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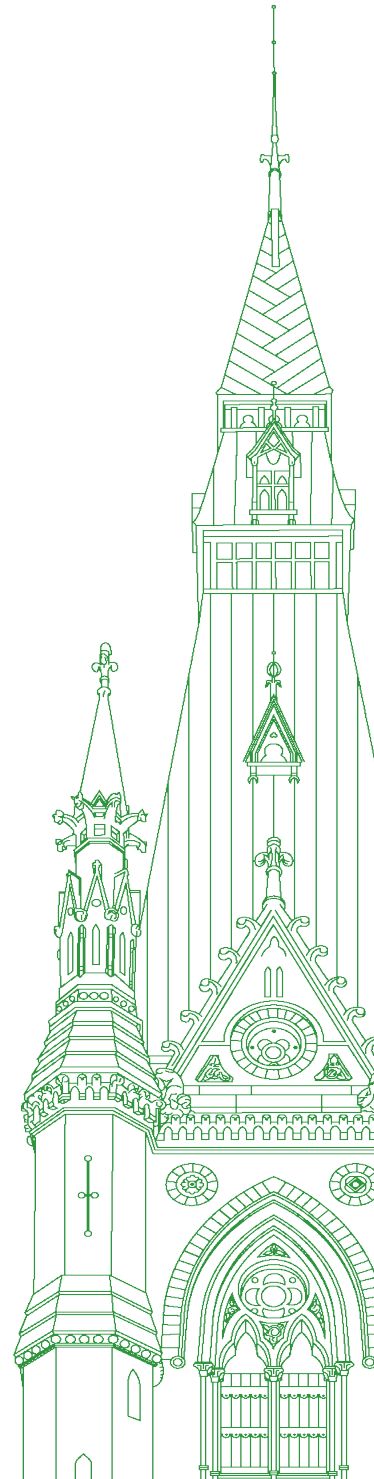
Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

EVIDENCE

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Monday, October 5, 2026

Chair: Hedy Fry



Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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• (1530)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold (Kamloops—Shuswap—Central Rockies, CPC)): Welcome to meeting 47 of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108, the committee is meeting to continue 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 would like to advise the committee members that all witnesses appearing virtually today have successfully conducted the required testing.

I would like to remind participants of the following points.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when not speaking. At the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: either floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I would like to remind witnesses that committee members may ask questions in either French or English. If you will need interpretation, please take a moment now to prepare your earpiece and select in advance the listening channel you will need in order to take full advantage of the time allotted for questions and answers.

As a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

For members in the room, if you wish to speak, raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the “raise hand” function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can, and we appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

I now would like to welcome our witnesses.

We have with us, appearing as an individual, Dr. Gary Anderson, Atlantic salmon angler and conservationist, by video conference; from Gaspé Coastal, Andrew Murphy, co-owner; from Save Miramichi Salmon Inc., John Bagnall, biologist, and Alex Mills, lawyer, both by video conference; and from the Wolastoqey Nation in New Brunswick, Dr. Colin Curry, fisheries lead, by video conference.

We will start with the witnesses' opening statements for five minutes or less, starting with Dr. Anderson.

Mr. Anderson, please go ahead.

Gary Anderson (Atlantic Salmon Angler and Conservationist, As an Individual): I've been a devout fly fisherman all of my life. I've fly-fished on five continents and in several oceans for a wide variety of species, and I have spent a significant amount of time living near and fishing the Miramichi River, which I've done for 50 years. I fish here for salmon, striped bass, trout and shad. I've witnessed the increase of the striper population and its effects on the runs of Atlantic salmon and all of the species I fish.

I learned an important lesson about fisheries management in 1991. It showed me what can be accomplished when a government has a clear goal and institutes effective and efficient means to achieve it. Let me share how I learned this lesson.

Based on my publications on Atlantic salmon, I was invited to explore salmon rivers in Russia, which had never been fished by western anglers, to assess their potential for sports fishing. As you can imagine, it was a challenging assignment. Over the next six years, I made one or two trips each summer and explored 16 rivers on the Kola Peninsula. Until the Iron Curtain opened, little was known about Russian salmon, or if and how the fishery was managed.

The Varzuga was my first Russian river. I was dropped, along with a unilingual Russian, by helicopter at the junction of the Varzuga and Pana rivers. Together, we floated a raft for over a week, and observed the river and a great many salmon jumping and also taking my flies. It's hard to imagine, but the Varzuga has an annual run of 150,000 salmon.

How does a river have such a prolific run? Beyond its conducive ecological conditions and geography, its salmon run is managed by a very simple and efficient system. The Russians did not fish for salmon at sea or along the coastline. They waited for the salmon to return to their natal river, and they harvested them there, allowing sufficient escapement to keep the salmon sustainable—a simple solution, but very effective.

We need to consider a few striper management policies that will begin to restore our Atlantic salmon numbers. To better align with the goal of increased salmon stocks, we should reduce the overall striper population to about 100,000, and do so before the species expands its spawning to other locations. There are no real trade-offs, so it should be an easy policy decision. Other presenters have suggested two means to achieve a reduced population: increase the first nations commercial fishery and allow the gaspereau fishermen to keep the striper bycatch. I endorse these means.

In addition, the angling catch needs attention. I suggest two changes. My first suggestion is to eliminate any reference to slot size. The slot retention policy is counterproductive. It encourages DFO conservation officers to expend major effort in monitoring things that make no overall contribution to the goal of conservation of the salmon population. Removing the lower end, the 50-centimetre minimum, would enable first-time anglers and children to retain a striper if they so chose. Removing the maximum of 65 centimetres would help achieve population reduction.

• (1535)

Almost all the large stripers are female, and they produce much more progeny than smaller females do. Allowing retention of larger fish would also enhance the value of the striper sport fishery. People are motivated to catch big fish, and we should let them to bolster the sport fishery itself.

My other suggestion is that the daily catch limit—

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Mr. Anderson, we're at five minutes. We're actually over five minutes. You can get the rest of your statements in during the questions session afterwards.

Gary Anderson: We should either increase or eliminate the daily catch limit. These changes would help—

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Mr. Anderson, can you hear me?

Gary Anderson: Yes.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): We're over the five minutes allowed for opening statements, so I'll have to ask you to provide this during the questions if you can. Thank you.

Andrew Murphy, go ahead for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

Andrew Murphy (co-owner, Gaspé Coastal): Thank you Mr. Chair and committee members.

My wife, Sarah Nellis, and I own an outfitting business in Chaleur Bay, where we offer Atlantic salmon, striped bass and brook trout fishing trips. Our future depends on the sound management of these species.

Everyone here shares the same objective: to restore healthy Atlantic salmon populations.

The concerns surrounding striped bass in the Miramichi deserve our attention, but our strategy to restore Atlantic salmon for all of Canada should not be based solely on those concerns.

Striped bass predation on salmon is documented. We must take it into account, but we must especially maintain an approach that addresses a multifactorial environment. Every river has different con-

ditions, and salmon face pressures all along a journey that connects our watershed to the north Atlantic. Our response should cover Atlantic Canada and Quebec, while respecting the realities of each population.

The federal investment of \$81.7 million over five years that was announced represents a significant opportunity to act. Let's give organizations the means to transform this commitment into sustainable benefits.

I suggest three priorities.

First, we should pursue and strengthen local actions with well-documented benefits. Watershed organizations, river managers and indigenous organizations must be able to retain their staff, schedule work and monitor their results over several years. Thorough scientific monitoring requires time, resources and consistency.

We must preserve the drainage basins that are still in good condition and restore those that are damaged. We need to consider the cumulative effects of our forestry, farming, infrastructure and industrial development practices on the water and the habitats in the drainage basin travelled by Atlantic salmon.

For critically low populations, time is running out. We must support conservation stocking when it is scientifically warranted, with projects that are tailored to the population concerned and closely monitored.

These actions require a coordinated plan and the means to expedite them starting immediately.

Second, we should support research on the marine migration and survival of Atlantic salmon, and existing monitoring. We should rely on the knowledge acquired to better understand what happens from the moment they exit the estuaries, into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, into the Strait of Belle Isle and into the north Atlantic. Ocean conditions, food, disease, accidental captures and predators should be considered as a whole to understand the losses and identify the most useful interventions.

We must also address the risks associated with open-cage farming of Atlantic salmon, specifically the transmission of disease and the destruction of ocean environments. The government announced that such cages will be banned in British Columbia by June 2029, to protect wild Pacific salmon, while currently supporting the growth of open-net pen aquaculture in the Atlantic region. This difference in direction demands explanation.

Atlantic salmon deserves clear commitments, too. We should direct public funding toward aquacultural practices that reduce those risks, while supporting workers and communities.

Third, funding must be made accessible, consistent and transparent. Deposit delays and red tape should not hinder the completion of good projects. Make it easier to access funding and give organizations the time and support needed to build solid partnerships and take action.

