqiyik: These are species that have sustained our people for generations across time and space. They are a part of who we are. They're our relatives.

About 70% of our language is verb-based. We don't separate ourselves or objectify, so they're our kin. They're our relatives. To us, as Wolastoqiyik, the salmon is a cultural keystone. It's on the crest of the New Brunswick flag. This is affecting our communities, not just across Wolastoqiyik but also our communities in New Brunswick and other communities in the region.

Serge Cormier: On average, how many salmon are returning each year? Do you know the number?

Chad Solomon: Last year, we had 17 adult wild salmon return, but 379 wild smolts returned to the hatchery.

Serge Cormier: This is for last year, you said.

Chad Solomon: It's for last year. That's correct.

Serge Cormier: The year before that, were the numbers almost the same, on average?

Chad Solomon: They were almost the same. They were maybe a little lower.

Serge Cormier: You said that you have had some meetings recently about the future of the facility and about what's going to happen next. In terms of the new investment that the government just put forward, the \$81 million along with some more money that will be put in for some groups, is there something in there that will maybe help offset this closure for your community? Is there something that you touched on with the minister?

Justice Gruben: Across multiple communities and across different areas where that money was distributed, we believe we do need an extended timeline for the Mactaquac Biodiversity Facility. To mitigate the measures, our request with the government is to extend the timeline in consideration of the funds that are to come. Our hope is that we can come up with a tangible, concrete and strategic plan to utilize these funds and keep this biodiversity facility open.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, Mr. Cormier.

Serge Cormier: Regarding the return, as I was saying, DFO has said that there's a low return for the amount they're putting into this facility each year. Even if there is a low return, the return of one salmon is better than the return of zero salmon. How can we increase the return, in your opinion? You named some factors. The decline is happening because of some of those factors. What would be the solution on your end to have a bit more of a return?

Justice Gruben: There's currently an upward trend. This has been in the last few years.

Serge Cormier: Okay.

The Chair: That's it. Thank you.

I will now go to Monsieur Deschênes for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'll continue with my questions for the Fédération québécoise pour le saumon atlantique.

The strategy that was announced still includes an opportunity: \$82 million has been allocated. However, what they're telling us is that we won't be able to act everywhere and that we will have to focus our efforts. How do you see things? Where should efforts be focused to save salmon?

Myriam Bergeron: First, it's important to target places where there are already organizations and people rallying around Atlantic salmon and salmon rivers. Of course, this is being done for the sake of the salmon, but it's being done by people and for people.

You know, 95% of salmon return to their natal rivers to reproduce. That's why, with a river-by-river approach, it's possible to address the root causes of a declining salmon population and restore it. Second, it's also important to fund the organizations that set up networking so that these organizations—which are the experts on their rivers—whether they're first nations or community and grass-roots organizations, can establish a local network among themselves. That way, everyone can work on the common denominators at the same time.

• (1750)

Alexis Deschênes: Do you think the government is doing enough to support you?

Myriam Bergeron: No. More can be done. I think governments have a responsibility when it comes to the sustainability of Atlantic salmon. It's about our natural heritage and the health of our ecosystems. We have a collective and social responsibility for our children and for the future. I think the effort that the federal government needs to make for Atlantic salmon can be increased not only through funding, but also through human efforts and a genuine willingness to set ambitious goals.

Alexis Deschênes: If you were the Minister of Fisheries, you would propose habitat restoration as well as studies on migration at sea and measures on predation.

Myriam Bergeron: Yes, absolutely. There needs to be a structure that's agile enough to use local knowledge to support local priorities, based on the specific characteristics of each river. However,

as I said, there are still some shared general themes across the provinces and all of eastern Canada. When it comes to certain key themes—whether it's predation, climate change, forestry impacts or land use in watersheds—it's important to make sure to build networks and develop skills at the local level based on the best possible science.

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will go now to Mr. Arnold for the Conservatives.

Mel, you have five minutes, please.

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

I thank all the witnesses for being here. Salmon are very important on all coasts.

Chief, you mentioned that you had a positive meeting with Minister Thompson. Did she provide any concrete commitments or actions that could save the Mactaquac Biodiversity Facility?

Justice Gruben: The conversation we had was very helpful and productive. I believe we're waiting for a response in the interim before the closure.

Mel Arnold: No immediate commitments...?

Justice Gruben: No.

Mel Arnold: Okay. Thank you.

In looking at the government's "Canada's National Strategy to Ensure the Future of Atlantic Salmon, 2024-2036", I picked up on a line that said "it will not be possible to invest everywhere". To me, that sounds like a government giving up on salmon.

I come from B.C., from the interior, and there were no salmon in the B.C. portion of the Okanagan system for over 50 years. Work with the first nations there, the Okanagan Nation Alliance, across the Canada-U.S. border, established a hatchery there, and now there are salmon returning on their own all the way up into Okanagan Lake, hundreds of kilometres up the river, where there hadn't been salmon for 50 years.

How important is it to the salmon population and to your nation that this genetic stock remain viable in some way, so when other factors are impacting the population, that stock can be there to rebuild what was there?

Justice Gruben: I'm going to allow Elder Patrick Polchies to answer that.

Patrick Polchies (Councillor, Billijk (Kingsclear First Nation)): Thank you for the question.

To be concise, it's extremely important. A big part of the work at the Mactaquac Biodiversity Facility is identifying the genetic strains of fish that would be well upstream of us.

As an example.... Thank you to Mr. White and to the Quebec federation for answering questions about the demise of salmon, or the possibility of that, in their areas.

In our case, if you add in three hydroelectric facilities on the river on top of all the issues they've talked about, it makes it extremely important. It adds weight to it. For me, it defies logic that the most endangered salmon have not seen any attention. In fact, the only attention they saw was the government's shutting down the biodiversity facility. It doesn't really make sense to me, but that's where I am.

Thank you.

• (1755)

Mel Arnold: Thank you.

