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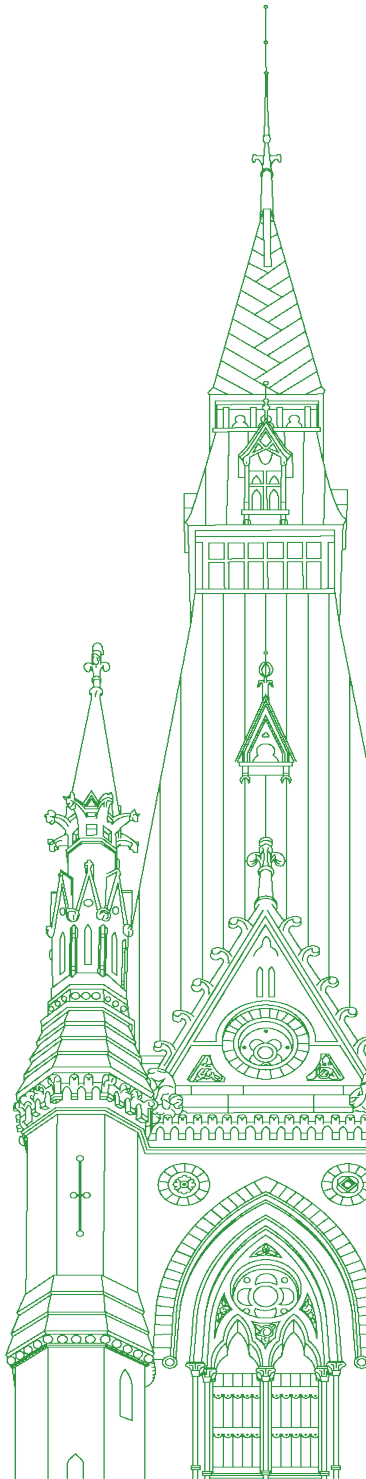
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Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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Chair: Hedy Fry

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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● (0820)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 51 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans.

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

[*English*]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108, the committee is meeting to continue its study of Atlantic salmon populations. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the standing orders.

You know our routine motions.

All witnesses appearing virtually today have conducted the communications piece that they're supposed to. They are now fully ready to participate.

I want to remind everyone to please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your microphone, and please mute yourself when you're not speaking. At the bottom of your screen, you will see the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. That was for the witnesses, especially. For those in the room, you know what you can do. I would like to remind witnesses that committee members may ask questions in either French or English, so if you wish to have interpretation, please get it ready before we begin so you're ready to go when we start. All comments should be made through the chair.

Now I'd like to welcome our witnesses.

Appearing as an individual, we have Kastine Coleman, fishing guide, by video conference. We also have Cyr Couturier, aquaculture scientist. From the Assembly of First Nations, we have Chief Jenny Brake of the Qalipu First Nation, as well as James MacDonald, director of fisheries, both by video conference. From the Atlantic Canada Fish Farmers Association, we have Evie Gagné, science liaison coordinator, by video conference. From the Greater Kouchibouguac Watershed Association, we have Mike Rushton, executive director.

A first nations chief could not make it, so we have one less witness today.

For the witnesses' information, you'll have five minutes. I will give you a one-minute shout-out and a 30-second shout-out. I'll tell you when there are 30 seconds left so you'll know when it's time to wrap up. If you don't finish what you have to say, it'll come out in the question and answer session, when everyone asks you questions.

Now, to begin, we will hear from Chief Jenny Brake for five minutes.

Thank you, Chief.

Chief Jenny Brake (Chief, Qalipu First Nation, Assembly of First Nations):

Weli eksitpu'k.

Good morning. Thank you, Chair, and thank you to members of the committee for the opportunity to be here today.

I am Chief Jenny Brake from Qalipu First Nation in Ktaqmkuk, Newfoundland, on the unceded, unsurrendered territory of the Mi'kmaq.

Atlantic salmon have sustained first nations across Canada and Quebec since time immemorial. They are connected to our food, cultures and ceremonies, our language and our responsibility to the lands and waters that for generations we've cared for. For first nations, the decline of Atlantic salmon is about more than fisheries management. It has a direct impact on our communities, our rights and our relationship to salmon.

First nations are already making difficult decisions to protect these populations. In some areas, communities have reduced or stopped harvesting salmon because of conservation concerns. Those decisions affect the exercise of constitutionally protected rights. First nations should not be expected to continue making those sacrifices while having limited authority over many of the decisions that affect salmon and their habitat.

That is why our main message to this committee is that Atlantic salmon recovery has to be done with first nations. First nations are rights and title holders. We need to have a meaningful role in governance, in the development of recovery measures and in decisions affecting salmon in our territories. Indigenous knowledge systems also need to be a part of this work. This knowledge has guided first nations stewardship and decision-making for generations. It should help shape conservation priorities, monitoring and recovery measures.

Our second message is that there is no single cause behind the decline of Atlantic salmon. We recognize the concerns that have been raised about striped bass and seal predation. These are important issues to study, and while the evidence supports action, any response should be developed with affected first nations. I myself am an ambassador for the Canadian Seals and Sealing Network, and I know first-hand about predation of seals, but predation is only one part of the picture.

Atlantic salmon face pressures throughout their life cycle. These include warming waters, low river flows, habitat degradation, barriers to fish passage, open net-pen aquaculture, disease and genetic risks, poor marine survival and mortality at sea. If we focus on only one of those issues, we are not going to solve the problem.

There are also practical steps that can be taken now. We need better monitoring to understand what happens to salmon after they enter the river and whether they actually reach their spawning grounds. We need to know whether fish ladders and other passage measures of hydroelectric facilities are working, not simply whether they are in place. We also need better information about interaction between wild salmon and open net-pen aquaculture, including farmed salmon escapes, genetic interactions, sea lice and disease. First nations should be directly involved in all of this work.

Finally, recovery needs sustained investment. Recent federal investments in Atlantic salmon are welcome, but recovery will take many years and, in some cases, generations. First nations need predictable funding that allows communities to retain technical expertise, monitor salmon over the long term, restore habitat, carry out research and strengthen fisheries governance.

Our written submission sets out more detailed recommendations, but our overall message is simple. First nations have already shown that we are prepared to make difficult conservation decisions to protect Atlantic salmon. Canada needs to match that commitment with long-term investment, stronger habitat protection, better monitoring and a meaningful role for first nations in decisions that will shape the future of these populations.

The goal should not be to manage continued decline. The goal should be to rebuild Atlantic salmon populations so future generations of first nations can continue the relationship with salmon that our peoples have maintained for generations.

Thank you.

● (0825)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That was very nicely done and under five minutes. Thanks very much.

Now we'd like to hear from Kastine Coleman for five minutes, please.

Kastine Coleman (As an Individual): Good morning, Madam Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to speak today.

I've been fly-fishing for Atlantic salmon for 35 years and guiding anglers for the past 10 years, primarily on the rivers of western Newfoundland. I understand that salmon populations naturally fluctuate, but the decline I've observed on our local rivers since around 2020 has been substantial and deeply concerning. At the same time, I've noticed an increasing presence of seals in and around the rivers. I recognize that open-net pen salmon farming and striped bass predation are really important concerns for wild Atlantic salmon, but today I want to focus on seal predation.

These are my first-hand observations. On smaller rivers such as the Southwest River, it's common in June to find seals occupying the home pool at approximately the same time the fresh salmon are entering the rivers. On the lower Humber River, there are seals occupying salmon pools as far as 20 kilometres from the mouth, sometimes remaining there for weeks on end during the summer. Large salmon weighing 30 to 40 pounds still return to this river. On the Codroy River in the fall, when some of the last salmon are entering to spawn, the estuary can be lined with seals.

I can't tell you how many salmon these seals are taking, or if they're taking salmon at all, but I believe the observations raise an important question: What is the impact of seal predation on salmon entering and leaving the rivers?

The kelt and the smolt are also vulnerable as they move through the rivers, estuaries and coastal waters. “Nordic Seals” is a report which acknowledges that measuring direct predation on salmonids is difficult, and that more research is needed. I agree, but the difficulty of measuring predation can't be a reason to overlook a potentially important source of mortality.

This brings me to my most important point. We have been studying Atlantic salmon for a very long time. In 2016 this committee conducted a major study of wild Atlantic salmon. It examined many of the pressures affecting these fish and made specific recommendations concerning predation. One recommendation called on Fisheries and Oceans Canada to support a grey seal harvest program aimed at reducing seal populations and enhancing the recovery of wild Atlantic salmon. That was almost 10 years ago and we're still here, studying declining Atlantic salmon populations.

I'm not suggesting that we stop doing the science, because we need good science, but research cannot be a reason to delay action indefinitely. The question should no longer be about what else we need to study. The question should be this: What are we prepared to do with the information we already have? If credible evidence shows that seal predation is contributing significantly to mortality in vulnerable salmon populations, appropriate management measures must be considered.

Newfoundland and Labrador has already experienced the consequences of the cod collapse. We know what happens when a fish population continues to decline while we try to understand the problem. I don't want us to stand here years from now, look back at Atlantic salmon and wonder whether we could have acted sooner. I'm asking this committee to support urgent, targeted research into seal predation on Atlantic salmon, particularly during their migration into and out of the rivers. But I'm also asking that we establish a clear expectation. The research must lead to action.

Atlantic salmon are part of Newfoundland and Labrador's natural heritage, our communities and our way of life. I've spent 35 years on these rivers. I've watched the changes. I'm deeply concerned about where they are taking us.

We need better evidence. We need urgent investigation. But we also need the willingness to act on what that evidence tells us. I don't want to look back one day and say, “We saw the warning signs, we studied the problem, but we failed to act in time.”

Thank you.

● (0830)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'll now go to Cyr Couturier for five minutes, please.

Go ahead, Mr. Couturier.

Cyr Couturier (Aquaculture Scientist, Retired Faculty, Memorial University of Newfoundland, As an Individual): Thank you.