The priorities should reflect the needs of the populations and the expected benefits. Make the amounts invested, the objectives and the outcomes accessible so as to improve our decisions. This rigour should also guide any intervention on predators, including striped bass and seal. Clarify the expected benefits for salmon, the uncertainties, the consequences on the identified species, and the conditions for adjusting or stopping a measure.

Remember that striped bass is an indigenous species that supports accessible fishing and a booming recreational and tourism economy. According to the 2027 Quebec plan, this fishery contributes over \$37 million to GDP and generates some 400 jobs in Quebec alone.

The gulf's highly migratory striped bass population frequents the shores of Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia. Its management in the Miramichi, where the population's only known spawning ground is located, could have consequences well beyond that river. Any major decisions should be based on the best scientific knowledge available and on fair and equitable consultations with the communities concerned.

In conclusion, throughout our regions, citizens, harvesters and committed entrepreneurs support a dynamic and resilient recreational fishing economy based on both salmon and striped bass. Our contribution to the vitality of our communities and the protection of aquatic environments deserves to be fully recognized.

Our community deserves commitments that match our efforts and true value: sustainable co-operation between governments, researchers, indigenous organizations and communities, genuine knowledge sharing, and educational and awareness support.

• (1540)

We need the means to protect and restore the wild fish populations that enrich our waters. Let us ensure that the investments in the next five years leave behind a sustainable legacy, healthy ecosystems and vibrant communities, ensuring that people will be able to discover the joy of fishing for generations.

Thank you.

• (1545)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Murphy.

We'll now go to Alex Mills with Save Miramichi Salmon Inc.

Alex Mills (Lawyer, Save Miramichi Salmon Inc.): Thank you, honourable Chairman, for inviting us and giving Save Miramichi Salmon an opportunity to address the committee.

I'm here with John Bagnall. John is our science director and has a wealth of information surrounding the science applicable to these issues.

I would start by acknowledging that I am speaking from unceded Mi'kmaq territory. I won't be following my speaking notes. I'll be as brief as possible, hopefully well within the five minutes.

I will tell you a little bit about our organization. Save Miramichi Salmon is, if I can use a term, a recently spawned non-profit advocacy group focusing on Atlantic salmon and conservation on the Miramichi River. We have a constituency that is made up of guides, outfitters, upriver municipalities at the moment, private fisheries owners and conservationists. We do not represent first nations, although we certainly respect their position and their priority access, and we do our best to keep them abreast of what we are doing and engaging with them on all fronts. We are trying to reach out more effectively to the striped bass fishing community and to the municipalities that derive an immense amount of revenue from them.

We have delivered a certain amount of material to you. A year ago, we provided a detailed submission, which I understand is part of the record, and has been translated and is available. We have also provided you with speaking notes that have been translated. Additionally, we provided another document that we did not meet the translation date for and it was limited in its circulation to our MP on the Miramichi and to the mover of the motion, with apologies, honourable Serge Cormier. That information is there.

Our message is simple, and it's condensed from what Gary has testified and what Mr. Murphy has testified and all the others before us. We have a crisis facing Atlantic salmon and other species on the Miramichi. It's not climate related and it's not habitat related. It is striped bass related. If DFO does not see that, they are blind. If you come close to the Miramichi River in the months of May and June, what is happening with striped bass will amaze you. If you are around the river much through the summer, you will see striped bass in places where you have never seen them.

What has to be done? It's exactly what the other witnesses have said today and others before us. It's not rocket science. We would add that there needs to be a major enhancement effort focused on the Miramichi hatchery and engaging in the most progressive variety of stocking and utilization of the hatchery facilities on an interim basis at least to get us through the crisis. We're advised there are some very interesting ways that are being utilized on the west coast in the nature of SAS stocking programs. Another interesting one I've heard about is kelt reconditioning, which is being used successfully, I'm told. In any case, that is the second part of what we've been saying to DFO since November 2024.

• (1550)

The third peg of our position and perhaps the most difficult one is that we feel there is some kind of bottleneck in Moncton with the gulf management that is impacting the ability to take the action, the ability to do what this committee had directed it to do, the ability to make decisions on stocking that are without any question required at the moment. There is a—

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): We're past five minutes now, so hopefully the rest of what you want to say will come out in responses to questions.

We'll now conclude the opening remarks with Dr. Curry for five minutes, please.

Colin Curry (Fisheries Lead, Wolastoqey Nation in New Brunswick): Good afternoon, Chair and members of the committee.

My name is Dr. Colin Curry, and I'm the fisheries lead with the Wolastoqey Nation in New Brunswick. I'm here on behalf of New Brunswick's Wolastoqey communities to speak about the decline of Atlantic salmon in the Wolastoq or Saint John River and the role of the Mactaquac biodiversity facility in maintaining the capacity to recover this population.

The outer Bay of Fundy population of Atlantic salmon is one of Canada's most significant conservation challenges.

The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, COSEWIC, recognized it as a unique designatable unit in 2010 and assessed it as endangered. More than 90% of the available productive freshwater habitat for this population is in the Wolastoq watershed. Upwards of 30,000 salmon returned to the Wolastoq each year in the late 1940s, but that was a fraction of the number that returned prior to industrialization.

In recent years, fewer than 500 wild fish have returned annually to the Mactaquac dam, though 2026 has seen a modest increase. This decline is associated with multiple interacting pressures, including poor marine survival, habitat impacts, barriers to fish passage, climate change, invasive species and pollution.

For the Wolastoqiyik, however, this is more than a conservation issue. Polamuwok, Atlantic salmon, are kin. They have been central to Wolastoqey food systems, culture, ceremony, community well-being and responsibilities to future generations since time immemorial.

The closure of salmon fisheries on the Wolastoq in 1998 reduced opportunities for harvesting, cultural practices and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge. The continued absence of harvestable salmon also affects the practical exercise of constitutionally protected food, social and ceremonial fishing rights.

The Mactaquac biodiversity facility has been part of the salmon conservation story on the Wolastoq for more than five decades. It was established in 1968 through a memorandum of agreement between the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and the New Brunswick Electric Power Corporation in recognition of the impact the construction of the Mactaquac generating station would have on Atlantic salmon in the river. The 1968 agreement assigned the federal government responsibility for operating, maintaining, repairing and

replacing the facility whose purpose included maintaining salmon populations in the Wolastoq.

The facility's role has evolved with science and, since 2001, it has primarily supported smolt-to-adult supplementation in the Tobique River, the largest salmon-bearing tributary in the Wolastoq system. It has also supported a live gene bank for endangered inner Bay of Fundy salmon as well as research, public education and monitoring. These programs are not presented as a solution to poor marine survival, which remains a major limiting factor. Their purpose is to preserve genetic diversity, maintain spawning capacity and freshwater production and keep recovery options available until marine conditions improve.

That distinction is important when evaluating the facility. Low numbers of naturally returning adults reflect cumulative mortality across the salmon life cycle, including freshwater migration, hydro power facilities and marine survival. They do not on their own demonstrate that freshwater conservation programs have no value. The conservation objective is to maintain a viable biological foundation for recovery.

Our submission therefore focuses on continuity during a period of transition. When the closure of the Mactaquac biodiversity facility was announced in January of this year, the Wolastoqey took action to ensure vital polamuwok conservation programs were maintained.

In July of this year, the minister acknowledged the necessity of the Tobique program and agreed to an extension for the Mactaquac biodiversity facility while partners work toward realizing this transition.

Our submission proposes an interim approach that keeps the Mactaquac biodiversity facility operating while DFO, Wolastoqey nations, New Brunswick Power and other partners develop a long-term governance and operational model. Our vision is that the Tobique's smolt-to-adult supplementation program will be maintained and ultimately expanded while creating greater opportunities for Wolastoqey leadership participation in decision-making authority.

This is also an opportunity to consider lessons from DFO's Pacific region, where federally funded salmon facilities support enhancement, research, monitoring, education and partnerships with indigenous communities and local organizations.

The central theme of our submission is that Atlantic salmon recovery must be considered not only in terms of immediate fish numbers but also in terms of the restoration capacity, knowledge, infrastructure, genetic resources and relationships that must be maintained for recovery to remain possible.

• (1555)

The recovery of polamuwok will not be possible overnight. It will require sustained investment and co-operation from all levels of government and industry. In many senses, polamuwok recovery will be a nation-building project.

For the Wolastoqey people, restoring—

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): You can wrap up. We're at five minutes.

Colin Curry: I'm almost finished.

For the Wolastoqey people, restoring polamuwok means restoring both an endangered population and an enduring relationship between people and the river and salmon.

Woliwon. Thank you and *merci* for the opportunity to address the committee.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you to all of the witnesses.

Five minutes go by really quickly.

I'd like to turn now, in our first round of questioning, to Mr. Bragdon, who is no stranger to this committee, having served in previous parliaments here.

Mr. Bragdon, go ahead for six minutes.

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

Thank you to each of the witnesses today. It was nice to hear each of your testimonies. We listened, and you all brought a very important perspective to the table on this absolutely vital subject, which is especially important to the Atlantic region and in my district in particular as well, obviously.