It sounds similar to a situation that we have in British Columbia right now. We have volunteer organizations that run a hatchery in the upper Fraser River. They have been working with habitat biologists and habitat restoration people within the Department of Fisheries and Oceans for years. They have maintained a facility that has continued the viability of a specific type of salmon: S52, or stream-type chinook salmon. DFO just announced the cuts to those habitat biologists in that area. They now have to travel hundreds of kilometres from Kamloops into that area.

Does this sound like a troubling trend to you that salmon—wild salmon—in some of these most endangered areas are being put at risk by the decisions?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Patrick Polchies: Yes, it certainly does.

It's interesting that it's that broad, and that even on the west coast you're encountering that sort of thing. I can't overstate the importance to the Wolastoqiyik and the Wolastoqey people that salmon have had for the 11,000 years that we've been on the river. They're a mainstay of our economy.

It's not just that. We were talking earlier about everybody in the Maritimes. Our families grew up on salmon—all of us. For everybody who's in the eastern part of Canada, your history goes back to productive and healthy salmon populations. It seems to me that DFO is not applying enough interest in maintaining salmon populations everywhere.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'll now go to Mr. Connors for five minutes.

Paul Connors (Avalon, Lib.): Thank you. I'm going to share my time with Mr. Cormier.

Mr. White, we talked about the predation of salmon. You mentioned striped bass.

Is there any other predation in Newfoundland and Labrador that you would consider?

Paul White: Thank you, Mr. Connors, for the question.

Ken McDonald, your former colleague—he was the MP before you—was a great advocate for the guardians and wild salmon in Newfoundland.

There are other predators—seals, definitely. In Newfoundland and Labrador, we also have the shads, the cormorants and the seabirds. They eat a lot of the young—the babies. I've seen them up in the rivers, taking the parr back and forth. They can't get enough.

They're big ones, for certain.

Paul Connors: In your opening remarks, you mentioned a multi-pronged approach.

What do you think are the top three things that should be done?

Paul White: I can speak to Newfoundland and Labrador.

For salmon, first of all, it's CPE for conservation, protection and what's called enhancement; I added the E to what DFO says. If we're going to do enhancement, we have to protect what we have first. We don't want to wipe that out and then have to rebuild. That would be the fishery guardians, fishery officers and local angling community. We can retain the salmon. I would say keep that. Do not get rid of the tag, because having more anglers on the river prevents the poaching and netting in rural Newfoundland, for example.

Then look at getting fish tanks and hatch-and-release programs into schools. Teach the young people all about wild salmon conservation. They are the future. It's their future, their project and their habitat.

Can you repeat the question for me? You asked for three priorities.

• (1800)

Paul Connors: You said we need a multipronged approach. What would your three solutions be, or any solutions?

Paul White: There you go.

The other thing is leadership. I know the government is working like that, but have more anglers, guardians and young people sitting around these tables because, at the end of the day, it falls on leadership. I know the politicians do the best they can with what they have, but sometimes—in my opinion—the bureaucracy gets in the way and stifles stuff. The decision-makers sometimes rely on that versus getting answers from everybody invested in wild salmon.

Paul Connors: Thanks very much.

I'm going to pass it to Serge.

The Chair: You have two minutes, Serge.

Serge Cormier: Thank you very much.

Chief, I'll go back to you, if you don't mind.

I asked all of you, at the beginning, about some of the causes of the decline of Atlantic salmon. I think it's a difficult question, but we need to ask because we need to do a report after this and put what we heard in that report.

I'm not at all questioning the treaty or indigenous fishing rights you have, but a lot of stakeholders in the recreational fisheries say that the nets set by first nations in some rivers are the reason we see a decline in, or a low return of, Atlantic salmon.

How do you respond to the concerns of people who target this as one of the many causes we just talked about, such as predation and climate change? It's out there. Some people are saying this.

Justice Gruben: Our people have fished since time immemorial and sustained these distinct species across different rivers and watersheds for generations, and none of them went extinct.

I'll allow Patrick, our elder, to expand. He worked in fisheries for decades.

Patrick Polchies: I will just say that it's always the case that we get looked at a little harshly for doing what we've done since time immemorial.

It is important to remember that, on my river, once commerce hit the shores—lumber, logging and all the fishing activities—we were put off the water completely. Our river was choked with logs. You couldn't fish, and the fish probably couldn't move either. It was huge business for many years, and it's well documented. To come back at us and say, “Maybe you're taking too much”, or something along those lines, isn't really fair. Commerce has done us in. Commercial fishing fleets make us look silly. We get on the river and maybe take 10 salmon. They have huge nets taking fish out at sea.

The Chair: I'm sorry. I'm going to have to ask you to wrap up. Thank you very much.

Voices: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: We've now finished this hour of witnesses, and I'm going to thank the witnesses who came.

I learned a heck of a lot from listening to you, so thank you for your expertise and your ideas. When you have a problem, it's always good to hear from the people on the ground about what the solutions could be. Thank you very much.

Now I want to suspend in order to move to the next panel.

• (1800) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1812)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to the new witnesses. I'm just going to do a bit of housekeeping.

At the bottom of your screen, if you are here virtually, there will be a little icon that looks like a globe. You can press on that to listen to the interpretation.

All comments should be addressed through the chair.

I want to remind you that you're going to be asked questions in English or French. Please put on your earpieces so that you can get the interpretation if you need it.

I also want to say that I will give you a shout-out when you have a minute left or 30 seconds left.

Now, witnesses, you are going to have five minutes for each group, not for each person. You have made a decision about who is going to do that. As I said, I'll give you a shout-out.

I want to thank you for coming.

We have Monsieur Pierre D'Amours, biologist and salmon fishing guide.

From the Atlantic Salmon Federation, we have Nathan Wilbur, president, and Neville Crabbe, vice-president of communications and special projects.

From the Miramichi Salmon Association, we have William Dalton, president, and Mark Hambrook, president emeritus. They're appearing via video conference.

We shall begin, and I will start with Mr. D'Amours for five minutes, please.