I've had a long history, Madam Chair, in applied research, development, and advising federal and provincial governments on fisheries and aquaculture. I've published quite a few papers on salmonid biology, reproduction, Atlantic salmon biology and reproduction, production impacts on the environment. I'm familiar with aquatic animal health aspects and the marine ecosystem dynamics, insofar as coastal fisheries are concerned.

Atlantic salmon have been in decline since the 1960s and 1970s across their range in North America. Habitat alteration, hydroelectric dams and acid rain—in particular in Mr. d'Entremont's area, which was a key thing in the 1970s—were at the heart of the impacts and riparian impacts. Now climate change is at the heart of the impacts on Atlantic salmon's survival at sea.

Atlantic salmon were originally from Europe. They migrated across the Atlantic way back after the last glacial period. One study actually noted that, in France in the 1940s after the Second World War, Atlantic salmon populations were starting to decline in France. It was because of climate change, even though they weren't aware of it at the time.

Climate change is not just warming waters; different precipitation patterns, including droughts, cause variability downstream from dams. The whole ecology has changed in many places owing to changes in ecosystems, for example, at the Bay d'Espoir estuary. Since the dam was built there, there has been a noticeable decline in fish returns to the rivers in the area since the 1980s, well before there was any fish farming. It was so much so that a moratorium has been put on commercial salmon fishing in the area, and around Newfoundland, since 1992, the same year the cod moratorium was caused.

I would note that the cause of salmon disappearance from rivers in North America is variable. However, overfishing, illegal poaching, intercept fisheries, habitat alteration and increasing warming of freshwater and saltwater habitat have been affecting returns for nearly three decades now. We do have evidence of global warming and coastal productivity changes since the 1990s, and now, off of the coast of Newfoundland and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Atlantic salmon are wanderers. I mentioned to you before that they originated from Europe some 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. On average, 10% to 30% will return to a different stream from which they came. Many Atlantic salmon populations show a lack of recovery or declining numbers along the coast, and in many areas not subject to salmon farming. Most studies conducted by DFO and others do not show a relationship between salmon farming and the decline of wild stocks. For example, on the east coast of Scotland, over 300 kilometres across land, similar dramatic declines do occur, as in areas where salmon...so it's something else that's affecting that.

Similar patterns of stock decline and unpredictable returns have occurred in the Pacific Ocean, far away from salmon farms and even with the removal of farms in some locales. The fish dynamics are still impacted by natural parasites that are present when farms are not even present. We've seen evidence of this in a 20-year study done by both DFO and independent scientists.

While some escaped salmon can affect natural returns—we acknowledge that—it can also be ephemeral. A recent meta-analysis by the Europeans, Norwegians, has shown that, if there are no escapes or they're prevented from escaping, populations can return to their normal levels. One positive outcome of salmon aquaculture has been to farm wild smolts until adulthood, and we're going to hear from Madam Gagné about this shortly.

Regarding ecosystem fluctuations, one thing about marine ecosystems is that they are dynamic. They're always changing. This, coupled with changing ocean conditions in mixing, productivity, is making stock predictions even more difficult. The Gulf of St. Lawrence and the southern gulf have shown a general increase in temperature, fresh water and nutrient inputs over the past 40 years as human populations and their activities have doubled in this half century or so. It's now obvious that species abundance, types and interactions are changing quite a bit in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. For instance, endangered striped bass, once protected in the gulf, are now colonizing newer habitat and rivers in the southern part, including the Miramichi estuary. You've heard about that already.

We're seeing similar shifts in populations in southern Newfoundland waters. For example, Atlantic salmon are increasingly at risk of disappearing; lobsters are increasing tenfold; and cod are not recovering, to a large extent, mostly because of the habitat alteration from dragging in the 1970s and 1980s by codfish harvesters. Even now, there is a minimal recovery in this area to the present day, which is most likely due to climate change impacts and changing ocean ecosystems.

● (0835)

Benthic fisheries, like lobsters, scallops and crabs, are often subject to decadal-type variations in recruitment with changes in ocean currents, such as the Atlantic multidecadal oscillation, associated with significant oscillation of the Atlantic meridional overturning circulation. I'm sorry for all of this technical wording.

With changing climate and changing ecosystem dynamics, it is hard to see whether or not, if any type of large conservation area or effort were to be inserted in our oceans, it will remain the same over time, as it is changing rapidly. We know that the global north is warming faster than other parts of the world, and that we're not immune to that, here in Newfoundland and Labrador or on the east coast of Canada.

That finishes my commentary.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I was just going to ask you to wrap it up, but I gave you extra time because some people had very short comments. Thank you very much.

I now go to Evie Gagné for five minutes, Ms. Gagné, go ahead.

Evie Gagné (Science Liaison Coordinator, Atlantic Canada Fish Farmers Association): Hello. Thank you. My name is Evie Gagné. I'm a science liaison coordinator with ACFFA, the Atlantic Canada Fish Farmers Association. I am joining you today from St. Andrews, New Brunswick, on the unceded lands of the Peskotomuhkati First Nation. Thank you for inviting me today.

The Atlantic Canada Fish Farmers Association was created in 1987, and it is the association representing and advocating for the finfish aquaculture farming sector in Atlantic Canada. We are also a proud partner in the Fundy Salmon Recovery program.

Fundy Salmon Recovery is a revolutionary and globally recognized partnership among first nations, academia, government and private industry that is making significant strides in the recovery of inner Bay of Fundy wild Atlantic salmon, which has been listed as an endangered species since the 2000s. It has received formal recognition by the United Nations as a world restoration flagship initiative. The project is an innovative collaboration effort among Fort Folly First Nation, Parks Canada, Cooke Aquaculture, the Atlantic Canada Fish Farmers Association, the University of New Brunswick, DFO, the Village of Grand Manan and the Government of New Brunswick.

The goal of the Fundy Salmon Recovery project is to increase the number of spawning wild salmon in the rivers of the inner Bay of Fundy, via smolt-to-adult supplementation, or SAS. Research and experience show that Atlantic salmon that spend their early lives in rivers or streams are much better equipped to survive and reproduce in the wild, so this novel project collects young salmon, called smolt, which have spent their critical early life stages in the wild, and then cares for them in modified aquaculture sea cages at the world's first marine conservation farm on the island of Grand Manan in New Brunswick. When the salmon have grown to adult size and are ready to spawn, they are tagged and released back into their natal rivers.

After many successful years of collaboration, the Fundy Salmon Recovery program has released over 15,000 mature inner Bay of Fundy salmon back to their natal rivers. We're seeing positive results in published research and on the rivers, with wild salmon returns that represent the highest numbers in decades: So far this year, over 160 tagged returning adult salmon have been counted in the upper Salmon, Point Wolfe and Pollet rivers. Actual returns are likely higher, as tag receivers are not always active.

What are we asking for? We are calling on DFO to support current approaches and to implement new ones to restoring wild Atlantic salmon populations, including smolt-to-adult supplementation programs. These programs raise young wild salmon in ocean pens until they are adults, keeping them safe from predators or other issues causing death, and then returning them to their native rivers to spawn. We need to act quickly to establish these programs in important salmon rivers, including the Miramichi and Wolastoq/Saint John River systems. This work should happen alongside ongoing efforts to restore river habitats.

As new SAS programs are developed across Atlantic Canada, we at ACFFA are ready to work with indigenous-led conservation partners to support these efforts. With DFO's support, these programs can help increase the number of wild Atlantic salmon returning to our rivers while research continues into the challenges affecting their survival, including marine mortality, climate change, habitat loss and barriers to fish passage.

Restoring wild Atlantic salmon populations is a long-term commitment that will require sustained funding, collaboration and effort over generations. Success should be measured, not only by the number of salmon returning to our rivers but also by what we learn and how we use that knowledge to improve conservation programs and results; make stronger connections between communities, their local rivers and wild Atlantic salmon; and the progress we make towards rebuilding healthy, sustainable wild salmon populations for future generations. These programs offer an opportunity to take meaningful action now, while building a stronger future—

● (0840)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Evie Gagné: —for wild Atlantic salmon.

Finally, I would like to share one of the highlights during my time working on this project so far. It was during the public release of wild Atlantic salmon in Elgin, New Brunswick, in 2024, when Fort Folly elder Donna Augustine shared that she felt the Fundy Salmon Recovery project was reconciliation in action. I am so proud to be involved in such meaningful work, and I encourage DFO to support this revolutionary approach in other rivers.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Last, but not least, I go to Mike Rushton. Mr. Rushton, you have five minutes, please.

Mike Rushton (Executive Director, Greater Kouchibouguac Watershed Association): Thank you for this opportunity.

While Atlantic salmon populations are crashing across most of the gulf region, something unusual is happening in the Kouchibouguac and the Kouchibouguac access rivers we manage. Both are showing positive trends in juvenile and adult salmon.

What if our work in rivers holds clues to successful salmon recovery? We don't yet know exactly what's driving these positive trends, but this deserves a proper investigation that should be supported by the strategy.

Much of the discussion is focused on striped bass, climate change and marine conditions. These are valid concerns that most of us already recognize and have discussed thoroughly. I want to focus instead on where organizations like ours can make a direct difference: freshwater habitats, early salmon life stages, and presenting practical solutions for the committee to consider.

Habitats are the foundation of recovery. We are among Atlantic Canada's most active organizations in large-scale restoration work, including thermal refuges, spawning bed enhancement and fish passage. Though often overlooked, our rivers are significant: the third- and fourth-largest watersheds along the Northumberland Strait.

We can debate the extent, but removing salmon from the wild for any period of time, regardless of life stage, increases cost and risk—biologically and financially. We aim to mitigate this by keeping salmon in the wild, an approach we believe in and that aligns with DFO science.

We recognize the merit of captive rearing in some cases, and the dedicated people behind the programs, but the high costs make them difficult to sustain and leave them at risk of closure, as we've seen. We aim to offer a glimmer of hope to communities unable to afford or maintain these with an alternative option.