Dr. Curry was speaking about the Saint John River, the Wolastoqey way and the importance of salmon not only to the Wolastoqey people but also to the entire history of our province, whether it's the sports fishery, the recreational fishery or a first nations community. Of course, when you get into the Miramichi in New Brunswick and the mighty Miramichi River, the importance of salmon to recreational fisheries or sport fisheries cannot be overemphasized. All of us want to see a healthy recovery of salmon stocks, and we know the challenges ahead are great.

I'd like to direct my question to you, Dr. Curry.

We know that the Mactaquac biodiversity facility, which I had the privilege of visiting this summer, supports the Tobique smolts and basically the smolt-to-adult supplementation program. How important is it that there is no gap in the program while long-term approaches to salmon recovery are being developed?

Colin Curry: In my opinion, that would be critically important. Unfortunately, this spring, due to the uncertainty at the time, smolts

were not collected. However, pre-smolt collection is currently ongoing in conjunction with the Tobique First Nation's aboriginal fisheries strategy program and NB Power.

The reason there needs to be continuity in the programs and that we can't just pause this for a few years is that if we do, then we lose out on the opportunity to really build momentum with the in-river component of the program, where the adults that have returned for spawning are given a chance to produce new offspring. Hopefully, the number of offspring that we're building over time will increase. However, without that supplementation, it would have to be conducted solely by wild spawning, and that will be a challenge in the coming few years with the temporary closure of the fish passage facilities.

Richard Bragdon: Thanks, Dr. Curry. I have to squeeze in a few questions here in a short period of time.

Having been in discussions with both the chief at Kingsclear First Nation and the chief and those who work at Tobique First Nation with regard to salmon recovery, I know that the absolutely vital importance of this program and the Mactaquac biodiversity facility and the great work they do cannot be overstated.

Do you believe that there was adequate consultation with the Wolastoqey First Nation when they made the initial decision and since then in developing a strategy going forward?

• (1600)

Colin Curry: I would say that prior to the announcement of the closure, the consultation hadn't been adequate. It caught all of our communities off guard. In years prior, we had even been discussing with the DFO the potential options for replacement of the facility or for upgrades to that facility because, obviously, being a 50-year-old facility, it needed some upgrading.

Since July—

Richard Bragdon: Thank you, Dr. Curry.

I want to ask you, as well as Mr. Bagnall and Mr. Mills, about salmon in New Brunswick in both river systems. We've had many reports done by this committee and others. Many studies have been conducted. Many announcements have been made.

In all of your estimations, has there been meaningful uptake and action in the areas that have been identified in the reports to this point and in what has been given anecdotally but also from those closest to the situation for years as to practical steps that could be done to help with the recovery of salmon stocks?

I'll start with you, Mr. Bagnall. Then I'll go to Mr. Mills and end with Dr. Curry. Thank you. Please speak quickly on this.

John Bagnall (Biologist, Save Miramichi Salmon Inc.): DFO has raised the commercial limit to 175,000 bass, but in my opinion and in my calculation, this is not nearly enough. In the last few years, the survival of bass has really increased. It has doubled over the 2000s.

There is so much recruitment and so many new fish entering the population that the harvest has to be increased—probably, in an initial year, to get it down to 100,000—to 450,000 bass a year. That probably would be 300,000 commercial and 150,000 recreational. It should stay above 100,000 for a while.

Richard Bragdon: Thank you so much.

I'll turn to the other two now.

I have 45 seconds, so you'll each have about 15 to 20 seconds, please.

Alex Mills: If you are addressing it to me, no, I don't think they have at all. John knows the numbers on it. We see what is not happening on the river. We see the loss of salmon. We see the loss of business. We see the frustration of first nations. They may have a quota, but they need capacity building. DFO has not been there to assist them on that front, so—

Richard Bragdon: Thank you. I'm sorry to cut you off, but maybe you can get that in during the next round.

Dr. Curry, can you finish it off?

Colin Curry: I would say the track record is mixed. On the capacity note, there was a program set up to help first nations with capacity. It lasted for a year and then kind of fell by the wayside. Obviously, there has been help through aboriginal fisheries strategy programs over the years, but funding for many of those programs has remained stagnant for certain communities.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you. I will have to stop it there.

We'll turn to Mr. Cormier, please, for six minutes.

Serge Cormier (Acadie—Bathurst, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. You're doing a great job so far. Keep it up.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Serge Cormier: Thank you to all the witnesses who are with us today.

I'll start with you, Mr. Anderson. You talked a little bit about some of the factors in the decline of Atlantic salmon. Can you please give us your opinion on what the three main causes of the decline are that we're seeing in the Atlantic Canadian rivers today, and maybe more in New Brunswick, if you want?

Gary Anderson: The big decline on the Miramichi is related to the striper population. Observing the salmon returning, it's most serious in the tributaries of the northwest branch of the Miramichi. That's the prime area for striper spawning and it's having the most serious effect on salmon. In general, however, the big threats are from aquaculture. I used to fish the inner Bay of Fundy rivers, which are now void of salmon. That happened when the aquacul-

ture industry developed in the Bay of Fundy. I would put that right up there with the striped bass for the Miramichi area.

Otherwise, we have some positive news on building habitat on the rivers, with cold-water refuges and so forth, but we need to enhance the production of parrs, using such things as kelt regeneration and smolt-to-adult rearing.

● (1605)

Serge Cormier: Mr. Anderson, maybe I can ask a question—I have only six minutes—about striped bass. So far, almost every single witness who's come in front of this committee has had this opinion on striped bass: There are too many and they are probably one of the causes of the lower return of the Atlantic salmon population. Why do you think DFO scientists have not acknowledged that yet?

Gary Anderson: It's beyond me. I can't figure that out either. They're supposed to ensure balance in the ecosystem, and there's no management of the bass that would restore balance in any way.

Serge Cormier: What is the number that we should harvest in the next three to five years if we want to give the salmon population a chance, especially in the Miramichi River? I will come back to some other rivers with some of the other witnesses, but scientifically, is there a number in the research you have done that would be optimal?

Gary Anderson: No, the number is best provided by those other than myself.

Decades ago, I never caught a striped bass, and there were certainly none upriver. Now, they are in the salmon pools, living among the salmon and devouring the juveniles.

Serge Cormier: Mr. Anderson, if I read correctly, you have a fishing camp on the Miramichi River, so you've seen first hand what has been happening in the last couple of years with striped bass. Do you catch striped bass right in front of your cottage?

Gary Anderson: Yes, I catch them here, but I am about five kilometres above the head of tide, and the head of tide is where you catch them in the spring spawning season and in the fall.

Serge Cormier: The Miramichi River is recognized as the river where striped bass spawn, but with the increase in the population of striped bass, do you think we may see that happen in another river in the Gaspé Peninsula, for example, or another river in New Brunswick? Will striped bass spawn in other rivers, not only in the Miramichi River, if we don't do something?

Gary Anderson: Absolutely. They used to spawn, to my knowledge, exclusively in the northwest branch. In the last five to eight years, they've started spawning in the southwest Miramichi as well. If my research is correct, there used to be a spawning population in the St. Lawrence as far upstream as Montreal, which was destroyed by the Expo 67 construction. There's a National Film Board film showing the bass spawning there.

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Anderson.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

We go now to Mr. Deschênes for six minutes.

[Translation]

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

Good afternoon, everyone. I'm happy to be here and to resume this study.

I will start with you, Mr. Murphy, since you are right from my town, in Gaspé. Mr. Murphy, you have been in business since 2025. What we're seeing, according to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, is that Atlantic salmon populations are experiencing a long-term widespread decline. Is that what you are seeing, too?

• (1610)

Andrew Murphy: What we have seen and what is very concerning, I think, for all of Canada, is that in 2024 and 2025, there was a sudden widespread decline in Atlantic salmon populations throughout the province. For everything that flowed into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, whether species from New Brunswick or Nova Scotia, we have seen declines of 30% to 60%, and even more than 60%, in all rivers.

Alexis Deschênes: We saw that in Gaspé as well.

Andrew Murphy: That was seen in Gaspé, on Côte-Nord and in Nova Scotia. It was seen in New Brunswick as well.

Alexis Deschênes: How was it this summer?

Andrew Murphy: This summer, the populations seem to have come closer to the historical averages of the last 10 years, excluding 2024 and 2025, of course. We are waiting for the final numbers for Quebec.

Alexis Deschênes: What is unique about your company is that you do sport fishing. You take people fishing for salmon, but also fishing for striped bass. You saw it as a business opportunity, right?

Andrew Murphy: Yes, that's right.

I don't think we're the only ones. As you can see, all the maritime provinces have fishing economies dedicated to striped bass. It is an accessible fish that can be fished from shore without a special permit or access. What's more, access isn't privatized. Both species present fishing opportunities.

Alexis Deschênes: Is striped bass fishing popular among your customers?

Andrew Murphy: I would say it's about fifty-fifty in terms of our customer volumes right now.

Alexis Deschênes: Earlier, you mentioned some figures. You said that, in Quebec, the fishery contributes \$37 million to GDP and could represent up to 400 jobs. Is that right?