• (1815)

[Translation]

Pierre D'Amours (Biologist and Salmon Fishing Guide, As an Individual): Madam Chair, I'd like to start with a gift for the people from the various government parties. I have salmon here that I have carved. These are little salmon that I give to fishers these days. When I fish, I catch a salmon, and I give away a salmon.

In the past, when fishers caught their salmon, they were proud. They would go home with their salmon and show it to their parents. They would eat it over the holidays. It was a moment of great joy. Right now, though, we're dying out. There are no more salmon. It's over. When I have a young fisher catching their first salmon, it's very sad, because they have nothing to bring home. It used to be a rite of passage, and that rite of passage no longer exists.

For that reason, I carve out little salmon and, when a good opportunity presents itself, I give them away. I want the person catching their first salmon to have a keepsake, because that salmon is very important for their emotional side and their cultural side. We're losing the salmon culture, because there are no more salmon to catch. There are fewer and fewer of them.

I have come here today to tell you that we're dying out. The Restigouche River represents 500 jobs and \$15 million. We can't afford to lose that. If we lose that, we lose everything.

What's interesting is that the river is good: good for us, the people of the Gaspésie, the people of the Restigouche River, but also good for you.

In my life as a guide, I have guided many people who were politicians, people like you. I have seen that, when you reached the Restigouche River, you were very tense because of your hectic lives. You were even a bit exhausted from all that hustle and bustle. I would see you reaching the river and, already, after one day on the water, I could see that the river was healing you. The river made you feel better. We could sense the tension in your shoulders decreasing. At a certain point, something fantastic would happen: You would touch a salmon, catch a salmon.

Why do people come from all over the world to fish for salmon? I'll explain a fantastic phenomenon: A fishing line is an electrical wire. When you catch a salmon, it's as if you're attached to the wilderness, to perfection.

It's because the salmon you catch is the best of the best. It's the little salmon that managed to escape from the minks, the mergansers and the natural predators in the river. It's the little salmon that made it out to sea, that escaped from the seals and all kinds of predators that wanted to eat it. It went to Greenland and came back. It was hunted again by fishers from Greenland, fishers from Newfoundland, other fishers out for herring or other species, and it came back. That means that when you catch a salmon, you're catching the best of the best, the one that managed to make it through.

You have your salmon, and it's incredible: Through the salmon, it flows into you; you have been through a fight, so the river heals you, calms you, and the salmon gives you incredible energy, energy that's like medicine. If we lose the salmon, then it's as if we're losing something incredibly magical that enables us to have beautiful lives.

I came here to tell you that, as Canadians, if we lose the salmon, we lose one of the most important things for our mental health and our joy of being alive on this earth.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to go now to the Atlantic Salmon Federation.

Mr. Wilbur, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Nathan Wilbur (President, Atlantic Salmon Federation): Madam Chair, members of the committee, good evening.

[Translation]

Thank you for the invitation to appear today.

[English]

I'm Nathan Wilbur, president of the Atlantic Salmon Federation. I'm joined by Neville Crabbe, vice-president of communications and special projects.

ASF is a 78-year-old conservation organization dedicated to wild Atlantic salmon, with the goal of doubling annual salmon returns to one million. We work throughout eastern Canada and internationally conducting research, advocacy and on-the-ground conservation, always in partnership with indigenous communities, governments,

grassroots organizations and scientists. Some of our most unique work has included creative conservation agreements with the Greenlanders to help keep harvest low at sea.

This iconic fish drives over \$200 million in annual spending and supports 3,800 jobs in eastern Canada, but much more than that, it is central to the cultural fabric of the region.

The status of Atlantic salmon is mixed. In the north, Labrador and northern Quebec remain a global stronghold, but populations in the gulf region, Newfoundland, the Gaspé and the Maritimes need urgent help.

Three major government-led studies in the past decade have produced a combined 90 recommendations for DFO. Many have not been implemented, and the salmon community has grown frustrated.

However, we are optimistic. Canada has recently released its national strategy for Atlantic salmon, with over \$80 million to accompany it. ASF has pledged \$25 million in privately raised funding towards the strategy's goals, for a total of over \$100 million in new investment. I want to sincerely thank members of Parliament, members of this committee and the Government of Canada for this historic commitment.

Atlantic salmon face many pressures: climate change, aquaculture, predation, barriers to fish passage, land use and low marine survival. ASF works on all of these issues.

One fundamental principle of our approach is to focus investment where it will have the greatest impact. On this point, I'd like to give the committee a concrete example of how you can help increase the number of wild Atlantic salmon returning to Canadian rivers by tens of thousands, and it won't cost the Government of Canada a cent.

Some watersheds have an outsized level of importance ecologically, culturally and economically. The Miramichi was once the most productive Atlantic salmon river in North America, but over the last 15 years, adult salmon numbers have fallen from 80,000 to 5,000. This decline has been driven primarily by one factor: striped bass predation.

During the growth of striped bass from 3,000 spawners in the nineties to 500,000 today, our tracking research has shown a collapse in salmon smolt survival from 70% to less than 10% through the Miramichi estuary, where these salmon overlap with aggregating striped bass. In other words, juvenile salmon simply are not making it to sea. If you'd like to see what this looks like, I have emailed you a short video.

Striped bass are a native species. They have a place in the ecosystem, but balance is needed. This is our number one message today: We urge DFO to establish an ecosystem-based management target of 100,000 spawning striped bass and to achieve this goal by growing the existing indigenous commercial fishery and by allowing bycatch in the gaspereau fishery in the gulf.

This would dramatically improve salmon survival on the Miramichi and reduce predation pressure on other gulf rivers, such as the Restigouche, the Cascapédia and the Margaree, while continuing to conserve striped bass and its thriving commercial, indigenous and recreational fisheries. These are all positive outcomes, and it's a win-win approach.

• (1820)

The current DFO limit reference point of 330,000 striped bass makes Miramichi salmon recovery impossible. DFO has its own policy stating that rebuilding one predator population cannot come at the detriment of other species. We are urging DFO to apply its ecosystem approach to fisheries management, because the department has a responsibility to conserve both Atlantic salmon and striped bass.