Given that salmon continue to decline despite efforts to date, we need to think outside of the box. Ironically, our solution is inside of a box. Fish can swim away from threats, but eggs are helpless. In natural spawning, most eggs are lost to predation, disease and physical damage. Our project uses instream incubators to protect the eggs from avoidable threats, while still allowing the strongest to survive and emerge into the river. Our unprecedented method returns eggs to their natal waters the same day they're spawned, eliminating captivity while reducing cost and risk.

Our approach offers two important benefits: more eggs surviving to hatch, and lower cost and risk. We believe the river is the best hatchery, allowing salmon to develop in the natural environment they evolved in and must, ultimately, adapt to, without expensive infrastructure.

We cannot bubble-wrap salmon and expect them to thrive in the wild. Every river has unique bacteria, water chemistry and even pollution that salmon must overcome as they adapt and develop their immune systems. Passing on stronger genes to future generations will have a compounding effect for recovery.

DFO has identified three components to validate this approach for use in other rivers: genetic evidence, population data and peer-reviewed research. We fully agree with these, and we have begun what we can with academic and indigenous partners, but the overall costs exceed our capacity. This work benefits all parties, and DFO should be sharing the financial and technical burden with us.

Salmon recovery requires rigorous research, continuous effort and sustained funding, yet short funding cycles and uncertain budgets undermine long-term initiatives. NGOs and indigenous organizations are the boots on the ground. We're not amateurs but biologists, scientists and researchers, often working longer hours, collecting more data and accepting greater field risk, while receiving lower pay and fewer benefits than public sector counterparts. We do this out of passion, not for wealth, but supporting a family or owning a home should not be out of reach, as it currently is for many. This disparity is unjustified and undermines staff retention, work quality and recovery programs across the board.

We're ready and willing to do the dirty work, but we need the resources. As DFO's field capacity declines even further than before, these partnerships become more essential. The committee and DFO are needed to make sound policy decisions to help salmon. NGOs and indigenous organizations are needed to take action on the ground. We need you, and you need us.

Pacific salmon have historically received exponentially more investment than Atlantic salmon. We recognize the commercial realities behind this disparity, but the consequences are real, and the recovery gap is wider as a result. We cannot change the past but, with the committee's help, we can improve the future.

The initial $81-million investment is welcomed, but DFO's limiting efforts to “priority” rivers demonstrates that it falls short of broad recovery. Follow-on funding is essential if we're serious about recovery. Anything less may be a waste of public funds and the time of everyone in this room and those working in this field.

I don't come just begging for money. I have solutions to offer, including improvements to flawed funding programs and policy, a case study opportunity, one action federal and provincial governments can take to improve salmon habitat together—

● (0845)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Mike Rushton: —and ideas that could involve the National Research Council.

I hope I get a chance to share some of these today and have further conversations if possible.

Thank you.

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

We're now going to the question and answer segment. The first one is a six-minute segment. Six minutes includes questions and answers, so please try to be as concise as you can.

We begin now with, for the Conservatives, Mr. Small for six minutes.

Clifford Small (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. It's great to see you here this morning.

My first question is for Mr. Rushton.

It warmed the heart to hear you acknowledge the work of this committee and mention that you need our work.

Since 2017, we've had three studies that have addressed salmon predation by seals. We had the 2017 study on Atlantic salmon. Then we had the striped bass study. Then there was a study on pinnipeds, otherwise known as seals or sea lions. In the mix of all that, we had the Atlantic seal science task team, which was commissioned by the current government. There were four reports and no action.

Do you think the government is doing its work? Do you think this study is going to end up on a shelf like all the rest, or do you think the government will actually take action?

● (0850)

Mike Rushton: I'm not really familiar with all the seal studies. Like I said, w try to focus on what we can directly impact, which is more of the freshwater habitat and the early life stages of salmon.

I'm optimistic that people are getting serious with the continued declines, continued struggle and concerns regarding Atlantic salmon. I'm optimistic that some changes will be implemented. Will all the changes and recommendations be implemented? Probably not if we're being realistic, but hopefully.

Clifford Small: Mr. Rushton, on the SAS salmon enhancement, it's been said to me that there are groups lobbying the minister who are saying that the SAS program is tampering with the gene pool.

What do you think of that?

Mike Rushton: I don't think it's fully tampering with the gene pool. We can always debate the extent, but science does show that more time in captivity does have more of an impact on biological factors, whether it's epigenetic or genetic fitness. Fitness, to us, isn't just genetic fitness, it's the ability to catch prey, to dodge predators, to find thermal refuge, to tolerate temperatures and pollution in the river. That's why we're big on keeping the fish in the wild.

Like I said, you can't bubble-wrap them and expect them to thrive in the wild. The wild is harsh, it's always been harsh, but we've made it even harsher, so it's on us to reduce some of those problems that we've created. We have to understand that if we want these fish to genuinely recover without constant intervention, they have to adapt and pass on stronger genes to future generations. These larger facilities with SAS programs and hatcheries, they cost millions of dollars. As we've seen with Mactaquac and other facilities, they're at risk of closure.

Clifford Small: Mr. Rushton, I know groups that have gone to DFO and wanted to develop salmon enhancement programs, but they were told by DFO that this could not happen unless those salmon runs were in danger of going extinct.

Do you think you'd be able to get private partnerships if DFO would let you go and try to bring back these runs?

Mike Rushton: I believe so. If your project shows legitimate success and increasing trends that you can prove are a result of your work, there should certainly be some private interests that would be willing to support that.

Clifford Small: Thank you.

Mr. Couturier, I have it under pretty good authority that the minister was lobbied against the SAS program going on the Miramichi because they said it was tampering with the gene pool.

Would you agree with that?

Cyr Couturier: Any time you undertake a development like marine biodiversity and release smolts, you are changing the genetic makeup of the fish, even though they may be wild fish. The approach this young fellow just mentioned might work, because it's only stream incubation. In terms of the Miramichi, if you were to put in a large hatchery or send a bunch of smolts down, you're probably just going to be feeding striped bass, seals and other organisms.

The whole ecosystem of the gulf has changed dramatically over the last 40 years, I would say, because of climate change. That's part of the responsibility that governments have to take on. We want more hydroelectricity, roads and things like that, but there are consequences in riverine habitats.

There's no clear solution to protect Atlantic salmon, other than some habitat remediation.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Cyr Couturier: That's it.

Clifford Small: Thank you.

My next question is for Ms. Brake.

Ms. Brake, as I mentioned earlier when I questioned Mr. Rushton, we've had four studies and reports since 2017. Those of us from Newfoundland and Labrador have seen the pictures of salmon sitting on the banks of the Grand Codroy.

Do you think this government has done everything it can do—

● (0855)

Chief Jenny Brake: It absolutely has not.

Clifford Small: —in its initiative to bring back Atlantic salmon?

Chief Jenny Brake: No, I think there's much—

The Chair: We have gone over time, but I'll allow you to answer very quickly.

Thank you.

Chief Jenny Brake: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I do not think everything has been done that could be done. There is a lack of traditional indigenous knowledge in the research and in the participation to enhance the populations of salmon across Canada. The focus has been in the west. Now it needs to look to the east to ensure that there are sustainable practices to enhance the populations of salmon.

First nations have a lot of traditional knowledge and capacity. We can meet with DFO. We're doing a lot of good work in Newfoundland and Labrador. There's a willingness here to do that. If we come together, a lot can be done that has not been done.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to remind everyone that I will give you a one-minute and a 30-second heads-up so you can wrap up what you want to say.

We have Philip Earle for the Liberals for six minutes.

Philip Earle (Labrador, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to try to get three questions in—one for Ms. Coleman, one for Chief Brake and one for Mr. Rushton.

Ms. Coleman, thank you for appearing in front of committee. I know you have extensive knowledge of Atlantic salmon. In your testimony earlier, you talked about some of the predation factors that you've observed.

We heard in testimony at this committee a few days ago that this sport fishery is worth as much as $250 million annually to the Canadian economy without intentionally killing a fish. To me, that leaves fish for sustenance, ceremonial and traditional purposes for first nations and Inuit.

Because of your extensive knowledge as a fisher, as somebody who promotes conservation and as somebody who adds to that $250-million annual economy around the sport fishery, can you talk to us about what you've observed from fishing in the south—from the Codroy River we just heard talked about—all the way up to the very north of Labrador? What are some of your experiences as they relate to the stock and to changes year over year?

Kastine Coleman: For many anglers, fishing for Atlantic salmon is on their bucket list. Newfoundland and Labrador is a dream destination because we have over 70% of the scheduled Atlantic salmon rivers in North America. A lot of people come here to get the opportunity to fly-fish for Atlantic salmon. They come here but don't know where they're going. To be able to spread them out on a river and give them that opportunity is incredible. They want to be able to fish for that wild Atlantic salmon.

In the past few years, it has become increasingly difficult to find the fish. It takes a lot of hard work. It's really sad to see that the population can't sustain the activity. To me, it's important to do everything I can to help the Atlantic salmon population survive.

Philip Earle: Thank you, Ms. Coleman.

Chief Brake, as the member of Parliament for Labrador, I'm reminded and very much aware.... Thank you for your testimony around the importance of the traditional indigenous harvest of Atlantic salmon for sustenance, ceremonial and traditional purposes.

In some questioning of witnesses last week, I talked about how important it is for indigenous voices to be heard as we manage this fishery for conservation and uphold the benefit of fish for those three sectors of ceremonial, sustenance and traditional.

Knowing Newfoundland and Labrador as you do, and being a chief from the west coast of Newfoundland, can you tell the committee some ideas you may have that may be shared by other indigenous groups in our province about how we can manage the harvest of Atlantic salmon to see conservation at the forefront, so we can have that species for another seven generations and beyond?

Chief Jenny Brake: Yes, absolutely.