Andrew Murphy: That is correct. That comes from a study that was commissioned by the Government of Quebec. However, we do not have the methodology that was used, the specific results or the information on how they arrived at that number, but we do know that there is a sizable fishery and economy in Quebec, yes, but also in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island.

Alexis Deschênes: You are not a biologist, but do you think there is a way for the two species, striped bass and Atlantic salmon, to coexist?

Andrew Murphy: There's no doubt that, historically, the two have coexisted. The presence of striped bass seems very new to us, but keep in mind that the first written mention of striped bass in Canada dates back to 1853. There concerns about species decline or extinction back then. Yes, that was in 1853. It has been a long time since we have had healthy stocks of striped bass in Canada. Today, there is no denying that the population is healthy and present.

Alexis Deschênes: You are also in the Cascapédia. Are you seeing striped bass come up the river?

Andrew Murphy: We see them occasionally. It depends greatly on ocean temperatures throughout the summer and on small prey fish, baitfish, returns.

Alexis Deschênes: The other rivers in Gaspé are also seeing striped bass going upriver. Isn't that right?

Andrew Murphy: Some rivers are seeing it more than others. For example, there seems to be a larger presence in the Matapédia. However, remember that in comparison with a river like the Bonaventure, the Matapédia has a lot more prey fish and feeding opportunities for a fish like the striped bass, but also more of any other type of fish.

Alexis Deschênes: That brings me back to this idea. Is there a way, in your opinion, for the species to coexist, so that we can not only develop the striped bass sport fishing sector, but also—and especially—maintain Atlantic salmon stocks and halt their decline?

Andrew Murphy: Yes. I do not see why it would be impossible for the two species to coexist. I think it would be particularly interesting to obtain clear, specific scientific data on the problems related to the coexistence of the two species.

Alexis Deschênes: Regarding the presence of striped bass, how did it go for you this summer when you took your customers out fishing? Was there a substantial presence?

Andrew Murphy: This summer, it rained a lot in Gaspé. We didn't do a lot of striped bass fishing trips. This summer was a bit more focused on Atlantic salmon, but for the trips we did do, we found the quantities of striped bass we expected.

Alexis Deschênes: Okay. According to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, one of the causes of the salmon decline is predation. There are discussions to determine the extent to which striped bass is responsible for the salmon decline, but certainly, it eats it. That is happening.

One of the ideas we could suggest is to increase striped bass fishing, to increase recreational fishing. We could even suggest commercial fishing. That isn't yet mentioned in the Government of Quebec's striped bass management plan, released this summer, but when we look at the scientific opinions on striped bass, we see that the level isn't that far from the threshold for opening a commercial fishery. What do you think of that?

Andrew Murphy: Indeed, remember that, currently, COSEWIC considers the striped bass situation to be of particular concern. COSEWIC is currently redoing the analysis for stock management. In the coming months, we expect to have COSEWIC's opinion on the general condition of the striped bass population in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence. I think it will be very important, at the very least, to wait for that meta-analysis in order to better understand our population.

• (1615)

Alexis Deschênes: We can look into the future a bit. Already, we are seeing striped bass stocks increase. That is what we are seeing in the most recent scientific opinion. Do you think striped bass commercial fishing in Chaleur Bay is doable without compromising your sport fishing business?

Andrew Murphy: First and foremost, I support clear and specific scientific opinions. In Canada, we have a fairly well-developed management plan for marine species, whether we are talking about striped bass or other species. Limit reference points, as they're called, are established, for both minimum and maximum population thresholds, to categorize stock health as healthy, cautious, or below a minimum conservation threshold. These are understandable data that are applied to all species in the same way in Canada. I think we really need to focus on scientific opinions and let our team and our scientific adviser work on defining what could be reasonable harvest limits.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Deschênes. That was six minutes.

We'll now move to the second round of questioning, for five minutes each, starting with Mr. Small.

Clifford Small (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for appearing today.

My first question is for Mr. Mills.

Mr. Mills, are you familiar with the captive adult rearing program for the Miramichi River, modelled after what's been taking place on the Petitcodiac?

Alex Mills: I think John would have more information on that. I'm generally familiar with it, but John can speak to it much more knowledgeably than I can.

Clifford Small: Okay.

Go ahead, John.

John Bagnall: Yes, I'm familiar with it. It's captive adult rearing the same as the smolt-to-adult supplementation that happens. You catch wild smolts and you grow them into adulthood in the hatchery. Yes, I'm familiar with it.

Clifford Small: How does that differ from the standard hatcheries that we've seen operating over the years on our rivers?

John Bagnall: Standard hatcheries spawn the adults in the hatchery then raise the progeny, and the progeny are distributed for stocking. Standard hatcheries compensate for a lack of freshwater habitat, and the other, captive adult rearing, or SAS, compensates for poor marine conditions.

Clifford Small: How many times did the Miramichi Salmon Association and folks who you know were partnering on this put that proposal forward to DFO?

John Bagnall: Well, I think CAST was in the late 2010s. They put it in, and they raised about 4,500 fish. Then, at the last minute, they were cut off. They were told they couldn't stock the fish.

The MSA has applied multiple times since then. As a matter of fact, this past year, it was successful in getting.... We have about 700 or 800 fish in the hatchery now, 700 or 800 post-smolts, but they were rejected about two or three times. I can't remember how many times, two, three or four times.

Clifford Small: What was that rejection based on? There's been a lot of water under the bridge since you first applied and a drastic drop in the salmon on your river.

John Bagnall: What was it based on? I assume that there were genetic problems. They have genetic problems. It's based on the poor Millstream study that was done for CAST. It's done on dogma, probably. A lot of it is dogma. I mean, we have mitigation for a lot of the problems that they.... Who knows? We have solutions for a lot of the problems that they presuppose exist.

Clifford Small: Do you think DFO was going under internal scientific assessment and evidence, or were there external forces lobbying them to stay away from—

John Bagnall: Yes, I see what you mean. Yes, I think there was external pressure. I'm sure there was.

There's a lot of literature out there suggesting that hatcheries are not a good thing, but a lot of those things can be mitigated with knowledge. We have world-class people among our organizations who could do research and mitigate a lot of the problems, either actual or theoretical, that they would think of.

• (1620)

Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Bagnall.

Mr. Mills, I heard you speak a lot about the need for stocking and salmon enhancement. We know that B.C. has 70 hatcheries that are partially or fully funded by the federal government and a couple of new superhatcheries with massive amounts of funding announced recently.

Do you think there's a double standard when it comes to enhancing B.C. rivers and Atlantic Canadian rivers? There are five provinces that have Atlantic salmon. Isn't that correct?

Alex Mills: Yes, there certainly appears to be a double standard.

There are a whole bunch of creative ways that hatcheries can be used. I think, generally speaking, we're probably not as hatchery bound as they are on the west coast, but using hatcheries creatively and the SAS program.... There are apparitions everywhere and risks everywhere that seem to frighten DFO, but there are very reliable, proven ways to use hatcheries in the manner that they should be used. We need that right now on the Miramichi.

DFO did come around and allow a SAS-type of stocking this year. Our organization—it's not something we're proud of, we only do it as a last resort—had started a judicial review of their initial refusal to allow a SAS-type of stocking. They did seem, at the end of it, to come around.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Mills.

We're now going to Mr. Cormier for five minutes, please.

[Translation]

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Murphy, I am glad you are here. I have been fishing in your region since 2006. I've had the chance to fish with many outfitters, going there with many friends that I have made over the years.

Since the very beginning, we have spoken mainly about striped bass, which may be problematic for the species. This year, I went on the Grande Cascapédia, the Bonaventure and the Petite Cascapédia. On the Grande Cascapédia, this year, the salmon return was particularly good compared with other years.

In your opinion, what do these new numbers show? There is a bit more salmon this year than last year. The numbers weren't expected to be very high, but nonetheless, there was an increase in the Bonaventure river as well and in the Petite Cascapédia, if I read the numbers correctly. In your opinion, why was it different this year?

Andrew Murphy: Unfortunately, I cannot answer that and I think there is a large scientific community that would like to get that answer. I would repeat that, as you, yourself, noted, 2024 and 2025 were marked by a sudden and widespread decline in Atlantic salmon in Canada. This suggests that it was likely caused by a marine impact when the migration of young salmon was impacted, when all the smolts are together. Unfortunately, I am not a scientist. I do not have a clear solution.

Serge Cormier: Let's talk as fishermen.

Andrew Murphy: Yes, let's talk as fishermen.

Serge Cormier: In 2024 and 2025, we know that there was a drought and that the river temperatures were unusually high. Some rivers in your area may have had to be closed for a while, but fewer than in New Brunswick. This year, there was much more rain, much cooler temperatures. Do you think this may also have been a factor in why we saw more salmon return to our rivers?

Andrew Murphy: That is not necessarily the case, because in 2024 and 2025, some rivers had high water levels with good conditions for a return of Atlantic salmon, but Atlantic salmon did not return to those rivers. We know, then, that there is a general problem somewhere.