In conclusion, to put this opportunity into perspective, restoring the Miramichi salmon population to 50,000 would generate gains five times greater than the entire Greenland salmon harvest on one river system. This does not require new funding or more science; it requires fisheries management decisions right now. This is a solvable issue in domestic waters.

Madam Chair, the Government of Canada has made a historic investment in Atlantic salmon recovery. With the right focus, we can ensure that this species thrives for generations to come.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will now go to the Miramichi Salmon Association.

Mr. Dalton, go ahead.

William (Butch) Dalton (President, Miramichi Salmon Association Inc.): Thank you.

My name is Butch Dalton. I'm the president of the Miramichi Salmon Association and the New Brunswick Salmon Council.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee today.

I'm joined by my colleague Mark Hambrook, president emeritus.

I'm here to provide the perspective of those working directly with Atlantic salmon conservation and to speak specifically to the factors affecting salmon recovery in the Miramichi.

Atlantic salmon populations throughout Atlantic Canada have declined dramatically over the past several decades despite investments in research, habitat restoration, conservation measures and management interventions. There's no single cause for the decline. Atlantic salmon face multiple pressures throughout their life cycle, including changing ocean conditions, poor marine survival, warming rivers, habitat degradation and, specifically for this committee,

predation. The challenge is that many of these pressures are occurring simultaneously, making recovery increasingly difficult.

From the perspective of those working in the Miramichi, one of the most significant ecological changes over the past two decades has been the remarkable increase in striped bass abundance. Those of us who spend our lives on the river have witnessed this change first-hand. Striped bass are now found throughout much of the watershed, including in areas in which they were rarely encountered historically, and they overlap extensively with Atlantic salmon smolts during one of the most vulnerable periods of the Atlantic salmon life cycle: the migration from fresh water to the ocean.

Importantly, these concerns are not based solely on observation by anglers or conservation groups. Scientific studies conducted by universities, conservation organizations, and Fisheries and Oceans Canada have confirmed that striped bass, in fact, do consume Atlantic salmon smolts. Smolts have been found in striped bass stomach contents, and acoustic telemetry studies have repeatedly identified the lower Miramichi and estuary as a major mortality bottleneck for migrating smolts.

Recent studies using advanced predation detection tags have provided even stronger evidence. These studies indicate that a substantial proportion of smolt losses are the result of predation by fish and that much of the mortality occurs in the same area in which striped bass are concentrated during spawning. Experimental work has also demonstrated that smolt survival improves significantly when fish are transported around this section of the river rather than migrating through it naturally.

Taken together, the science tells us that the question is no longer whether predation occurs but whether the current abundance of striped bass is creating mortality levels that are limiting salmon recovery. From our perspective, that concern is legitimate, and it deserves serious consideration.

The Miramichi Salmon Association operates one of the longest-running Atlantic salmon monitoring programs in North America. For many years, our data suggested that freshwater production was not the primary problem. The river continued to produce substantial numbers of smolts, but too few of them survived to return as adults. That observation closely aligns with scientific studies showing that mortality is concentrated during migration through the estuary and early marine environment.

What is particularly concerning is that we are now beginning to see signs that production itself may be declining. Preliminary results from this year's smolt monitoring on the northwest Miramichi indicate substantially fewer out-migrating smolts. In addition, thermal refuges that once held thousands of juvenile salmon during periods of extreme temperatures are now supporting very few fish. While these observations warrant further study, they suggest that the population is becoming increasingly stressed.

Current management measures have not halted the decline of Atlantic salmon. While predator management alone will not restore salmon populations, predator-prey interactions must become a much more important component of a recovery plan. Likewise, seal predation, marine survival, climate change and habitat degradation must all be considered as part of a comprehensive strategy.

In the near term, we need to continue investing in monitoring, habitat restoration and conservation hatcheries. We also need to make better use of the scientific information that is already available and adopt a more adaptive and ecosystem-based approach to management.

From a population perspective, there is a growing concern that Atlantic salmon in the Miramichi may have declined to a point at which natural recovery will be extremely difficult without intervention. Increasing the number of smolts entering the system through conservation supplementation may be necessary to rebuild abundance and improve resilience while broader recovery measures are implemented.

● (1825)

In closing, I'm not here to suggest that striped bass are the sole cause of Atlantic salmon declines; they are not. However, the scientific evidence, combined with what we are observing on the river, indicates that predation by striped bass is one of several factors affecting smolt survival and should be considered within any serious Atlantic salmon recovery strategy.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will now go to the question and answer segment. We will start the six-minute segment with the Conservatives.

Mr. Small, you have six minutes.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Dalton, I just heard you reference lower production on the Miramichi this season. You spoke a little about hatcheries. We can get back to that in a second, but before that, I note that there was a report in 2019 about striped bass and the impacts of striped bass. Recommendations were made. A key recommendation that keeps coming back to me came from stakeholders in your region and throughout the Maritimes about changing the slot size so that fish larger than 65 centimetres could be retained. Did that happen?

William (Butch) Dalton: It did not.

Clifford Small: What would have been the impact on the production of striped bass if that recommendation had been followed by this government?

William (Butch) Dalton: If you were harvesting these mature spawning fish, you would have a reduction in egg deposition. Consequently, you'd possibly reduce the population of striped bass.

Clifford Small: There was quite a call in that report for the increased harvesting of striped bass. What's your opinion on the increased fishing of striped bass since 2019? Has it been significant or insignificant?

William (Butch) Dalton: It's been insignificant. The recreational fishery was increased from three to four fish that you could retain between the slot sizes of 50 centimetres and 65 centimetres. The first nations commercial fishery was implemented, but it was not fully realized by first nations. We're hoping that the 175,000 quota this year will be realized. I hope that will have an impact when it comes to reducing the striped bass population.

● (1830)

Clifford Small: On the proliferation of striped bass, I don't know if you heard Mr. White talking earlier about the sightings of large amounts of striped bass that people were catching on the southern and up to mid-Labrador coasts. We often hear that striped bass are a Miramichi problem, but do you think the bass are proliferating into many watersheds? We know what's happening in the St. Lawrence River. What do you think about the proliferation of these bass?