I've been at this table and in this conversation around fisheries, salmon and seals in particular, for quite a long time. While growing up in the Bay of Islands, my father taught me that you take what you need. That hasn't always been the case. Indigenous voices have not been heard, traditionally, for a long time in Newfoundland and Labrador in particular, and in other places across Canada.

Just this summer, I participated in a bit of a gathering with folks from DFO in Newfoundland. We went to the Serpentine River together. Several members of my team and several members of DFO spent two days on the Serpentine River. This is a river my father took us to as children, and it always had an abundance of fish. It was a very special place and still is, but what we see now is not what we saw when I was a child. The purpose of going there was to acknowledge how far gone we are right now and to try to build relationships to come together and increase capacity.

We all know there is a decline in employment with DFO, and traditional knowledge is needed. We have science, but a lot of it is really dated. We also know that up to, I think, 10 different Atlantic wild salmon species are at risk right now.

The Assembly of First Nations and the national fisheries committee—I'll give credit to my friend James MacDonald, who's here on the call—have a wonderful community with a lot of traditional knowledge that we are eager to bring to DFO to work together to help enhance these populations for long-term sustainable use of the rivers for all.

● (0900)

Philip Earle: Thank you. If I get another opportunity in this round, I'll come back to your testimony.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Earle. You have 30 seconds, if you want to do anything with it. It's okay.

We're going to go to Monsieur Deschênes for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I thank the witnesses for being here.

I'll begin with questions for Chief Jenny Brake from the Assembly of First Nations.

You say that you're seeing in Newfoundland and Labrador what we're also seeing in the Gaspé: a decline in Atlantic salmon. In a 2024 resolution by the Assembly of First Nations, you criticized the Department of Fisheries and Oceans for a lack of transparency in implementing the Atlantic salmon conservation strategy. The resolution specifically mentions that the Mi'kmaq, but also a number of other nations, were excluded from the process.

Do you still hold that view two years later?

[*English*]

Chief Jenny Brake: I would say that, two years later, there is a very small amount of advancement in that relationship. It's started and it's taken work mostly on.... I can only speak for my region, but I've been aggressively seeking for that relationship to improve. It has not come to me; it's been the other way around. I think that the willingness of our first nation.... Our inherent rights, our traditions and our culture all speak to stewardship of the land and waters. We take it on as our responsibility to maintain and improve those relationships. It's not easy. The doors are not always open. Sometimes we're beating them down.

I will say there's an improved relationship in Newfoundland and Labrador. I continuously say, “Let's be the example for others.” I will use the example of the trip into Serpentine River this summer as a step forward in the right direction. A lot was learned there in a few days together, breaking bread, sharing stories and understanding that together we can increase capacity. That is much needed. I think there is an improvement, but it's a small step right now.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: We've had a lot of discussion here about recreational fishing as it relates to the future of Atlantic salmon. I'd like to talk about the traditional and ancestral fishing practices of indigenous peoples.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, what kind of fishing do you practise?

How much salmon do the members of your nation get from your rivers?

[*English*]

Chief Jenny Brake: What type of fishing...?

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Yes.

[*English*]

Chief Jenny Brake: I would say fly-fishing, yes. Our members practise fly-fishing for salmon. I would say that the majority of our members are not fans of catch-and-release.

They will fill their tags and leave the rivers. Inside of that, there are many other species that we fish for food, social and ceremonial.... I'm not sure if I'm answering your question. I'm sorry.

● (0905)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: I think so. What you're saying is that, in Newfoundland and Labrador, it's mainly fly fishing.

Do your members sometimes use nets at river mouths to catch Atlantic salmon?

[*English*]

Chief Jenny Brake: No, we have river guardians. Qalipu First Nation employs several river guardians and we work with Department of Fisheries guardians as well. I don't know that we've seen that in a very long time. I know that when I was a youngster, that was more common. I don't think it was meant to be harmful: It was feeding families.

I do sometimes take offence to the word “poaching”, because I know that a lot of first nations individuals took what they needed and no more than that. I don't see a lot of abuse happening. I think that in certain areas—in the Gander River area, maybe, and possibly at home—you may see nets, but I don't think it's quite as common as it used to be. It's not really common in first nations here in Newfoundland and Labrador as well.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Would it be appropriate use nets to fish for Atlantic salmon?

[*English*]

Chief Jenny Brake: Not at this time, no, absolutely not. I think everything we can do to ensure that we leave as many salmon in the river to repopulate is what's really important right now.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: So, for reasons of resource conservation, the use of nets would not be appropriate. Is that what you're saying?

[*English*]

Chief Jenny Brake: Yes, just the same as I would say that catch-and-release can be harmful. I think we have to be as responsible as possible in taking any salmon out of the river.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: A week or two ago, a witness told us that nets had been used in the Cascapédia River in the Gaspé. According to the information we have, this went on for two or three weeks. As far as you're concerned, I understand that this isn't a practice you would encourage.

[*English*]

Chief Jenny Brake: No, it would not.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Why?

[*English*]

Chief Jenny Brake: I just don't think it would be ethical at this time. It takes too many salmon, and I just don't think it would be the right thing to do.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: What do you mean when you say that it would not be ethical?

[*English*]

Chief Jenny Brake: Well, you're preventing the salmon from flowing down the river. It's an easy way to remove a salmon. Netting is an easier mechanism to take them. I think we need to give them every opportunity to travel through that we can.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you very much, Chief.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The second round will be a five-minute round. It begins with Mr. Arnold for five minutes, please.

Mel Arnold (Kamloops—Shuswap—Central Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the witnesses.

I'll start off with Mr. Rushton.

I'm trying to get through as much as possible as quickly as possible.

On the incubator boxes that you're speaking about, are you collecting eggs from the redds and putting them into boxes? Is that the process? Can you quickly describe what you're doing?

Mike Rushton: We collect wild broodstock during their upstream migration and extract the eggs streamside from the females non-lethally. We anaesthetize the fish, strip the eggs, make sure the fish are recovered and then release them so they can return another day to spawn again. That allows us to eliminate captivity from the equation and also a lot of costs that commonly are associated with captivity.

Mel Arnold: Where are the brood boxes where you put the eggs located?

Mike Rushton: There are certain site selection criteria, but you want good sites with a fast enough velocity flow that they have sufficient oxygen and less chance of getting siltation on the eggs, and that are deep enough to keep the incubators underwater. We used the Jordan-Scotty box incubators that are designed for very short-term use in British Columbia waters which are crystal clear and fast-flowing. They put them in for a few weeks, typically, as eyed eggs.

Again, we are trying to eliminate captivity, so we put uneyed eggs in the river the very same day they are spawned. We had to customize the protocol to adapt to lower-gradient rivers with a little more turbidity and siltation in the water to mitigate siltation risk to the eggs. It's been an evolution.

Mel Arnold: Are the brood boxes predator-proof?

Mike Rushton: Are they what...? I'm sorry.

Mel Arnold: Are they predator-proof?

Mike Rushton: Yes, that's part of it. We try to protect the eggs from avoidable threats, which are predation, washouts.... In nature, they're sometimes moving rocks the size of your hand to make a nest, and that can crush eggs. They're very delicate, so we gently put them in these incubator boxes to protect them from predators, high-flow displacement or crushing by rocks. We ensure more eggs are fertilized, as well, versus in nature. A lot of eggs aren't even fertilized.

Yes, they protect the eggs from that. They're still all at risk of pollution, water chemistry, temperature changes and those things, but that's how the strongest will survive.

● (0910)

Mel Arnold: Thank you.

Mr. Rushton, I did some research on your background, and you've been doing some work on pesticides remaining in some of the lakes, as well. Do you think those remaining pesticides are also having an impact? It's something that this committee hadn't heard anything of yet, so I appreciate it.

Mike Rushton: I think what you're referring to is when I was contacted by CTV News to speak about a study by Mount Allison. Mount Allison did that research and found that DDT is still persisting decades later in brook trout and stuff.

Whether it's DDT or pesticides that we still commonly use today, I'm sure they pose a risk to fish. Anytime you add some chemical to the water, you're changing things for better or worse.

Mel Arnold: Thank you.

I want to switch to Chief Brake.

Chief Brake, I understand you produce or sell seal products. Is that correct?

Chief Jenny Brake: That is correct.

Mel Arnold: How have you been managing with the market situation, with the European ban on seal products and so on? Do you have adequate access to raw materials and adequate access to markets?

Chief Jenny Brake: I'd say both are a struggle. We've done quite well with our seal products. We sell omega-3 capsules for human consumption and pet oil as well. We're in stores and markets all across Canada, and we sell by the barrel into Asia as well.

I would say that this is our way of playing a part in managing the population of seals, but we continue to see challenges with European markets and with the ability to harvest, so yes.

Mel Arnold: If you had an increased market, do you feel that you would have enough raw material?

Chief Jenny Brake: Absolutely.

Mel Arnold: It's access to market that is your biggest....

Chief Jenny Brake: It's both, but access to market is definitely a barrier.

Mel Arnold: Thank you.

Ms. Coleman, I'll hopefully get another round with you, but I want to touch base on something that was already mentioned here, which was the $250-million input to the annual economy through salmon fishing. Are you able to expand a little further on that? How important is that to the rural communities?

Kastine Coleman: We get a lot of people coming here, and they're either going fishing with local guides or going to salmon lodges. For every one of those people who show up on the island, you have the flight in or the ferry ride across. Then there are car rentals. The people are eating at local restaurants and buying local products. Every person who comes here is really important in supporting the small communities in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The Chair: We've gone over time on that one.

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

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

I'll go to Mr. Couturier first.

You said that climate change was a factor in the decline of Atlantic salmon. I think lot of members around this table believe in that. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the Miramichi River in New Brunswick. Of course, climate change had an impact, like you said, on the temperature in the gulf, but in the Miramichi River system right now, striped bass are seen in very large numbers.

Do you think that reducing the amount of striped bass in this river—that was the river that has the most return in Atlantic Canada—will have a beneficial impact if we try to reduce this number as soon as we can?