Serge Cormier: There are many factors. We cannot just say that it is striped bass, but we know that that is one factor among many others. One witness who appeared before the committee, a fishing guide in the Matapédia region, if I am not mistaken, also spoke of seal. Seal, mainly at sea, could potentially have an impact on salmon survival. Do you agree regarding seal predation?

Andrew Murphy: There may be seal predation. Certainly, there may also be an impact on the biomass of prey fish in general, which could then limit the development of adult salmon. There again, there is no clear and specific data on the interactions of seal predation on salmon at its various stages of life. Those data are difficult to obtain. It requires harvesting adult seals and analyzing their stomach contents. Once again, it is hard to say that it is really due to predation. We know that the Gulf of St. Lawrence isn't necessarily faring well in terms of oceanographic conditions. We are seeing major changes in temperature and current, and we are also seeing some collapse in the base of the food chain.

• (1625)

Serge Cormier: You also mentioned habitat restoration. When we talk about salmon habitat, whether we are fishermen or scientists, we all know that having adequate retention basins is very important, so as not to touch certain areas called runnels, where the water is colder. We are also seeing logging coming increasingly close to rivers when we go into the woods. In your opinion, habitat restoration is probably also very important. Do you hope the strategy for Atlantic salmon will allocate funding directly to habitat restoration?

Andrew Murphy: Yes, that is my hope, for sure. That said, I think a case-by-case analysis based on the drainage basins is necessary. There are very healthy drainage basins, with habitats that are hardly damaged, and yet, we are seeing significant declines in Atlantic salmon in those drainage basins as well. We know it will be very important to provide better access to the runnels and tributaries. In Quebec, we hope to petition to have all tributaries flowing into Atlantic salmon rivers be considered as forming part of the Atlantic salmon rivers, in order to obtain specific forestry protections, among other things.

Serge Cormier: I have only 30 seconds of speaking time left and I do not know whether I'll be able to ask you any more questions.

Andrew Murphy: I will speak fast.

Serge Cormier: If you had any recommendations for the committee on ensuring the survival of Atlantic salmon and seeing significantly higher returns of salmon to our rivers, what would your three priorities be? What would your three solutions be?

Andrew Murphy: We should have an approach heavily based on science. I recommend that everyone here listen to the scientific committees. We do very good Atlantic salmon research in Canada. At the end of the day, that is really it. We should also support small community organizations, so they can implement the long-standing research in their environments. Obviously, we must also focus on what is happening offshore. When we talk about what is happening offshore, we are also talking about what is happening in the high seas and North Atlantic. Again, I come back to this point. We know there is a general decline. It is affecting the entire Atlantic salmon population.

Serge Cormier: Thank you.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

We'll now move to Mr. Deschênes for two and a half minutes, please.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My questions are for the representatives of Save Miramichi Salmon Inc.

Mr. Mills, I understand that you launched a challenge against the Department of Fisheries and Oceans owing to its management of striped bass in the Miramichi River, among other things. Where are you with that?

[English]

Alex Mills: We are waiting for a decision on a motion by DFO to have our case thrown out summarily. It's been sitting with the courts since last December. It's an unusual length of time, but that's where that action is at the moment.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: The department's studies seem to conclude that, in the Miramichi River, the results were inconclusive. However, you are challenging the results of those studies. Could you please explain the basis of your challenge?

[English]

Alex Mills: I might go over to John on that science question. I think there's additional science that comes into play there.

John Bagnall: They concluded that the results were inconclusive. From what I can understand, it's explained in research document 2022/030. They found a significant effect of bass predation on tagged smolts for the northwest Miramichi, but not for the southwest Miramichi. I think that's the basis whereby it can't be concluded that bass are the problem.

However, the author had three or four more years of data available that he could have used. He published it in 2022 and he only used up to 2016. When you plug in the available years after that and put them into a regression formula, both rivers are significant. Bass significantly affect the population from both rivers—the northwest Miramichi and the southwest Miramichi. I think that's what DFO is leaning on to say that there's no effect. Perhaps not, but that's what I understand.

• (1630)

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Deschênes.

We'll now move to Mr. Lewis for five minutes, please.

Chris Lewis (Essex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

For full disclosure, I'm very new to this committee, so I'm listening keenly.

However, I'm not new to the world of fishing or outfitting. I am an angler and also an outfitter myself, and I continue to be to this day. I'm certainly not from the Atlantic, but I live squarely in the middle of the Great Lakes and a lot of these issues are very close to the very issues that we face in the Great Lakes. It's everything from restocking, where I think about our lake trout, which have been restocked in Lake Huron and are now doing very well, to our yellow perch, which are being eaten out of house and home by the amazing walleye on Lake Erie. I'm duly aware of these.

I understand there have been three reports done. In 2017, the Atlantic salmon study was done. I believe it was by this committee. In 2022, it was on the striped bass. In 2023, there was the pinniped study. In 2017, there were 17 recommendations brought forward by the committee, and I'm sure they were brought to the House of Commons. In 2022, there were 12 recommendations, and then in 2023, there was the pinniped report. That's a lot of recommendations that have been brought forward.

Dr. Anderson, you had spoken about ensuring that indigenous communities have a say in this. I went through quite a few of the recommendations. A lot of times they talk about this. To your knowledge, have you seen any of these recommendations done to help out with our Atlantic salmon population?

Gary Anderson: No. I'm not familiar with the details of that.

Chris Lewis: Thank you, sir.

Mr. Mills, would you be able to weigh in on this? Are you aware of these studies?

What I'm trying to get to is—and anybody can weigh in on this, by the way—that of all these recommendations, what has DFO or the government done to implement these recommendations?

Alex Mills: I'll weigh in, if I may. My understanding is that the recommendations that came out of the 2019 report from FOPO had not been implemented.

I think that's one of the issues we raise in regard to this. If there are recommendations from this committee on this occasion, they should be coupled to a subcommittee that is involved in monitoring the implementation of those recommendations.

That's our understanding of that tranche of recommendations.

I might add to that, if I could, very quickly, that one of the things on our mind is that DFO in Moncton is so bound by process, procedure, policy and risk aversion that it's hard for them to move nimbly. Some form of management that brings the issues closer to the river is something that should be included in the committee's work. I know that in Quebec, there are the ZEC systems. I don't know the extent to which there are models there or in other places. I know that the first nations on the Miramichi have put forward a localized management model.

To us, as long as Moncton is managing this, they're going to be bound by practices, policies and procedures that make it very difficult, when in fact we know that when the minister turned her attention to it, she was able to change a quota for the indigenous fishery very quickly. At a senior level, it can be done to respond to the needs and to the necessities to keep a balanced fishery.

• (1635)

Chris Lewis: I really appreciate that.

I know that I'm just about out of time. Hopefully, I'll get another round. I have a lot of questions.

Thank you, sir.

Alex Mills: Okay, good.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Lewis.

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

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

This question is for Mr. Mills, whose opening statement I found fascinating.

I would like you to expand on a number of points, Mr. Mills.

Why do you think there's such a resistance from DFO in recognizing the problem that striped bass are becoming in maritime Canada?

Alex Mills: We are mystified, and I think others who have testified are also mystified as to why not. No, we know—

Robert Morrissey: Does striped bass provide any...? The striped bass are not a commercial fishery of any value.

Alex Mills: They are. There is a strong economy associated with striped bass. I don't know if that's the driver, because you have good economic returns from that fishery for a month or two.

However, if things were in balance across all the species, you would have a great opportunity for the indigenous fishery to generate income. There is an opportunity for a strong sport fishery for striped bass. It's there now, but if things were in balance, there would be a strong striped bass fishery for the months of April through to June. Then, if balance were there, there would be a strong Atlantic salmon fishery that would carry through until September. Again, I'm told that there could also be a strong sport fishery again in the fall and, first and foremost, a strong contribution to the economies of the first nations, who have first dibs.

There are also recent efforts by the Maritime Fishermen's Union to partner with the first nations on the first nations quota to add some economic benefit to that sector of the fishery on the Miramichi.

Balance is a win-win-win. There is a market. The first nations, the MFU and members of our organization all identify that there is a strong demand for Miramichi striped bass in the New England market. If it were in balance, it would be beneficial all around. Why DFO is defending this explosion of striped bass, nobody knows.

Robert Morrissey: Mr. Mills, if I'm quoting you accurately, you referenced the roadblock in Moncton. Could you elaborate? I take it you're talking about the regional DFO office in Moncton.

Alex Mills: Yes, it's the regional DFO office.

We've taken a more strident approach than others, but we did start with a request to the minister to address what are fairly basic steps that they could take to manage and balance striped bass with other fisheries. The minister gave us a perfunctory response but sent us to Moncton. We went to Moncton to meet with them, and we were essentially dismissed. There was no interest in Moncton in talking to us. Moncton seems to be uninterested in talking to stakeholders. They are not inviting to outside scientific advice.

The work that John has done in terms of communicating with some stellar former DFO scientists in regard to these issues and the work that UNB is doing in their rivers institute is all high-end science that DFO appears to not be interested in discussing.