William (Butch) Dalton: I think they're everywhere. I don't believe we really have a handle on the population size. Even the notable population ecologists I speak with have a hard time determining what the population actually is. I think it's getting bigger. I'm not a population ecologist myself, but I know it's hugely problematic.

Clifford Small: Until the government heeds the recommendations of the 2019 bass study, do you think there's much point in investing in hatcheries in watersheds where the bass are so prolific? Do we need to deal with the bass first?

William (Butch) Dalton: I believe it's something that should happen simultaneously, particularly in the Miramichi. Our salmon population has reduced to a point at which it's just a fraction of what it used to be. My personal belief is that we should be reducing the bass population while implementing supplementation programs when they're merited.

Clifford Small: Thank you very much.

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Clifford Small: Mr. Wilbur, in the 2017 study on Atlantic salmon, there was a recommendation that the Government of Canada lead a delegation to Greenland to lobby on behalf of wild Atlantic salmon. Did that happen?

Nathan Wilbur: Canada and other countries meet annually at the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization meeting each June. It happened just last week. Every few years, a new quota for Greenland is negotiated.

I can speak confidently in saying that Greenland has done an excellent job reducing their fishery from a substantial level down to 30 tonnes, which is about 9,000 salmon. Those come from Canada, the U.S. and Europe. Usually two-thirds of them are Canadian. They have reduced their harvest, and they have implemented a very robust reporting system. With their 90% reporting, they've done a good job.

Clifford Small: I have one more quick one for you.

Saint-Pierre and Miquelon is reportedly harvesting around 150 tonnes of Atlantic salmon. I'm not sure if I got that figure right, but you can correct me, and I don't mind. There are reports of salmon coming ashore in Newfoundland from that harvest and being sold on the black market in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Do you think Saint-Pierre and Miquelon is accurately reporting what they're catching? Is it possible that they could be overfishing our stock in French waters?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds to answer. I'm sorry.

Nathan Wilbur: We have to rely on anybody reporting to NASCO and ICES that their country's reports are as accurate as possible.

I will correct that figure. It's just over one tonne that was harvested by Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, which is 300 to 500 salmon.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to the Liberals for six minutes. We have Serge Cormier.

You have six minutes, please, Serge.

[Translation]

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. D'Amours, I'm going to talk to you at greater length later, but I just want to tell you that I'd like to spend a day on the river with you.

• (1835)

[English]

Mr. Wilbur, thanks for being here.

Thanks to you, also, Mr. Dalton, with the Miramichi Salmon Association.

I know you were in the room before. I'm not going to ask you the three causes that you think.... It was probably one for all of you—striped bass.

I want to go back to Greenland for a second. Yes, as we know, Greenland reduced the amount of salmon that they are allowed to catch, but it's still 30 tonnes.

You said that there were 9,000 salmon, I think, and those 9,000 salmon are returning to some of our rivers, as you probably know, spawning and producing eggs.

Do you think we're doing enough to make Greenland understand that we are at the point now at which Atlantic salmon is on such a decline that it may be time to have a little pause? Do you have talks

with them about this issue, maybe to say, "Have a pause, and don't fish for a couple of years", just to see if we will have more return?

Nathan Wilbur: Thank you for the question.

Greenland, as I mentioned, has done an excellent job in reducing their fishery from 1,500 tonnes in the 1970s down to 30 tonnes and about 9,000 salmon.

To put this in perspective, the returns to Canada, in recent years, have been about 600,000. They have been somewhere between 400,000 and 700,000, depending on the year. What we're talking about here is splitting hairs in Greenland.

Our recommendation is to create a maintenance situation with the Greenland fishery, to make sure that we have strong relationships with them and that we incentivize good reporting. ASF works directly with the Greenlanders and the Greenland government on incentivizing, reporting and conducting science. We're expanding that to, I hope, some habitat protection in west Greenland.

We think Greenland has done a good job. We think that Canada should look internally, in places like the gulf region, and reduce the striped bass population to achieve ecosystem balance. That would generate far more returns of Canadian adult Atlantic salmon to Canadian rivers.

Serge Cormier: Mr. Dalton, on striped bass, in your neck of the hood, on the Miramichi River.... All of us around this table have seen some videos of this river with big bunches of striped bass spawning everywhere. In the last couple of years, in this committee, we heard some DFO officials say that striped bass are not eating small salmon. It's not part of their diet. I think we all know that this is not accurate. We have evidence of that.

Why do you think that DFO is so—if this is a good word in English—rotten at decreasing the number in the striped bass population and saying that this is too much? The ecosystem is everywhere now. Why do you think DFO officials do not want to reduce the amount of striped bass in the ecosystem?

William (Butch) Dalton: I think it's a success story for DFO. It's one of few.

Serge Cormier: It's a success story in the sense of a recovery.

William (Butch) Dalton: It's been a great recovery. There were 5,000 striped bass or even fewer. They've managed to recover the population. It's a population that's out of control at this point in time.

The study you're referencing is the 2% stomach contents of striped bass. If you look at and extrapolate that number, 2% of striped bass have smolt in them, but there are one million striped bass. That's a lot of smolt. That's all the smolt. We're seeing a 6% to 7% survival rate through the estuary.

Serge Cormier: Right now on the Miramichi River, if I'm not mistaken, there's a quota allocated to some first nations. Is it right that they did not even fish their entire quota?

William (Butch) Dalton: That's correct.

Serge Cormier: What would be the best solution for you to decrease the population of striped bass on the Miramichi River? Will this be like what we're doing right now with first nations, except they won't take the whole quota? If they're not taking all the quota, will it be transferred to some other group or to a commercial fishery at some point?

What is your view on that?

• (1840)

William (Butch) Dalton: My view is to allow the gaspereau fishermen to keep striped bass as a bycatch. There are all kinds of mechanisms you can use. You can liberalize the fishery, allow more retention and change the slot size.

Serge Cormier: If I'm not mistaken, last year the gaspereau fishermen were allowed to keep some of them, but it was at the last minute.