Cyr Couturier: The answer to that is I think it possibly could help initially. However, as you know, where our Gulf of St, Lawrence and other parts of the ocean are rapidly warming, the food sources are changing for the animals, and that includes the fish, including salmon, because salmon has both a freshwater and a saltwater phase. It's an anadromous fish, as you know. Actually, so is striped bass.

Striped bass adapt very rapidly to changing climate, and they will continue to look for food. If you were to harvest them, the way that you would have to do it would be to harvest all the reproductive size fish, the larger fish. Right now the limit is fish that are under 26 centimetres, or something like that, the non-reproductive fish.

Could it do? It could help for a while, I think, if you had a large harvest. I know colleagues or friends and family in Prince Edward Island are not allowed to harvest the large fish. They're not that far from the Miramichi, and that's the way DFO manages it for food and sports reasons. It's complicated.

● (0915)

Serge Cormier: You're a retired teacher, and I think you probably know a lot about science also. There seems to be a disconnect sometimes between DFO scientists and, let's say, outside scientists, who are good scientists also, but they're not working with DFO. It seems that sometimes DFO scientists work in a box and don't want to go outside the box to find a solution.

Did you have a chance not to look at that, but did you see that in your in your 35 to 40 years of experience?

[*Translation*]

Cyr Couturier: Yes, that's true. I've seen that quite often.

Serge Cormier: I didn't know you spoke French, Mr. Couturier. I should have asked you questions in French.

Go ahead.

[*English*]

Cyr Couturier: Yes, I've seen that quite a bit over the years. Increasingly, DFO has actually had to rely on university research in order to accomplish its ecosystem management in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and other places like that. At Memorial University, we have the Centre for Fisheries Ecosystem Research. At Université du Québec à Rimouski, they have a big group that works on all of that kind of stuff as well.

DFO has had to collaborate in those areas with the academics who can put students to answer those questions. I think there's more of a willingness now, but it's taken about 10 years for that to develop. Research by universities is a lot cheaper than having a DFO scientist do research.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Serge Cormier: Thank you

Ms. Gagné, just quickly respond, because I have only one minute.

You talked about the small to adult program, and the Fort Folly First Nation was with us, I think, last Tuesday. I asked them a question about the difference between the program that you're doing and the one that they wanted to do in the Miramichi. I just want to have your sense on this. If you take small salmon growing in a wild environment and grow them in a water tank in an aquaculture facility, in your opinion, do you think that this will help restock the river? Even if we change the genetics a little bit, will it be harmful to some of our rivers?

Evie Gagné: Personally, I feel that the genetic risk is low enough that any enhancement projects are worthwhile. If we're getting more salmon in rivers, that is an overall benefit as opposed to the low risk of genetic issues.

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up.

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

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Couturier, I have some questions for you.

You mentioned the global challenges facing Atlantic salmon, such as climate change. You also talked about development and the risk of habitat loss for salmon.

Are you concerned when you see the progress of energy development projects in the Maritimes?

We're talking about the Wind West project, which is a major offshore wind turbine project off Nova Scotia. We're also talking about the Bay du Nord project, off the coast of Newfoundland.

Are you concerned about the impact that the development of these energy projects could have on Atlantic salmon's ability to survive and thrive?

● (0920)

Cyr Couturier: The Bay du Nord project is not a hydroelectric project. It's an offshore project 500 kilometres away from the coast. I don't think it will cause problems for Atlantic salmon.

As for wind turbines or other projects in the Maritimes, I don't think they will cause problems for Atlantic salmon because salmon will avoid those areas. Their habitat is near the coast and even extends as far as Greenland, and those facilities will not be within their range, where they travel to feed. So I don't think it will make a difference.

As for hydroelectric projects in Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec, if they go ahead, they could cause problems downstream for the salmon migrating to Newfoundland and Labrador these days. However, I don't think it will cause many problems, since it's within the territory and electricity will go through Quebec, of course, to meet the needs of people who want that energy.

That's also one of the reasons why I don't think Quebec wants to produce hydroelectricity in the north. It could do so, but that would damage the environment of Atlantic salmon, which is now in Ungava Bay.

However, in Newfoundland and Labrador, this shouldn't cause any problems for Atlantic salmon.

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now go to Mr. Lewis for five minutes, please.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses this morning for their testimony once again.

Madam Chair, through you, all my questions will be directed toward Ms. Coleman.

Ms. Coleman, I'm very intrigued and I'm very impressed. Just a few months ago, I did a podcast with Lisa Roper from *Lisa Roper Outdoors*. She's well known across Canada as a woman in the fishing industry. I read through the testimony that's here in front of me, and I understand you're the only female Fly Fishers International-certified casting instructor in Newfoundland and Labrador. That certainly is something to be celebrated. Congratulations for that. I also understand that you work alongside Mr. Byrne at Tight Loops Tight Lines outfitters. Full disclosure: I am an outfitter myself in northern Ontario.

Ms. Coleman, that leads into the thing you said that really struck me the most in your opening testimony: “The research must lead to action.” The reason it really hit me goes back to last Saturday. My five-year-old grandson was on the ice for the very first time. He had amazing instructors. He worked his little bum off to try to stand up on the ice. At the end of it, he got really frustrated. It wasn't the instructor's fault. I bring up that story because it all goes back to how it must lead to action. Whatever we do today, a study can't be shelved. A study must lead to action.

Past committee testimony made it clear that when salmon runs vanish, rural lodges and communities die with them. DFO has spent years holding consultations while runs continue to collapse. What specific immediate management actions must DFO take before outfitters are forced to close their doors for good?

Kastine Coleman: Thank you very much for all that.

I think we need better evidence, but we also need a willingness to act on what the evidence tells us. Yes, we have salmon declining, but we can't afford to keep studying that decline while the opportunity to protect the fish continues to diminish.

Here in Newfoundland we have cormorants. We have seals. We have open net-pen salmon farms. It's showing that all these things are leading to that decline. You don't really want to see that. These are vulnerable fish at different stages in their lives. Identify all those risks and then go ahead and start to work on them all at the same time, not just one thing on its own. We don't want to focus only on what's wrong and what's killing and limiting the growth of the species; we want to be able to work on all these things.

Take even the single rivers here in Newfoundland. The lower Humber River, which has 30- to 40-pound salmon still returning, is a perfect river. It has lots of spawning grounds. It has lots of water flow. However, we have Sea-Doos running up and down the spawning beds and through the pools all summer long, so you're disturbing fish that are actually coming back. We need to protect what we have—

● (0925)

The Chair: You have one minute.

Kastine Coleman: —and then work to—

Chris Lewis: Thank you, Ms. Coleman.

I have time for only one more quick question. Before I ask it, if you're ever down in the Windsor-Essex area, I would love to take you out fishing on Lake Erie.

You've worked directly on practical restoration projects, such as fish ladders. DFO routinely imposes strict harvest limits on recreational anglers while there are often historic levels of other fish populations. From your position in conservation and outfitting, what are your thoughts on the current harvest limits on recreational anglers?

Kastine Coleman: That's a tough one. I haven't retained a salmon since 2012 or 2014. I am 100% catch-and-release. I don't see the need to keep fish. I know that in my family, my dad will keep probably one fish a year. There's an argument for both sides. It does keep other people on the river, which can limit poaching. It helps the community, and it's a great sport. My favourite time of the year is the last month of the season, when there is no retention allowed.

Chris Lewis: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I now go to Mr. Earle for five minutes, please.

Philip Earle: Thank you.

At Monday's committee meeting, I declared my bias, just as my colleague Mr. Lewis has done: I'm a fisher. My family also owns a sport fishing lodge. I too am a hook-and-release person. While there may be some mortality in hook-and-release, I'm confident that a 100% kill rate exists with hook-and-retain. I just wanted to say that, acknowledging that I'm a committee member and not a witness.

I want to go back to Ungava Bay. I want to go back to Labrador, where the salmon stock is strong. In the rivers the stock is strong. Many people, including scientists, will say that because of the smaller population, fewer people are fishing, and therefore the rivers are stronger. In southern Newfoundland, with similar topography and its rural and remote small population, the salmon stocks are in significant decline.

I'd like to ask Ms. Coleman for her views on this. Does she believe that the salmon stock in southern Newfoundland is very low as a result of climate change, aquaculture or a combination of both?

Kastine Coleman: I have to be careful with what I say. I don't like to make enemies.

It's probably a combination of both. I believe it has a lot to do with the aquaculture industry here, the open net-pen salmon farming, but there are other things. The rivers are getting warmer. It's about being able to protect the areas around the river by not cutting trees so close to the rivers and the lakes so that when we do get the snow and the rain, it's not just running off and it lasts a little bit longer. Then there are the cormorants.

Yes, a lot of different factors are leading to the decline of those southern rivers.

Philip Earle: Thank you.

We're all friends here. In particular, we're all friends of the Atlantic salmon. It's important to protect it.

I want to go to Mr. Rushton.

You caught my attention with your testimony, which we really appreciate. I really appreciate your coming here.

You made a statement around flawed funding. I want you to expand on that for the committee if I heard you right. That does concern me. In the context that our government has recently put significant money aside for Atlantic salmon, I want you to tell this committee how you believe we should best spend it. So, give us your insights on flawed funding and for the new funding that's now there.

● (0930)

Mike Rushton: I'll start with the initial investment. I call it the initial investment because I'm really hopeful that there's follow-on funding coming with that $81 million. There have been decades of disparity between the Atlantic and Pacific regions with regard to investment in salmon, and we're far behind. That $81 million is a nice start, but I think more is needed to address that wide gap if we want genuine recovery, which I think most of us do. I understand the need. Eighty-one million dollars sounds like a good amount of money until you divide it by five; then it's $16-some-odd million per year, which doesn't go very far for the Atlantic region. There are a lot of rivers.

I understand that the DFO was put in a difficult position. It's choosing to go with a focal river approach because there's such a limited pot of money, but there are a lot of salmon rivers out there. I understand that it can't give money to every single river, but not every single river has active salmon programs. Actually, the majority probably don't.