The partnership that was proposed between the MFU and the first nations in regard to MFU fishing on first nations quota was rejected by DFO. I don't know the reason or the details, but that was feedback received from both those entities at a recent meeting on the Miramichi.

● (1640)

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Mills.

That's time for Mr. Morrissey.

We'll now move on to Mr. Small for five minutes.

Clifford Small: Mr. Chair, my question is for Mr. Mills, with reference to Mr. Morrissey's question on the reluctance of DFO to recognize the abundance of striped bass in the maritimes and act on it.

Mr. Mills, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans is the minister with the broadest sweeping power in the federal government. With a stroke of a pen, the minister and her many predecessors, since the Atlantic salmon study was done in 2017, and then the striped bass study and the pinniped study, could say to their department...she's the boss over her department.

Do you think that the various ministers of fisheries that we've had over the last 11 years could have done more to save Atlantic salmon?

Alex Mills: Absolutely. There's no question about that.

She has the power. She did make an effort recently by upping the first nations quota. Unfortunately... I know what Mr. Curry was commenting on. The first nations are telling us they need processing capacity. I am not a commercial fisher, but I know a little, and you need processing to have good product to get to market. They need that, so a quota of 175,000 is meaningless unless the producer can process it and get it to market. There seems to be a willingness between the first nations and the traditional net fishery to work together to fill a quota, but there is not the capacity to process it.

Yes, the minister could have done more. She could have directed increases in bag limits for the sport fishery. There are a number of simple steps the minister could take to reduce the amount of striped bass. Absolutely.

Clifford Small: My next question is for Mr. Bagnall. It's about the recommendation in the striped bass study to have the slot size

changed and to remove the maximum size length restriction of 65 centimetres.

What do you think the impact of catching a bass that's 80 centimetres long would be—that's a spawner—versus catching a 40-centimetre fish, in terms of the egg production?

John Bagnall: I don't think very many 40-centimetre fish would be gravid females. Supposedly, the egg production fecundity of a female striped bass is 150,000 to 250,000 eggs per kilogram, so you would have to figure out the weights.

I don't know, Dr. Anderson, what it would be. However, you're not going to get any eggs out of a 40-centimetre one. Those huge fish are going to produce a lot of eggs.

● (1645)

Clifford Small: Thank you.

John Bagnall: An 80-centimetre bass is going to produce a heck of a lot of eggs.

Clifford Small: I have a different type of question for you now. It's about where the run of a river has to be before DFO will step in and take action.

Is there a number on that? Is it 250 or 350? How low does it have to be before DFO will consider that run to be endangered?

John Bagnall: Is that for bass?

Clifford Small: No, it's for salmon. I'm sorry.

John Bagnall: For salmon, they go by egg deposition. It's a system called the precautionary approach. For the northwest Miramichi, that number is 1.76 eggs per square metre of wetted habitat. For the southwest Miramichi, it's 1.52. You need enough female fish to give you 1.52 eggs for the southwest and 1.76 for the northwest. That's—

Clifford Small: Where are you now?

John Bagnall: They're way below that now. I'm going from memory here, but the northwest is at 0.25 versus 1.76.

Clifford Small: That sounds like negligence on the part of the government, letting it get that low.

John Bagnall: It's really getting low. It's getting really bad. It's about double that in the southwest, but again, it's about a third—

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Mr. Bagnall, I have to stop you there.

Perhaps you'll get another round here, Mr. Small.

I'm moving on now to Mr. Cormier for five minutes.

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm sorry. I think this is for Mr. Curry regarding the Mactaquac biodiversity facility.

My colleague Mr. Bragdon was asking a question of you earlier. Just to clarify, I think there's talk already going on with the government—DFO and the minister's office—and even the Province of New Brunswick to see what can be done for the facility.

Is that right?

Colin Curry: I'm not aware of the province's involvement with discussions right now. However, I am aware that DFO and New Brunswick Power have been meeting, and we've been party to some of those meetings, to discuss the transition for the facility. I believe that NB Power has a strong interest in seeing the smolt-to-adult supplementation program continue to operate into the future. In my opinion, they share our vision to see the program expand.

Serge Cormier: From what I remember, there are also different kinds of programs at the facility, right? Can you outline some of those programs, please, quickly for us?

Colin Curry: Yes, sure.

There were a number of programs related to inner Bay of Fundy salmon. That is a different population, and those fish were a part of the live gene bank for Big Salmon River, which is to the east of Saint John. Also, there happened to be some Atlantic sturgeon at the facility.

My understanding, in speaking with other partners and colleagues, is that the inner Bay of Fundy programs are now being transitioned to other operators. Fort Folly First Nation is taking over the Big Salmon River work, in addition to their work on the Petitcodiac River. They're doing that in partnership with Cooke Aquaculture. The sturgeon that were there are undergoing a staged release. Those fish were not being utilized for research or any any kind of conservation program.

There are also, unfortunately, education programs that are no longer operating, such as Fish Friends, which has really gone by the wayside. The research that the facility supported, trying to understand salmon biology, is also.... There are currently no real research-related programs happening at the facility.

Serge Cormier: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Curry.

Mr. Mills, I think you said that there were more than 76,000 or 75,000 grilse returning in 2011 and fewer than 7,000 in 2025. You're also suggesting, I think, that we need to reduce the striped bass to 100,000, but you're also saying that we need an initial harvest of 450,000. Is that right?

• (1650)

Alex Mills: Again, yes, that's right, but I would—

Serge Cormier: Okay, but before going further, if it's right, on what do you base your 450,000 for year one, two or three? Is it based on scientific fact? Is it just what you're seeing on the river? Explain to us the process of getting to that number.

Alex Mills: As I say, I'll punt to John on that. He's the man with the numbers.

John Bagnall: That number, 450,000, is probably, in the first year, to be able to get the bass spawning population down to

100,000 within three years. That is due to the huge fecundity and the huge, what they call, recruitment of bass. That's the replacement. Those are the three-year-old, four-year-old and five-year-old fish that are entering the population.

So many fish have spawned in the past that you're going to get massive recruitment, and when you propose 175,000, as is the case now, that will keep the population pattering along but at a really high level where it will affect salmon. In order to get it down to 100,000, you have to, to use a banking term, get into the principle. You have to knock them down. That's what the 450,000 does.

Then you need 350,000 or 250,000—I don't have numbers in front of me—and then for five or six years after that, you have to keep the population elevated because of the past fish, the recruitment that's coming through.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Cormier. That's five minutes.

We'll go now to Mr. Deschênes for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for you, Mr. Mills. I am trying to clearly understand something. I understand that on the Miramichi, commercial fishing is authorized. According to what I see in the most recent scientific opinion, 125,000 striped bass can be fished. Is the problem that the quota allocations aren't large enough or that there aren't enough harvesters?

[English]

Alex Mills: That quota is for the first nations, to my understanding. There's no traditional non-indigenous fishery, except for the one that I understand was proposed recently by the Maritime Fishermen's Union to fish on the first nations' quota. I really can't speak to why that quota has not been reached. I wish that some of the guys from the first nations were here because they could address it. I could only speculate as to why that quota was not reached or how close they came to it.

John might have more information on that.

John Bagnall: Yes. I know that Eel Ground is the Natoaganeg—I can't really pronounce it very well; maybe Colin could help me. Anyway, Eel Ground is the primary band that is fishing the bass for all of the first nations in New Brunswick. They had a quota of 50,000 two years ago—I think it was two years ago. Anyway, they asked for 100,000 and they were denied it.

If you wanted to get to 150,000, I'd let Eel Ground go. They did help out another band called Indian Island, but I don't think any of the others had the ability or the desire—I don't know, capability—of getting into it, so a lot of that quota just remained unfished.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Earlier, you said that there was a lack of striped bass processing capacity. In Gaspé, I know that the processing plants have the workers and the time. We could help, if that were the case.

When it comes to commercial fishing in New Brunswick, has consideration been given to granting commercial fishing quotas to non-indigenous harvesters?

[English]

Alex Mills: To my understanding, they have not. I think that's one of the sensitive areas. I really am speaking as an outsider to this whole issue and simply from what we have learned from first nations. However, it's our understanding that, in terms of establishing or re-establishing the traditional non-indigenous fishery, DFO is not prepared to do that. Again this is on information presented to us at a broad stakeholders meeting in September—

• (1655)

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Mills.

That's the time for Mr. Deschênes.

We'll move on to Mr. Lewis now, for five minutes

Chris Lewis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

This is a really good conversation today.

I believe this question would be directed towards Dr. Anderson, but if anybody else wants to jump in, that would be great.

I'm very curious. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, I am an outfitter myself, and I work very closely in far northern Ontario with our indigenous friends and communities, but as an outfitter I understand.... I'm not sure what happens out east or even what happens out west. In Ontario, I know we have lease agreements with them, and it costs a lot of money to run an outfitting business. I'm just curious if anybody has an answer for this.

For outfitters or guides, what has been the economic impact of those outfitters specifically, either on the Atlantic salmon lost or the striped bass increase? Would anybody like to weigh in on this question?