William (Butch) Dalton: Yes. It was a short window.

Serge Cormier: I have a quick question. Are you all thinking that if we were to reduce the amount of striped bass that we have in your particular river, we would see a huge increase, or at least an increase, in the return of salmon in the next couple of years?

William (Butch) Dalton: If we don't have that as part of a management strategy, we're not going to see a change. You can't count out habitat restoration, climate change and other factors affecting Atlantic salmon. However, it's a particular concern in the Miramichi.

Without a reduction in striped bass, I would argue, even with a supplementation program—whether that's a small to adult supplementation or increasing the number of juvenile salmon we put out through conservation hatcheries—we're not going to see any difference. It has to be part of the equation.

The Chair: Thank you. That went well over time. I'm sorry.

I want to let members know, before I go to Mr. Deschênes, that there is a vote being called. We have 27 minutes left. I want to know what the committee wants to do.

Do members want 15 minutes to vote, or do you want to vote in here? Do you want to go back to the House? What's the unanimous consent here?

We can stay here, vote and take another 10 or 15 minutes, because if you're voting on the app, you don't need a full 15 minutes.

What do you want to do?

Mel Arnold: The vote will be after 7 p.m.

The Chair: We can finish this.

Mel Arnold: The vote's not until 7:09.

The Chair: That's good. Okay.

Go ahead, Mr. Deschênes, for six minutes, please.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. D'Amours, thank you for your impassioned plea. You explained very clearly the importance of saving Atlantic salmon and everything associated with it. You're very familiar with the Restigouche and Matapédia rivers. If I'm not mistaken, you caught your first salmon at the age of six. So you've been navigating those rivers for quite a few years. You mentioned half a century. What have you observed?

Pierre D'Amours: What's interesting about the Restigouche River, compared with the Miramichi River, is that striped bass had never been present in the Restigouche River. When we look at historical data and the scientific studies conducted by Fisheries and Oceans Canada, we realize that striped bass had never been found west of the Baie des Chaleurs, so striped bass is an invasive species in the Restigouche basin; it had never been there before. I checked to see how true that was. Since I'm very good friends with the Mi'kmaq, I went to speak with Mi'kmaq elders, and they told me the same thing. There had never been striped bass in the Restigouche basin.

Alexis Deschênes: So you're saying that this isn't the recovery of a species that previously existed. Based on traditional Mi'kmaq knowledge, it had never been present.

Pierre D'Amours: There had never been any. To be even more certain, I went and spoke with my fishing guide friends who have been on the river for a long time. I know guides who were on the river at the age of 10 with their fathers, and their fathers had been on the river with their own fathers for another 60 years. So we have 120 years of history passed down from father to son. All of these men had never seen striped bass in the Restigouche River.

So when we talk about the Restigouche River, we're not talking about the same phenomenon as the Miramichi River. We're talking about the presence of an invasive species. There had never been any striped bass in the Restigouche or the Matapédia.

Alexis Deschênes: And now, are you seeing a lot of them?

Pierre D'Amours: Last year, in some pools, we could count as many as 2,000 striped bass.

Alexis Deschênes: That's in one pool.

Pierre D'Amours: Before coming to see you, I stopped on the Restigouche bridge, and I could already see clusters of striped bass in the lower part of the Restigouche.

Earlier, you asked the representatives of the Fédération québécoise pour le saumon atlantique a question, and they said that small salmon are being eaten at sea. I can tell you that small salmon encounter striped bass that move upstream into the Restigouche estuary. If the salmon aren't returning, it's because many of these small salmon, which should be heading to Greenland, are already being eaten by striped bass, which shouldn't be present in the Restigouche in the spring.

• (1845)

Alexis Deschênes: So these are things you've observed.

Pierre D'Amours: Certainly, these are things I've observed, and I would go even further; I think it's important to mention that I've also seen the disappearance of smelt populations. In the Restigouche River, I've seen smelt populations almost disappear. It's the same thing with trout. So we have to be careful with striped bass, when we think everything is happening out at sea. Trout, for example, don't go into the Strait of Belle Isle in Newfoundland. Smelt don't go that far, either. They stay in the estuary.

Alexis Deschênes: It's not marine migration.

Pierre D'Amours: Exactly.

Alexis Deschênes: What makes you say that striped bass is the cause? There could be other causes.

Pierre D'Amours: There could be other causes.

As a guide, I wasn't allowed to, but I did kill striped bass when I caught them. I opened them up, because in addition to being a guide, I'm also a biologist. When you look at what's in the stomach, you can get a sense of what's really going on. I found salmonids in the stomachs of striped bass.

At some point, we can speculate, talk about temperature and all sorts of other factors. That's one of the issues I see in the field of salmon: We spend a lot of time saying it's this, or it's that.

If you were to ask me—and I'll get right to the point because you need to vote—what the three things to do are, I would say that the first thing I would do would be to cull three million seals. Fisheries and Oceans Canada doesn't want us to cull three million seals because, if we did, cod and salmon populations would rebound immediately. The department would look very bad. That's why it wants to take a lot of time to conduct studies and have us talk about it. In other words, it can make us waste our time. I would remind you that we're in the process of losing our jobs. That's 500 jobs that we're going to lose. That's \$15 million. Personally, I don't have any time to waste.

Alexis Deschênes: That's on the Restigouche and Matapédia rivers.

Pierre D'Amours: Exactly, it's on the Restigouche and the Matapédia, where there had never been striped bass.

Alexis Deschênes: What are you proposing with respect to striped bass?

Would it involve increasing recreational fishing or opening a commercial fishery?

Pierre D'Amours: A commercial fishery could be opened.

It's important to remember that striped bass is an invasive species, while it isn't in the Miramichi River.

Alexis Deschênes: However, striped bass can represent a business opportunity for some outfitters because there are people who may come and fish for that, too.

Pierre D'Amours: Striped bass can be fished everywhere along the coast for free, but people come from all over the world to fish for salmon on the Restigouche River.