I'd like to think that we are one of those credible salmon programs that are active, and I'm not sure if we're going to make that list. If not, I'm going to try to push for other follow-on supports. I think there could be room to use some of that money for high-value, non-focal rivers, at least.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mike Rushton: As for the funding flaws, there are just limited funding pools. The pools haven't really grown much, but the costs of everything, including staff compensation, have. Like I said, staff retention is huge. If we want consistent, continuous, long-term effort, which is needed for recovery, we need to increase those funding pools.

You don't need to reinvent the wheel. We have the habitat stewardship program and the Canada nature fund from DFO. We also have The Foundation for Conservation of Atlantic Salmon, FCAS. They're well-established review systems. They're great at what they do; they just need more money to work with. A simple top-up would be relatively easy to do, I think. Increase that, and address that issue.

Also, non-indigenous organizations, especially smaller ones like us, are required to match every federal dollar with a non-federal dollar. We do well if we get $200,000 non-federal dollars, and that limits us to asking for about $200,000 federal dollars. However, a legitimate, meaningful project to recover salmon requires $800,000, minimum, for rivers like ours. It could be even higher for other rivers. A lot can be chewed up just in monitoring data collection. If you want to actually do restoration, which we really do need to do, that's very expensive. We need significant money for that.

There are other issues. For example, priority threats for the CNF program don't really make sense. They're irrelevant for salmon—physical acoustic disturbances and fishing interactions in the marine area. There are no freshwater priority threats listed. You need to have schedule 1-listed species to even access that funding.

Thankfully, we have the brook floater, a freshwater mussel, so we have to use that to get our foot in the door for that funding. However, the Restigouche watershed, for example, doesn't have the brook floater, so it's basically ineligible for the CNF fund. That's just one example.

I think they need to ensure that population science is considered an eligible activity—tracking, tagging and counting fish. Right now, there's a high priority on habitat, which is good, but you need population data to inform your decision-making and evaluate the results of your work.

I'll leave it there.

The Chair: Thank you. We've gone over time on that one.

We have another round, and we'll begin with Mr. Small for five minutes, please.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My question is for Ms. Coleman.

Ms. Coleman, there was a recent funding announcement for $82 million to support the recovery of Atlantic salmon. I'm sure that you're quite familiar with the river guardian program in Newfoundland and Labrador, which supports 75% of the Atlantic salmon in North America right now—Newfoundland and Labrador rivers alone.

A couple of years ago, there was a request by angling groups to have the river guardian program increased with an extra, approximately, four to six weeks total, split between the beginning of the season and the end of the season, which would amount to a cost of about $500,000 or $600,000.

Does it make sense to you that we're grasping for straws when the breed stock that's made its way back is not protected to the full extent that it can be by the river guardian program?

● (0935)

Kastine Coleman: The kelt are leaving in May. The smolt are leaving in May. There are early runs and early returns of fish in May. I think that the river should definitely be protected then.

Right now, it's the end of October. I don't know if the fish have spawned yet, but they're pretty close to it. The rivers are not being monitored here, either. The salmon are really in their holding pools. They've been there for a month. They could easily be picked off from poaching. It would make sense if the river guardians were still active.

Clifford Small: Thank you very much.

Ms. Brake, I know that you're active in trying to develop and export seal products.

We've had all these studies, as I mentioned. Since 2017, there have been four studies that have addressed seal predation on Atlantic salmon.

Are you familiar with the bill that's now before Congress called the protecting Columbia River salmon act?

Chief Jenny Brake: No, I'm not.

Clifford Small: Given that you're an ambassador for the seals and sealing network, don't you find it strange that the federal government hasn't talked to you folks to ask for your input or what you'd like to see in terms of lobbying in the U.S. to make sure that the bill will remove seals and sea lions from the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which would then open up quite the market for you?

I'm flabbergasted that the minister and people within her office or the PMO haven't consulted with groups like yours to let you know that this is ongoing right now. It has bipartisan support in the U.S. I'm shocked that they haven't come to first nations groups—

The Chair: You have one minute.

Clifford Small: —to ask for your input and to help to try to influence what's going on in the U.S. on that.

Chief Jenny Brake: To ask a first nations chief if they're shocked if they haven't been consulted is.... I mean, come on. It's more shocking when we are consulted at times.

No, I have not been made aware of this. I have tried my best to educate DFO and DFO leaders in the areas of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. We sat in a room with the national fisheries committee with the Assembly of First Nations, and they didn't know that seals weren't covered under that in the U.S.

To answer your question, I'm not shocked at all. No.

MP Small, as the chief, I would expect to be consulted. I hope that can change in the future.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now go to Mr. Klassen for five minutes, please.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here.

I appreciate all the comments coming from the witnesses who are talking about working together and looking forward to seeing how we can resolve some of these issues rather than finger-pointing and looking to the mistakes of the past. We can only accomplish what we're trying to do if we all work together on this.

Mr. Rushton, I have a question for you.

The Atlantic Canada Fish Farmers Association was saying that 4.1 times is how many cycles it takes to restore the fish.

Can you talk about the amount of success in your system versus fish hatcheries in the amount of returns coming?

● (0940)

Mike Rushton: I haven't really studied too much of their data.

I know that they have had some short-term success, which is good. I'm not familiar with the long-term success. I've heard questions raised. I don't want to speak on it too much when I'm not too familiar with it, but I've heard questions raised about the long-term success of those programs.

I would like to think that our program would have good long-term success as we're keeping the fish in the wild. There are issues when you raise fish in the wild, such as their ability to navigate. In some cases, their otoliths, their inner ears, are malformed. That's for the navigation of the fish. If your GPS is out of whack, you might get lost on your migration journey, which is a crucial thing.

I think our leaving fish in the wild should result in better long-term outcomes. I can't speak to the long-term outcomes of those programs, though.

Ernie Klassen: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Gagné, in the report we have here, you've talked about fish having returned for second and third spawning opportunities in home pools. How many years would that would that encompass?

Evie Gagné: The Fundy Salmon Recovery program has been going on for more than 10 years now. Those fish that are returning more than once would have been in the past 10 years.

Ernie Klassen: Okay. Why the 4.1 times? How many cycles is it to restore the offspring production versus the land-based reared in the SAS program? Can you talk a bit about that?

Evie Gagné: Right. That number is from some scientific research that has just recently come out.

That refers to SAS programs like the one we're involved in, where the fish are raised in a marine environment, an ocean environment in a conservation farm on Grand Manan Island, compared to programs where they're raised in freshwater land-based facilities.

The study shows that they're 4.1 times more successful, reproductive-wise, than the wild fish that have been reared in fresh water only.

Ernie Klassen: Okay.

Mr. Rushton, I think you were mentioning the genetics. On the fish that are raised in the system you're using, is there a way that these two systems could collaborate better to ensure we don't have those genetic flaws?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mike Rushton: I think DFO is getting to a point where they have to start taking an official stance on Atlantic salmon stocking policy: Like I said, actually investigating the case study with our rivers and evaluating our program to see if it's good or bad. It's the same with SAS programs and whether they're raised in marine environments or freshwater environments.

Evaluate everything, because you're going to have to take a stance soon, and I think that would be the best way to properly understand the risk and the cost, and the benefits and rewards, with all those programs and make proper informed decisions and recommendations. I think DFO should jump on this moving train now and start evaluating these programs so that they can take an official stance and we can start taking more action.

Ernie Klassen: Thank you.

I think my time is up.

The Chair: Yes, I think your time is just about up.

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

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I have a question for you, Ms. Coleman.

You mentioned one of the solutions that should be considered to slow the decline of Atlantic salmon—namely, reducing the seal population.

Why do you say that?

[*English*]

Kastine Coleman: When I'm on the river, I see a lot of seals, and they're sitting in such.... We have nothing else here in our rivers. They're 20 kilometres upriver sitting in salmon pools, and they're staying there all summer, just sitting on rocks. While you're fishing the pool or just observing, you can see how the the salmon are affected. When you drive by the mouth of a river, it is lined up with seals, and I know that the fish are on their way out and on their way in at that exact time.

It's one of those things where you need to.... I think we need a little more research to see what exactly the effect is of seals on salmon, and research in watching the seal movements to determine when the seals enter the rivers and the estuaries, how long they remain there and where they concentrate, and then investigate whether the seals are feeding on the salmon or identify which stages are affected, just to get estimates on how many salmon may be lost to predation or—

● (0945)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: How would you suggest we reduce the seal population?

[*English*]

Kastine Coleman: I think there needs to be a targeted reduction in seals. Different management options, I guess, need to be considered in response to the findings.

In 2016, there was a report that addressed grey seal harvest programs. It would be great if the committee could revisit that issue of predation management in light of the current situation and the evidence that is available right now. The management measurements obviously should be supported by reliable evidence and designed for relevant species and locations.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Seal hunting is not currently prohibited. Do you think that modernizing regulations, particularly the marine mammal regulations, could facilitate an increase in seal catches?

[*English*]

Kastine Coleman: I'm sorry. I couldn't keep up with the translation. Can you repeat that?

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Yes, of course.

Do you think it would be appropriate to modernize regulations, particularly the marine mammal regulations, to facilitate the commercial seal hunt?

[*English*]

Kastine Coleman: Yes, I do.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now go to Mr. Arnold for five minutes.

Mel Arnold: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Again, thank you to the witnesses.

Ms. Coleman, I'll come back to you again on the economics piece of this.

Can you describe what kind of economic flow you see into a rural community through the salmon harvest or the salmon fly-fishing? Is it local individuals? Is it foreign? Is it European money that's fuelling the economies? What types of impacts do you see?

Kastine Coleman: I have clients from all over the world. It's definitely not just to harvest, because I run a catch-and-release guiding business.