Alex Mills: I might weigh in on that. I was an outfitter for 25 years, and I'm still a professional guide in New Brunswick. The impact is disastrous. It's as simple as that. You can see the salmon camps that are teetering. One in particular has been in operation for 150 years, and it is participating in the striped bass fishery as much as it can. It is taking a big hit. It's public information that their place is on the market. That's the story up and down the river.

I know other camps that are private and have a large staff. They're not catching any salmon, or very few. You cannot run a salmon camp without catching some salmon.

Specific numbers, I don't have. I think a number of outfitters are trying to take full advantage of the presence of striped bass, and

that is offsetting the salmon loss, but I think they're separate markets. They should be able to operate consecutively for a very healthy sportfishing season on the Miramichi, but now the salmon side of it is taking a very large hit, as well as other people—tackle dealers and so on.

Chris Lewis: Thank you for that. I appreciate that very much. I know COVID did—

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Mr. Murphy raised his hand. I think he wanted to respond to that as well.

Chris Lewis: Of course. Please go ahead.

Andrew Murphy: Hi, Mr. Lewis. I'm an outfitter currently operating in Quebec.

To go back to the initial statement, Quebec currently evaluates the impact of striped bass to be around \$37 million a year, with about 400 jobs created. I believe the salmon number is around \$42 million, and I believe the job number is around 600 to 800, but please don't quote me on this one.

There is one number I've always found particularly interesting, as far as the angling economy goes. The American Saltwater Guides Association questioned their partners down in Louisiana to try to evaluate the redfish recreational fishery down there. They asked their guides to track expenses related to their current trip but also income from anglers coming from the outside and spending money within the area. What they concluded—and I can send you this study later—is that the guide will collect, on a 200-day season, about \$120,000 to \$150,000 in wages from his clients. When you calculate flight costs, off-water entertainment, expenses and all of that, it balloons to about \$600,000 contributed to the local economy per guide operating in that area.

We tend to undervalue the benefits that are brought on by the angling community that sport fishes, and redirect attention to commercial impacts and evaluations. As a whole, anglers are very motivated to travel and willing to spend good money to participate in their sport, and in order to do so, they need healthy fisheries. As a guide community and an outfitting community, we need the tools and support from the federal government to make sure that these fisheries stay healthy and that our industry can continue to thrive.

• (1700)

Chris Lewis: Thank you, Mr. Murphy. That was fantastic.

I have one brief statement, please, Mr. Chair.

I really appreciate you speaking about our American friends who come up to fish with us as well. In terms of numbers, this is well over \$100 million that we're talking about—\$37 million, \$42 million, plus the offshoots for our fly-in fisheries and whatnot. I really appreciate that information, and I wish you all the best as well.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Lewis.

Before we go to the next round of questions, there is one more in this round.

Go ahead, Mr. Cormier, for five minutes, please.

Serge Cormier: To continue with these numbers that we just talked about—let's say salmon versus striped bass—I'll start with Mr. Mills first, and then I'll go to Mr. Anderson.

Mr. Mills, in the Miramichi River—and I pass by that river many times a month—there's a lot of activity when it comes to striped bass being harvested. Now, unfortunately, the salmon angling has declined a little bit. What do you make of that when we compare both of them? The striped bass is also a wonderful fishery to experience, whereas the salmon fisheries are not non-existent in the Miramichi River but have slowed down a lot.

Alex Mills: Again, I come back to my earlier comment. It should be there in balance. If you were down in an LRP of around 100,000—and these are the numbers that John is way more fluent in than I am—the talk is that you would have a reasonably healthy salmon run.

Now, that's not to say there aren't pressures in the open ocean. With that aside, if we are in that range of below 100,000 bass spawners, then we have a situation where we could have a healthy bass fishery and also a healthy salmon fishery, a healthy trout fishery and smelt runs, which also have been decimated by striped bass. It's a question of balance.

If I could add to that, the—

Serge Cormier: Thank you.

Mr. Anderson, on the same topic, I know that you've fished in many rivers around the world. You were talking earlier about Russia managing their rivers well. In other rivers, what do you see? What do they do differently from us?

I think you said that close to Greenland or whatever, we're still harvesting 25 tonnes. What do some of those countries do differently?

Gary Anderson: Let me begin by saying that Americans come here to fish for salmon. They have no rivers in the United States where they can fish for an Atlantic salmon. They are much less inclined to come here to fish for striped bass. The salmon is an iconic fish, and that's what people pay the most for.

It varies around the world. Starting here, I fished the George river in northern Quebec many times. That river has no stripers, and the salmon don't migrate beyond the Ungava Bay, so it's a closed system. It was that way in Iceland for many years, and so on.

What they do elsewhere is what we do in our best management systems. They tend to be in Quebec in Gaspé, where the rivers are

locally managed now. The fish are monitored and physically counted by scuba divers twice a year. Those are well managed. They don't, of course, control the offshore situation, but they certainly control the river.

• (1705)

Serge Cormier: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Murphy, do you agree that your rivers are well managed in Quebec?

Andrew Murphy: Yes, I do think that Quebec's river management model is relatively strong, because many decisions are made in the field, drainage basin by drainage basin. This helps us better address the unique and situational challenges of each environment.

Serge Cormier: Do your customers fish more salmon or striped bass?

Andrew Murphy: I would say it's fifty-fifty. We have customers from all over, with Americans making up nearly 60% of our clientele. I would say there is an interest in both species. Yes, there are fishers who come here exclusively for salmon, but we are also starting to see more and more fishers who come exclusively for striped bass fishing.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Cormier. That was bang on five minutes.

Now we'll go to the next round, starting with Mr. Small for five minutes, please.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have some questions for Mr. Murphy, since he made the long journey to come here to be in this room.

Mr. Murphy, a 2023 report from this committee addressed the increased predation by seals. Do you feel that seals are a factor in the diminishing returns of Atlantic salmon?

Andrew Murphy: I feel like they can definitely be a contributing factor, especially if we have scientific data to prove it.

Clifford Small: Recommendation 15 from that report says this:

Pinniped management must be agile and responsive to location-specific factors along each of Canada's three coasts, including impact on the sustainability of prey populations and climate-change driven changes in migratory patterns, behaviours, and diet of predators and prey.

The first part of recommendation 16 goes on to say, "Taking steps to reduce pinniped predation of salmonid and other prey species made vulnerable at 'pinch points' in all Canadian waters".... Steps need to be taken, basically.

This report is three years old. To your knowledge, were recommendations like this followed? Have you seen any increase in seal harvesting or whatnot in Quebec?

Andrew Murphy: I'm not aware. We do have a recreational hunting season for seals in Quebec now, which is managed somewhat. The difficulty with seal seems to be the ability to utilize the carcass of the animal. It is not commonly eaten, and the fur trade, as you are very much aware, has declined tremendously. It's harder to manage a species and reduce its numbers if there's not much of a use, or not a very clear use, for the animal.

Clifford Small: I know there's been some talk by folks in the St. Lawrence estuary about the lack of a striped bass fishery. Do you think it's possible that bass could spill out from the estuary and flood into all of the Gulf of St. Lawrence?

They've been observed as far north as Mary's Harbour, Labrador, which is north of the Strait of Belle Isle, so they've proliferated quite a lot.

Do you feel that the bass population in the estuary of the St. Lawrence is a problem for your salmon populations in that area?

Andrew Murphy: I feel the population in the estuary of the St. Lawrence should definitely be open to recreational fishing. It is a population that went extinct in the late seventies, if I recall properly. Management efforts have been made by Quebec to reintroduce the fishery and expand it back to its native range.

Obviously, we're dealing with a situation that is quite different, with the effects of climate change. Multiple species of cold-water animals are moving farther and farther north as warming waters are changing the dynamics of our oceans.

Again, we have to remember that striped bass are a highly migratory species in the summer months, as they go to their feeding grounds. Then they will follow temperature curves as far north as they can go.

Clifford Small: Thank you.

Then there's recommendation 12 in the 2019 striped bass study, which states that predators of Atlantic salmon should be managed, including a sustainable harvest of grey seals.

What do you think of these recommendations and reports that continue to be produced here and largely ignored?

Andrew Murphy: It's hard to state, definitely. I think the recommendations are all on the right track. The key part in there is, always, "to be sustainably managed". We also have to listen to our science base once they establish things like lower reference points for various populations.

We also have to make sure that the harvesting is indeed conducted in a sustainable way so that the long-term health of the stocks is not affected.

• (1710)

Clifford Small: Is there one recommendation in this study that you would like to see? Would you like to outline it now?

Andrew Murphy: It goes back, again, to the general point: I hope we can listen to our science advisory teams and act upon what

they recommend to us in a swift and efficient way. Give them means, listen and act upon what they recommend.

Clifford Small: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Small.

We now move to Mr. Cormier for five minutes.

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll start with Mr. Curry, but this will be a question for every one of you.