So our real economic value isn't in a fish that can be caught anywhere, but in salmon, which must be brought back to its previous levels. Imagine the dream of being able to return to a river that, in-

stead of giving a small salmon carved out of moose antler, allows us to catch a salmon that we can eat. If we were to do that, as a Canadian society, we would achieve something truly remarkable.

However, I have to say that, as long as the decisions that need to be made fall under the responsibility of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, all we'll do is talk about them in meetings.

Alexis Deschênes: So it would be a good idea to look at the commercial striped bass fishery.

Pierre D'Amours: Yes, exactly.

The third thing is science. With real science, solid science, we will make the right decisions that need to be made. Personally, I think that if we bring together everyone acting in good faith and stop treating salmon as a political fish, we have a chance of getting through this.

Alexis Deschênes: By solid science, do you mean studies?

Pierre D'Amours: Yes, I'm talking about real, solid studies.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. I think we should wrap up.

We're now going to a second round. This is a five-minute round.

We're going to Mr. Arnold for five minutes.

Mel Arnold: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Again, thank you to the witnesses. I noticed you were sitting in the back of the room earlier, for the testimony. Thank you for being here.

I want to turn right away to all of you.

Recommendation number 14 in this committee's report from January 2017 states:

That Fisheries and Oceans Canada allow a significant increase in the harvest of striped bass by the recreational fishery by lengthening the retention season and increasing catch limits, where striped bass populations warrant it.

Was that recommendation followed by the department?

Go ahead, Mr. Wilbur.

Nathan Wilbur: There was a slight relaxation in recreational fishing harvest retention rules and season length. The department did take some action on that.

The most significant actions were increasing the indigenous commercial striped bass quota from 50,000 to 175,000 and, last year, allowing bycatch in the gaspereau fishery for a short window. The indigenous commercial fishery has been the largest component.

It's a learning curve. The Eel Ground First Nation has done a great job growing that fishery. It's taken some time. They need help.

Mel Arnold: Was there a significant increase in the harvest of striped bass by the recreational fishery?

● (1850)

Nathan Wilbur: The department does not measure the harvest of striped bass in the recreational fishery. It's a long-standing recommendation that we have.

Mel Arnold: We have no idea, then, whether they allowed a significant increase.

Nathan Wilbur: They allowed a significant increase in the opportunity, but they have not measured the result of that.

Mel Arnold: Thank you for that.

In the same report from 2017, recommendation 13 is as follows:

That Fisheries and Oceans Canada support a grey seal harvest program that emphasizes full utilization of the seal to provide economic opportunities with an aim to significantly reduce the seal populations and enhance the recovery of wild Atlantic salmon populations.

That was a unanimous recommendation from this committee.

This sounds uncannily familiar to me from the west coast, with our wild steelhead populations in the Fraser. Those steelhead populations are now basically down to zero. Dr. Carl Walters completed a study and recommended management of predation in the estuaries. I believe his report said that we could see a 70% to 80% increase in steelhead returns if that predator management was done.

Do you feel that predator management between striped bass and the grey seal populations would be a first good step in this?

I see Mr. D'Amours nodding on that.

Can you go ahead on that, Mr. D'Amours? I'll then ask Mr. Wilbur.

Pierre D'Amours: I think we all agree.

[Translation]

I believe that if we're talking about effective direct actions that will yield short-term results, this is exactly what we need to do. We need to address the seals, and we need to address the striped bass. If we do that, I believe we'll have achieved one of our goals.

This is an emergency. We are in a state of emergency. We no longer have time to waste on endless meetings, year after year. We must act. If I were asked what needs to be done, I would say that addressing the seal and striped bass issues is the right course of action. We must also rely on sound science.

[English]

Mel Arnold: Mr. Wilbur, go ahead quickly.

Nathan Wilbur: Striped bass is a localized, significant pressure on one of Canada's most important wild Atlantic salmon rivers, the Miramichi. Reducing that population will immediately result in significantly improved Atlantic salmon survival and adult returns to Canadian rivers.

Mel Arnold: Thank you.

I want to go back to those two recommendations, because those were recommendations to government. Basically what we're hearing....

Please tell me. Did government respond appropriately and implement those two recommendations?

William (Butch) Dalton: Maybe we could get Mark Hambrook to comment on that.

The Chair: Is he still there?

Can you please open your camera? Thank you.

Mark Hambrook (President Emeritus, Miramichi Salmon Association Inc.): I remember when those recommendations were made, and efforts were made to try to get a grey seal harvest, especially by the private communities, but we always ran into roadblocks.

One of the big ones is the marine protection act in the United States. If we harvest seals and use them for some purpose, they might ban our lobster imports. Trying to get a grey seal harvest has not been easy, even though there are people willing to do it and, I think, they have markets identified. It's been this political struggle.

Certainly, on striped bass, we've increased the recreational fishing limits, and we have an indigenous commercial fishery, but they're all moving way too slow to make a difference. Fundamentally, this lower reference point of 330,000 is a real stumbling block for the DFO. We need it down to 100,000. We think that was a flawed study—the 330,000. We've asked the government to reconvene, bring different scientists in and get that lowered. If it were lowered to 100,000, we'd be able to do something more.

• (1855)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll go to Mr. Cormier for the Liberals for five minutes, please, Serge.

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Going back to Mr. Wilbur for a second, on the \$80-million strategy we just announced plus your \$20-something million more that you're going to put in, what are you going to do with that money?

Nathan Wilbur: For Atlantic salmon, there's such a range of issues because they have a complex life cycle all the way to Greenland and back. Low marine survival is widely recognized as the major bottleneck across the Canadian range. There is such a range of issues. Some we can control, and some we can't. We may not be able to do very much about low marine survival.

What we can control is removing barriers in watersheds so that habitat isn't as fragmented. It's like death by a thousand cuts in eastern Canada, with dams and culverts. There's climate-resilient cold-water habitat there. We need to remove those barriers. We'll be investing in that. We need landscape protections to buffer against the impacts of climate change, warming water and the increased intensity of rain events.