I've had clients from France, Germany, Italy and New Zealand, and a lot of locals, both Canadians and Americans. Newfoundland is a tough place to get to. It's expensive. It's long travel. When people come here, they're not staying for just two days or three days. They're coming in and staying in local hotels. They're buying groceries, and they're eating at restaurants.

They're doing other things while they're in the communities, whether they're here to fish with me or they're staying and fishing at an outfitter's. They're coming here and taking part in all the other things around here and going on different whale-watching tours and on hikes. It really does bring a benefit to the entire community that people are coming to visit.

Mel Arnold: Okay. Thank you.

You've also talked about seal impacts that you've seen in the Atlantic rivers. I'm going to diverge a bit here, but we've seen the same thing on the Pacific coast. I've personally witnessed seals as much as 90 kilometres upriver from the mouth of the river impacting our Pacific salmon.

With that, Madam Chair, I'd like to move the motion that I placed on notice on October 22. I move:

> That:
>
> (a) pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake a study of at least six meetings to examine:
>
> (i) the state of wild Pacific salmon stocks and Indigenous, recreational and commercial fisheries that depend on them,
>
> (ii) the effects that all fisheries have on other economic sectors,
>
> (iii) stock status zones of all wild Pacific salmon of Canadian origin,
>
> (iv) opportunities for increasing salmon habitats, hatcheries, and harvest opportunities,
>
> (v) the effects of international treaties on the management and interception of wild Pacific salmon of Canadian origin along their migratory routes,
>
> (vi) the status of federal government actions presented in its June 22, 2022, response to the committee's 2022 report titled “Pacific Salmon: Ensuring the Long-Term Health of Wild Populations and Associated Fisheries”,
>
> (vii) how federal resources are applied to management, protection, restoration, and conservation of wild Pacific salmon stocks and habitats;
>
> (b) pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee report its findings and recommendations to the House; and
>
> (c) pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee request the government to table a comprehensive response to its report.

● (0950)

The Chair: We have a motion on the floor.

Mr. d'Entremont, go ahead.

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

Seeing that we do have some folks here, I move to adjourn debate on this motion.

The Chair: It's a motion to adjourn. It's not debatable.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

The Chair: The debate is adjourned.

We still have witnesses, if anyone wishes to question the witnesses.

Mr. Deschênes, go ahead for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you.

[*English*]

Clifford Small: It's Serge.

The Chair: Serge, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Serge Cormier: Madam Chair, I'm going to give my time to Mr. Philip Earle.

Philip Earle: Thank you.

For the witnesses, this is how the committee works. We'll have lots of time in committee business to discuss the motion that was just moved by our colleague on the other side.

The commercial fishery in Newfoundland and Labrador is very important to the economy of all of Atlantic Canada, no less. We heard today about predation on salmon by seals, cormorants and other species that may live in the ocean.

I'd like each of you to make a comment on this, if time permits. While we may not have direct control over the predation of seals on Atlantic salmon, we often see the trawling or the seining of other species of fish at the mouth of salmon rivers.

Ms. Coleman, I would start with you and then maybe go to Chief Brake and others who are here to give witness.

Do you believe that's a good practice, or is it a practice that we should curtail in the mouth of the rivers out of concern for the conservation of wild Atlantic salmon? In particular, in Newfoundland and Labrador, there are 186 salmon rivers—28 of them in Labrador and 158 on the island.

Could I get your comments on that?

● (0955)

Kastine Coleman: I don't believe you should be allowed to seine at the mouth of salmon rivers. There's a lot of bycatch that is not talked about. It's not seen on camera. I think it's really important to put a little protective barrier around the mouths of the rivers to prevent that.

Philip Earle: Ms. Brake, you know me. Being from Labrador, I do know the importance of the indigenous fishery and keeping the stock secure, so we can continue to practise our traditions for generations. Do you believe we should be seining at the mouth of Atlantic salmon rivers in Atlantic Canada?

Chief Jenny Brake: Absolutely not.

I mentioned in my opening statements that there's not just one factor in what's happening to the reduced stock of salmon. Any measures that can be taken on any contributing factors should be taken, including not allowing this to happen, for sure.

Philip Earle: Mr. Couturier, go ahead.

Cyr Couturier: I would agree. I guess it depends on how close you are to the estuary, what species are being targeted and so on, but I would tend to concur with what has been said.

Philip Earle: Does any other witness have a point of view on this? Would they like to share with the committee on the possible damaging effects of purse seining in the mouth of salmon rivers for capelin, herring, mackerel or some other species that may be prolific, at a time when Atlantic salmon are running into or out of the salmon rivers?

Mike Rushton: I would just say that indiscriminate fishing methods like that obviously could have a negative impact on Atlantic salmon, so they're probably not ideal.

Philip Earle: Thank you.

In the couple of minutes that I have left, I'd like to go back to you, Mr. Rushton, because I was intrigued by your comment around the funding, and I appreciated your testimony after that.

As we look at the $81 million that the federal government has made available targeted towards Atlantic salmon, would you be supportive of a view where some of that funding went towards rebuilding rivers, where rivers have been almost decimated by dams and impeded by other barriers, with some of that money going towards protection, as my colleague on the other side has made reference to? Then, for rivers that have significant salmon stocks, whether that's the Basse-Côte-Nord region of Quebec or Labrador, we could put a lot of effort—

The Chair: You have one minute.

Philip Earle: —into sustaining....

Mike Rushton: Yes, I think that could be a wise use of those funds.

As I said, habitat should be the foundation of every recovery effort in every river. Without it, it doesn't matter how many fish you dump in the river if they don't have a home. It's like a garden. You need healthy soil for plants to thrive. You need a healthy river for fish to thrive, especially if we want genuine recovery.

As I said, they shouldn't have to rely on us. I understand declines have been significant, so maybe we need to enhance and give them a boost in the short term while there are still fish to do so with. Yes, habitat should be the foundation of everything. Predator-prey balance and poaching issues are certainly issues, as well, that we should be looking at.

Philip Earle: Thank you.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

I now go to the final round with Mr. Lewis for five minutes, please.

Chris Lewis: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My first question is for all the witnesses.

I'm going to go back to the Great Lakes for a moment. I'm going to speak specifically to cormorants and the devastation that the cormorants have had on our fisheries.

Just a few years ago, finally, the Ontario government allowed a hunting season for cormorants—up to 50 cormorants a day. I think that's fantastic. Cormorants on Lake Erie, Lake Huron, Lake Superior and Lake Ontario are said to eat twice their body weight. For those at home who don't know what a cormorant is, it's not edible. It's not for the table, and it literally destroys our islands with the acidity in their feces. There are beautiful, gorgeous islands, and the trees turn bare. They have no useful life—in Chris's concern—on our Great Lakes.

Therefore, I'm just wondering, on the Atlantic coast, in these fisheries, is hunting allowed?

This is open to anybody who can answer that question.

● (1000)

Cyr Couturier: There is some hunting allowed in localized areas, but fish harvesters have often complained about this and have sought licences to do somewhat of a cull of the cormorants, but DFO continues to limit it. I believe it's still very impactful on the fisheries. That's all I can say. You can do some of it, but it may not be enough.

Chris Lewis: Thank you.

I'm going to follow up on that quickly. Before the Ontario government allowed law-abiding firearm owners, hunters, outdoor enthusiasts to hunt cormorants on their own, the Ministry of Natural Resources literally used to go and do their own cull. They would actually hire commercial fishing boats to bring them across to the various islands, off Toronto and Windsor. That's only to my knowledge. They'd do major culls out in the middle of the Great Lakes.

To anybody's knowledge, does the DFO currently do this themselves as part of predation control?

I'm getting a resounding no, I think. Thank you for that.

I'm going to go to you, Mr. Rushton, and thank you very much for your testimony, sir.

Previously at this committee, we heard from organizations that have received $200,000 from the DFO to put on symposiums while the government has slashed funding for biodiversity centres. I know you had previously received a modest grant of $25,000 from the Foundation for Conservation of Atlantic Salmon, and I'm wondering if you could speak to DFO's funding decisions, as a leader of a community-based environmental organization, on the most effective use of resources, from your perspective.

Mike Rushton: Like I said, I think habitat recovery is crucial, but so are population science and supporting population enhancement, regardless of the method. Our method is a little different from most.

I don't want to oversimplify it, but the amount of funding is the biggest issue.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mike Rushton: The FCAS is a great program, but our operating budget is much larger than $25,000. We appreciate every nickel we get, but we need everything to make a successful field season. Those amounts have been pretty much the same for almost 20 years, and the cost of everything has doubled, if not tripled, whether it's for gas, trucks, staff compensation, contractors who do habitat restoration work, lab analysis, materials, equipment or supplies. Everything's going up except the funding support.

I don't want to come here and act like I'm begging for more money—everybody wants more money—but it's justified. We really need it. If you don't want to waste your time, and if you want to see actual results, you have to invest in it, or it's going to be insufficient and we'll be here 10 years from now, talking about the same thing. I'd like to start improving things.

Chris Lewis: Thank you, Mr. Rushton.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I now go to Mr. Earle for five minutes.

Philip Earle: I believe it's in reverse order. I think it's MP Cormier who's taking this slot.

The Chair: We have you down.

Is it Mr. Cormier?

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Madam Chair.

As a little side note, it's okay for our opposition colleagues to say that there's not enough money. Do you know what? We agree with that. We just put $81 million more into the Atlantic salmon strategy and another $300 million into the Atlantic fisheries fund. Previously, in 2017, we had $400 million for the fisheries fund and some habitat restoration programs that we had in the past, but our Conservative colleagues voted against all that funding.

Ms. Gagné, I'll go to you first, because I think you had your hand up on the previous question about catching different species.

Go ahead and give your answer on that, please.

Evie Gagné: Thank you.

My thought on that topic was similar to what Kastine was saying. I would be very interested to know what the bycatch is. There's no commercial fishery for Atlantic salmon, as we know. If they are catching wild Atlantic salmon as bycatch, it is very important to know that information.

● (1005)

Serge Cormier: Thank you.