I know you're working on behalf of first nations. I want to begin by saying that I fully recognize the right of first nations to fish for food, social and ceremonial purposes. We also hear that indigenous knowledge and indigenous communities have important roles to play when it comes to the conservation of, let's say, Atlantic salmon, in this case.

At the same time, there are lots of factors, as we were talking about earlier, whether it's striped bass affecting Atlantic salmon, or climate change or this and that. There's also the fact that some first nations still put nets across the river to catch salmon, of course, for food, social and ceremonial.... At the same time, the salmon population is declining.

Do you think we should also talk with the first nations and try to put a pause on that to help the salmon return more in some rivers?

I'll start with you, Mr. Curry, and then I'll go around the screen after that.

Colin Curry: Sure.

I can't speak directly to the situation in the Miramichi. Most of that watershed is not part of the territory of the communities I largely represent. However, within the Wolastoquey system, there hasn't been a food, social and ceremonial harvest since 1998.

There is one community that has a small number of tags for the Restigouche system, and nets are not—

Serge Cormier: Are they using nets also?

Colin Curry: No. Nets are not a permitted form of fishing under that licence. It's fly-fishing. The—

Serge Cormier: I want to go to the others, Mr. Curry.

Mr. Mills, what do you think of that?

Alex Mills: John is closer to the river than I am.

To my knowledge, there is no food and ceremonial fishery on the main southwest Miramichi. I don't think there is one on the northwest either—the other large branch. There's certainly no Marshall fishery, to my knowledge.

John Bagnall: There's a food, social and ceremonial fishery on the northwest....

I don't think first nations fish it that hard anymore, though, and it's based on large salmon. Of course, it would help if there was no gillnetting, because gillnetting is unselective. It takes large female fish and grilse.

There were trap nets. I know the Red Bank Metepenagiag have.... I'm not sure. Eel Ground and Red Bank have trap nets. They can select for grilse, which are mostly male. That would really help. I think there is a 590 AMSW large fish allocation on the northwest Miramichi. I think it's only 10 or something on the southwest.

Yes, gillnetting is unselective.

Serge Cormier: Okay.

Mr. Anderson.

Gary Anderson: There are those trap nets on the northwest, but the model that speaks to your question is that of the Grand-Cascapédia, which is the river that has the most celebrated private clubs. Since the 1980s, it has been moved to the community. The mouth of the river goes through the Maria band lands, and they have traditionally fished with nets.

Over many years, they made arrangements not only to buy out the nets, but to involve the band in outfitting the river. They have a lot of rods that fish it through what are called the Mi'kma'ki Outfitters.

• (1715)

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Anderson.

I have 30 seconds. Go ahead, Mr. Murphy.

Andrew Murphy: I think we have to prioritize access for first nations to their historic rights to Atlantic salmon fishing. I think it's very important to make sure that communities can connect with the fishery in various ways.

We've seen examples like what was mentioned on the Cascapédia River, where fishing rights have been given to the band and its members to outfit and fish on the river and take clients out. We've also seen similar approaches on the Moisie River on the north shore, which led to a voluntary decision by the band to stop netting after they were given access and management rights to capitalize on the angling economy.

I think those are key decisions, but what's most important, I think, is to respect the realities of each individual first nations community.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

We now move to Mr. Deschênes for two and a half minutes, please.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I have a follow-up to my colleague's question. Mr. Murphy, to your knowledge, did the Mi'kmaq place nets at the entrance of the Grande Cascapédia river this summer?

Andrew Murphy: To my knowledge, yes.

Alexis Deschênes: How long did that last?

Andrew Murphy: I do not know the exact details, but it lasted about three to four weeks. It was a confidential agreement between the community and the Quebec government.

Alexis Deschênes: When those nets appeared on the Cascapédia, how did those around you react?

Andrew Murphy: Of course, there was some grumbling, but I think that stems largely from a lack of understanding on the part of some local harvesters and visitors.

Alexis Deschênes: Okay.

Do you have any information on the number of salmon that may have been caught in those nets?

Andrew Murphy: Unfortunately, I do not have any.

Alexis Deschênes: You said that it lasted two or three weeks.

Andrew Murphy: Yes. It may be a bit longer, but I know that it stops at certain times. I know that the fishing is structured by clear definitions and clear commitments from both parties, the Quebec government and the Gesgapeagiag administration.

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Mr. Murphy.

I have a question for Mr. Curry, of the Wolastoqey community.

There is an offshore wind energy development project in Nova Scotia. There's an application to have it recognized as a project of national interest. We are talking about \$45 billion to \$75 billion in investment for the first offshore wind energy development project. We heard from DFO experts who said that the impact of the project on fish had not yet been assessed. We know there is salmon in that area.

You are on the shore of the Saint-Jean River, in New Brunswick. How does the Wolastoqey Nation view this offshore wind energy project? Do you have any concerns?

[English]

Colin Curry: I'm not aware of specific details of an offshore wind energy development. I know that off Newfoundland there has been a study conducted by the Impact Assessment Agency into the feasibility of offshore wind in that location. Wolastoq salmon would normally migrate as far as Greenland. On their travels, if offshore wind energy infrastructure were to be built there, they would migrate past those areas.

I would suggest that since offshore wind is much more mature in areas like those off Great Britain that also have Atlantic salmon runs, that might be a potential place to start. One thing we know that is related to offshore oil and gas development in that area is that the presence of infrastructure in the water along salmon migration routes can create areas where predators, essentially, can hang out. It potentially indirectly exposes those fish to higher predation pressure and may also impact—

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: A project called Wind West is planned off the coast of Nova Scotia.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): I'm sorry, but your two minutes is up.

• (1720)

Colin Curry: Thank you. Sorry. I couldn't hear you.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Mr. Deschênes's two and a half minutes is well gone.

I'm going to start off with a question of my own in this round and then pass the rest of the time to Mr. Small.

What I'm hearing through this study reminds me of what's happened with our iconic B.C. steelhead. Through the management of those steelhead in the Fraser system, they've basically been managed to zero partly through an avoidance of any hatchery augmentation and a focus on a wild rivers policy on a river that really is no longer wild.

Have siloed management decisions or things like non-selective fisheries impacted the wild Atlantic salmon the way I see they've impacted steelhead in B.C.?

Mr. Curry, I'll start with you. I think you've probably had less time than anyone to try and get your position out there.

Colin Curry: Could you quickly repeat the question?

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Have siloed management decisions between areas of the department or certain levels of government had an effect on wild Atlantic salmon populations, and has the influence of non-selective fisheries had an impact on the decline of those stocks?

Colin Curry: There's a lot wrapped up in that.

In non-selective fisheries that may be conducted offshore, I'm not really aware of whether bycatch may be an issue. Within the Wolas-toq/Saint John River system, there is a seasonal gaspereau fishery that may, in some circumstances, inadvertently trap migrating salmon smolts. There are conditions placed on licences that are meant to address some of those issues, as well as around any salmon that might be caught within those nets that need to be released immediately.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you.

I'll quickly put that question to Mr. Bagnall, and then I'll pass the rest of my time to Mr. Small.

John Bagnall: I think Colin was referring to the gaspereau fishery on the Oromocto River. Next year, or this year—I'm not sure

whether it occurred this year—they can only fish in one direction so that the smolts will be able to get out of the Oromocto River.

As far as non-selective fisheries are concerned, gillnets are non-selective. If you're any place where you have a gillnet fishery and there are multiple species passing by, you're going to get them. I don't know whether that had a great deal to do with the decline of salmon, except for the gillnet fisheries in the northwest, for sure.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Small.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, two weeks ago, after Prime Minister Carney met with President Macron of France in Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, the French president announced a five-year exploratory quota of 1,500 metric tons of snow crab per year to be caught outside of Canada's 200-mile limit.

Crab fishers who fish that area from Newfoundland and Labrador feel that they'll be impacted by this 3.3 million pound removal of snow crab because it all has to be part of the assessment and then the quotas that are subsequently issued. On behalf of those folks who are concerned, I'm putting on notice the following motion:

That the committee report to the House that it condemns the Government of France's unilateral attempt to establish a snow crab fishery off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador near Saint-Pierre and Miquelon; calls on France to immediately back off, abandon its proposed exploratory fishery, and respect Canada's rights and interests on its continental shelf; and calls upon the Government of Canada to stand firmly with Newfoundland and Labrador's fish harvesters, defend Canada's fisheries resources, and make clear that Canada will not tolerate foreign governments threatening the livelihoods of Canadian fishers.

• (1725)

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Small.

This is placed on notice.

Mr. Morrissey, go ahead.

Robert Morrissey: It's just on notice, but the public record will show that the minister has already spoken to this issue and has addressed most of what's in this proposed motion. It's a notice of motion, however.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you.

With that, we're at time.

I would like to thank our witnesses for taking time to meet with us.

Your testimony will help this committee in our work on the study.

If you have further information that you'd like to share with the committee, it can be submitted in writing through the clerk.

Our next meeting will be Thursday, when we will continue work on the draft report for the review of the Fisheries Act.

Is there anything further, or shall I adjourn the meeting?

The meeting is adjourned.

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