Protecting more land and contributing to the Canada 30 by 30 commitment is probably the biggest opportunity in our lifetimes to make progress on one of the root-cause issues and give Atlantic salmon the gift of long-term sustainability, which is cold, clean water.

Serge Cormier: Maybe I'll go to Mr. Dalton really quickly and then Mr. D'Amours.

You are all conservation groups for, let's say, Atlantic salmon. There's some other conservation group that does not agree with you regarding the striped bass. As you said, it's a success story. Wow, it's growing.

How do you blend together and explain to each other, yes, it's a success story, but there's no balance here anymore?

William (Butch) Dalton: It's just the way that you've said it. There is no balance. From a management perspective, DFO has engaged in single-species management in isolation. They're not looking at an ecosystem-based approach. Everybody likes to fish striped bass. Everybody likes to fish Atlantic salmon, but when you get three guys in a boat who can go out for four hours and catch 270 striped bass, there's a problem. That's catching; it's not fishing.

I don't think anybody wants to see the demise of striped bass. They're a native species to the Miramichi. We're just looking for a balance here. It's an ecosystem out of control, and it's having an impact not only on Atlantic salmon but on trout, gaspereau and other species.

[Translation]

Serge Cormier: Mr. D'Amours, earlier I told you that I've been fishing for salmon for 25 years. I'm probably not an expert like you, but I love it so much. I tie my own flies. I have my own canoe. I've been fishing since I was—

Pierre D'Amours: What's your favourite fly?

Serge Cormier: I have two. I'd say that the first fly I ever caught a salmon with was the Green Machine. My second would be the Blue Charm.

Pierre D'Amours: Did you catch small or large salmon?

Serge Cormier: My biggest one was about 27 pounds, and I'm really happy with that. I'm not in the 30-pound club yet, but I'm glad I got close.

I'd actually like to continue on this same topic. As you mentioned earlier, it creates jobs such as guides, camp staff and cooks. There are even small shops that sell all kinds of fishing hooks.

Do you think that recreational salmon fishing is sometimes seen as a pastime for the wealthy? We often hear that it's a pastime for the wealthy, that it doesn't matter if we don't invest in it, and that the wealthy will just move on to something else. Do you hear that, too?

Pierre D'Amours: It's certainly a sport for the wealthy. Even for the average person, it's expensive to go salmon fishing.

That said, when you want to hate something, you can always find a good reason. We must never forget, when it comes to the Restigouche River and the many fishing camps, that it is the Americans who own the river. We need to make an effort to realize that, for every American, there are often three or four people from the village who will find work. We must recognize that the entire community in northern New Brunswick, in the Matapedia River region, depends directly on this. Therefore, we must strive to promote it. We must realize that countless people make their living from the rivers and the salmon.

Serge Cormier: Like me, have you noticed that in recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in this recreational fishing,

among people of all social classes as well as among young people? Take Hooké, for example—which you're probably familiar with. We're seeing young people who are genuinely interested in this type of fishing. They want to conserve salmon and do more.

So, when you guide these people, do you also see that they aren't just millionaires, as people say?

• (1900)

Pierre D'Amours: I'm especially happy to see women here because, at first, I only served as a guide for men. How many women have I introduced to salmon fishing? How many women have accepted a small salmon that I gave them? People come salmon fishing, as I was explaining earlier, and they see the benefits of this type of fishing. They catch the salmon and release it back into the water, but they've felt the salmon's energy. It's so rewarding to see all these young people, older folks, and those who aren't wealthy, but who are still able to catch salmon. That's why it's a good thing—

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Pierre D'Amours: It is such a precious asset. We cannot lose it.

Mr. Cormier, don't forget the Restigouche River; don't forget that the striped bass is an invasive species—I repeat, invasive.

Serge Cormier: I caught two last year. I'll show you.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. D'Amours, can we wrap up, please?

Mr. Deschênes, you have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Wilbur, I fully understand your point of view and the importance of taking action regarding the striped bass population. Now, what specific measures do you propose to reduce the striped bass population originating from the Miramichi River?

[English]

Nathan Wilbur: That's a great question. Thank you.

I'm proposing, specifically, that DFO support the Eel Ground First Nation and other first nations communities throughout the gulf region in the development of the fishery, so they can actually catch the quota of 175,000 set by DFO.

Simultaneously, allow bycatch in the gaspereau fishery throughout the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: What kind of support are you proposing for first nations? What is missing? The quota has been granted.

[English]

Nathan Wilbur: They are not currently allowed to use enough trap-nets. They use live trap-nets. The Eel Ground First Nation, in particular, would like to use more. They would also like to have a multi-year licence—right now, it's year to year—so they can plan and make investments in equipment and personnel. That's a significant bottleneck. Allow the communities to use enough nets to catch the quota. Last year, only about 60,000 of that 175,000 quota was handed out to the communities.

In DFO's defence, it's a learning curve. Last year was the first year of that larger quota. The minister has assured us that the full quota will be handed out this year. We're appreciative of that, and we hope the department does that.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you.

Mr. Dalton, specifically, what do you think we should do to restore balance and reduce the population of striped bass in the Miramichi River?

[English]

William (Butch) Dalton: Do you mind if I defer to Mark on this question?

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: You're welcome.

[English]

Mark Hambrook: Thank you for the question.

What Mr. Wilbur suggested is the right approach.

I would like to add this: The population of salmon is stressed now. It's going to take time to get the ecosystem in balance. We have to do restoration efforts. We have to try to save every little salmon we can until we can get the ecosystem balanced. The ecosystem is out of balance in the Gulf of St. Lawrence because of grey seals. The cod population is devastated there. It will never recover as long as there are grey seals. There are big issues in getting ecosystems balanced.

We have to save every fish we can until we get it balanced.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to thank the witnesses for coming. Again, I am learning fish things that I didn't know about. You have been very excellent in suggesting recommendations, which is good. You pinpointed the problems and gave us some good recommendations.

Now we have to—

Yes, Serge.

Serge Cormier: We have the vote, Madam Chair. I'm going to move to adjourn the meeting.

The Chair: Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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