I still have a couple of things for you, Ms. Gagné.

You talked about smolt-to-adult numbers in your program. I think you said that it was 160. Was that 160 salmon returning in a particular river, or in all the rivers you were doing restocking in?

Evie Gagné: The project is focused on three main rivers right now. The Upper Salmon River was the one that had the most returns this year, but there are returns in all those rivers.

Serge Cormier: How long has this program been on? Is it a year, two years, four years or 10 years?

Evie Gagné: It's been about 10 years now.

Serge Cormier: Will you be able to provide the committee, later on, with some numbers on those returns over the last 10 years?

Evie Gagné: Absolutely. We would love to.

Serge Cormier: That's good.

You're probably doing a lot of science with your organization. I asked this question of Mr. Couturier previously. Do you think DFO officials are in their box, sometimes, with all their guidelines and criteria, and don't want to listen to other scientists outside of that box, though we could get some solutions that would be beneficial for the restocking of some of our rivers?

Evie Gagné: Yes. Unfortunately, as much as I admire my friends and colleagues who work at DFO, I think they're restricted somewhat in what they can do. I would like to see DFO scientists able to collaborate and work a bit more outside of their box.

Serge Cormier: Thank you.

Ms. Coleman, I'll go to you.

Just like my colleague Philip Earle, I have been an avid salmon fisherman for years, and I had the chance to fish with him last summer on the Pinware. I think you learn the most when you go on the river, fish with people and talk with the guys.

In some of our rivers in New Brunswick, we have the same situation. The salmon stock is declining. It's even declining in the Quebec area where I fish a lot.

Do you think salmon fishing is seen by the government sometimes as a rich sport, if I can say that? Maybe we're not investing in this because it's a rich thing. Do you see it like that?

Kastine Coleman: No. I can see why people would have that opinion, because if you book a lodge, sometimes they're charging in U.S. funds, and it can be up to $20,000 for a week on the river.

On the ground, it's not a rich sport. You have people out there in their flip-flops with their $10 fly rods making their own flies. As a local, I don't think it's a rich sport.

Serge Cormier: I also don't see it that way. Sometimes there's a picture out there, as you mentioned, but I've seen a lot more young people of all classes. Do you also see that in Newfoundland and Labrador?

Kastine Coleman: Yes, and there are a lot of youth coming into the sport.

Serge Cormier: That's great.

You have a really nice résumé, by the way. I hope that sometime I'll be able to fish with you and Philip in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Thank you very much for your testimony today.

Kastine Coleman: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Deschênes, you have two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chief Brake, there's a question I can't help but ask you, as there have been significant developments in relations with first nations this week. The Prime Minister opened the door to the idea of abolishing the Indian Act.

How is this being received in your community?

[*English*]

Chief Jenny Brake: I was on the planning committee for the first ministers' meeting, which took place this week. The focus of that meeting was to open a door for conversation to allow first nations to have a voice in legislation that's being made.

The conversation of the Indian Act abolishment has been taken from that meeting and focused on, but that was not the focus of the meeting. The focus of the meeting was next steps in relationship building and looking at Bill C-39, Bill S-2, Bill C-5 and things that really impact our communities.

Of course, the Indian Act is something that we will discuss, but first nations themselves need to be in control of if and when the Indian Act is no longer in existence. You cannot just remove something that allows us to govern without replacing it with something else that allows us to stay in control of our communities.

● (1010)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: I understand. There were other topics.

So what you're saying is that you're open to the idea of abolishing the Indian Act, as long as there's a discussion on how it would be replaced.

Am I understanding you correctly?

[*English*]

Chief Jenny Brake: That is the general consensus, I would imagine, amongst a lot of community members in my area, but we've really not had enough discussion on that to make a firm statement on that today.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: I have a few seconds left.

Regarding the seal hunt, do you think federal regulations should be amended to facilitate commercial hunting?

[*English*]

Chief Jenny Brake: Absolutely.

I think the international markets need to be opened up to allow for full access so we can harvest and export. There's an economic opportunity and an inherent right for indigenous people to practise their traditional ways of knowing and doing, but the markets aren't allowing us to have a fulsome economy there.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now have Mr. Small for three minutes, please.

Clifford Small: Madam Chair, my question is for Mr. Couturier.

In 2018, the current government banned the killing of nuisance seals in Canada. If that had not happened and if we could kill these nuisance seals in estuaries, like those that are observed on the Grand Codroy, what kind of an impact would that have on the survival of returning salmon?

Cyr Couturier: Seals do eat salmon, so if you remove them, you're going to save some fish. I don't think it needs to be studied any more than that, although my colleague on the west coast would say that we should study it more. If she has seals on the Humber River and other rivers, 50 kilometres up the river or however far, and they're staying the whole summer there and there's not much else in the river, what are they eating? I mean, seals won't just stay there, bathe and not eat. They have to eat.

Clifford Small: Short and simple, do you think that seals that are inhabiting freshwater systems should be culled?

Cyr Couturier: I think they should be culled, and you have to find a market, obviously, as Chief Brake just said. Newfoundlanders and Labradorians can certainly do that very humanely.

I've also had the opportunity to speak with one of the chiefs from the National Circle for Indigenous Agriculture and Food, and they would strongly support a cull of seals and sea lions out in British Columbia, because they're basically devastating a lot of the fisheries there.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Cyr Couturier: Yes, some of those are actually going into fresh waters, too.

That should be supported.

Clifford Small: Thank you.

Ms. Coleman, do you think that seals that are in freshwater systems should be culled?

Kastine Coleman: Yes.

Clifford Small: Thank you.

Ms. Brake, given how important having healthy salmon rivers would be to true reconciliation, would you support a cull of seals in freshwater systems?

Chief Jenny Brake: MP Small, it's Chief Brake, and I would not support a cull. Responsible harvesting is important, but a cull is an aggressive manner. It's usually received with a lot of push-back.

Responsible harvesting, with responsible interaction with first nations in doing such a thing would be more important. I don't like to refer to it as a cull, but a large hunt would be more appropriate.

● (1015)

Clifford Small: Would you like to see the decision the government made in 2018 be reversed when it comes to nuisance seals?

Chief Jenny Brake: That's a discussion that can be had, absolutely. I'm really not here to criticize either party. I just want progressive work going forward.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Chief Brake.

The Chair: Finally, we'll go to Monsieur Cormier for three minutes, please.

Serge Cormier: Madam Chair, I'm going to give my time to my colleague Philip Earle.

Philip Earle: If it were possible, Serge, we could trade names, and then we'd get the list correct.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

There's real evidence that Atlantic salmon as a species could become extinct. We understand the biology of salmon. They're born into the river. They go into the ocean. They grow up and come back to the river to spawn. I don't need to educate anyone here on the biology of salmon. I believe we're all here for that very reason. We want to protect it.

There is clear evidence, though, that many rivers in Atlantic Canada are technically dead. By extension, the stock that's supported by that river has technically passed.

The loss of a species is something that I can't really imagine, but I want to ask some questions around the trifecta of the salmon: food, culture and sport. For the indigenous, it's food. For Newfoundland and Labrador and Atlantic Canada, and I believe it applies to the Pacific region as well, there's a culture around salmon. Certainly, there is sport. We talked about the value.

In an earlier session, some of our witnesses talked about something happening in the ocean that destroyed a lot of the stock in 2022 and in other years. It caused me to reflect that we're seeing more severe weather conditions, heavy rainfalls in the fall and hurricanes in pronounced fashion, basically blowing out the rivers at this time of the year when our witness, Ms. Coleman, said that salmon have finished their spawning and may be returning to the ocean.

Ms. Coleman, looking at the weather patterns that we've seen in recent falls throughout Atlantic Canada, do you believe that some of the challenges the stock is experiencing in rebuilding itself may be because of those weather phenomena that we're seeing, where we're having more wind, more rain and more blowouts of rivers late into fall?

Kastine Coleman: Yes, it's always a possibility. The salmon have been doing a pretty good job of finding spawning beds and being able to...because they're basically returning to the same pools they were born in. Maybe there needs to be a bit more work done on enhancing the spawning beds and maybe protecting them a bit more, knowing that we do have either more water or lower levels, sometimes even on the lower Humber where the water supply is shut off and water is dropping or raising more than it naturally would. We could just eliminate those extra little things that are happening.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That ends it. I am hoping that—

Mel Arnold: Madam Chair, before we close off, we were a few minutes late in starting, so I hope you'll indulge me for a couple of minutes here.

As the testimony has highlighted, this committee has produced multiple reports over the past decade touching on Atlantic salmon. The first one was “Impact of the Rapid Increase of the Striped Bass in the Miramichi River and the Gulf of St. Lawrence”. That was tabled on February 28, 2022. Another one was “Ecosystem Impacts and Management of Pinniped Populations”, tabled in December 2023. “Wild Atlantic Salmon in Eastern Canada” was tabled January 30, 2017.

As we approach the preparation of a report from this study, I'm concerned that we'll end up repeating the same recommendations made in those previous reports. I think it's important that members know the status of the government's response to those past recommendations. We will be hearing from officials, I understand, and I believe it would benefit the committee and the work of this study if the officials came fully prepared to provide us updates on the status of those government responses to the past recommendations.

I'd suggest that the committee send a request to DFO asking them to ensure the officials are prepared to provide updates on DFO responses to past recommendations when they appear at the committee. If this means that the appearance of officials is delayed by a week or two, I think it's justified, because we can't afford to pass this issue's recommendations before knowing what has happened to those previous recommendations.

● (1020)

The Chair: Mr. Cormier is next.

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I understand what my colleague is saying, but the officials will be coming to the meeting, Madam Chair, next Monday, I think. We'll be able to ask the officials all the questions we want, especially on some of those reports that were done in this committee. I think, and I hope, that they will be prepared to do that. I don't think we need to send something to DFO officials to say to come prepared.

I move to adjourn the meeting, Madam Chair.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

Thank you.

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