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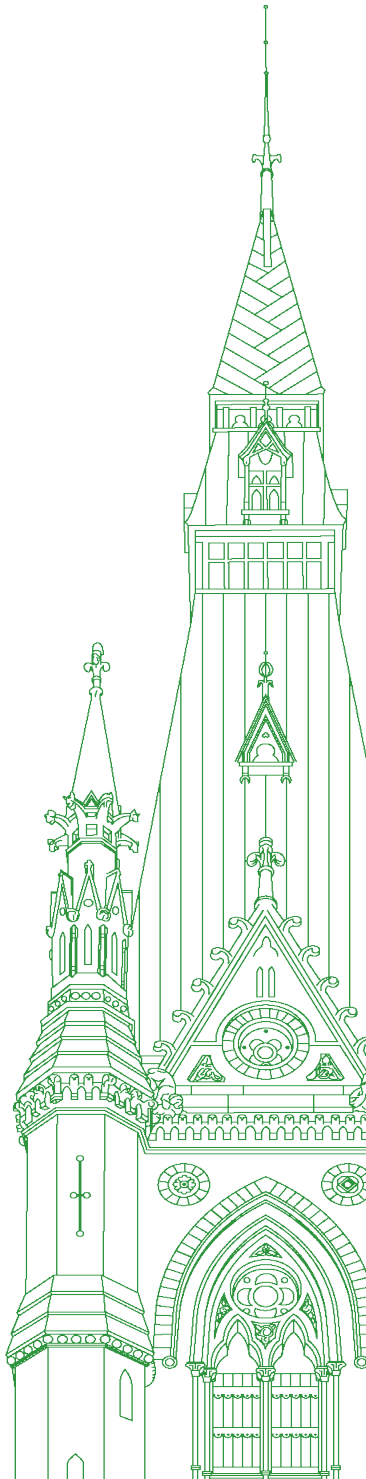
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Chair: Hedy Fry

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold (Kamloops—Shuswap—Central Rockies, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone. I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 52 of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans. Pursuant to Standing Order 108, the committee is meeting to continue its study of Atlantic salmon populations.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. I think everyone here, especially those online, is familiar with the interpretation buttons on their screen.

I remind everyone to place the earpieces away from the microphone if they're not using them and to mute their microphones if they're not speaking.

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

All comments should be addressed through the chair.

I would like to now welcome our witnesses from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. We have Diane Allan, senior assistant deputy minister, strategic policy. I believe Ms. Allan will be introducing her colleagues, so we will start right away with her opening statement for five minutes or less, please.

Diane Allan (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

My name is Diane Allan. I'm the senior ADM in the strategic policy sector at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. In this role, I support the development of strategic policy advice and partnerships that help advance sustainable fisheries, healthy aquatic ecosystems and the long-term conservation of Canada's aquatic resources. This includes working across sectors and with partners to address complex fisheries and conservation challenges, such as those of Atlantic salmon.

Today, I'm joined by my colleagues, Kate Ladell, director general of ecosystems and biodiversity management; Bernard Vigneault, director general of the ecosystem sciences directorate; Mark Waddell, director general of fisheries resource management and Mario Gaudet, director of fisheries management in the gulf region.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging that we're joining you today from the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to discuss the decline of wild Atlantic salmon populations and the department's efforts to support their conservation and recovery.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada works to ensure that fisheries remain sustainable, productive and resilient while safeguarding fish, fish habitat and the aquatic ecosystems that are fundamental to Canada's environmental, cultural, social and economic well-being. The department supports these objectives through strategic policy leadership, science, fishery management, habitat protection and restoration, collaboration with indigenous partners and stakeholders, and targeted investments like the fisheries funds that advance innovation, sustainability and conservation across the sector.

Wild Atlantic salmon are an iconic species that is deeply connected to communities across eastern Canada. They are also of profound importance to indigenous people; Atlantic salmon are closely tied to their culture, identity, traditions and ways of life.

Recognizing the need for coordinated and sustained action, the government published “Canada's National Strategy to Ensure the Future of Atlantic Salmon” in 2025. The strategy provides a framework to guide collective action and recognizes that no single intervention can secure the future of wild Atlantic salmon. Conservation efforts must address pressures throughout their life cycle while reflecting regional differences in population status and threats.

Despite decades of management, stewardship and restoration efforts, Atlantic salmon populations continue to experience significant declines. These declines reflect complex, interacting pressures, including climate change, habitat degradation, barriers to fish passage and predation. No single solution can fully address these challenges.

To identify and understand salmon recovery, DFO also works with research partners to monitor salmon populations, assess threats, and address key challenges and gaps to inform effective conservation actions. This work helps protect the evidence base that is needed to guide policy, management and investment decisions.

Fisheries management also plays an important role through measures such as reduced retention limits, catch-and-release requirements, and restrictions during warm water and low water conditions.

The strategy was developed through extensive engagement with indigenous peoples, provinces, conservation organizations, researchers and members of the Atlantic salmon community. This past spring, the minister also sought further input through provincial round tables and corresponded with more than 115 organizations, helping inform conservation priorities and funding approaches.

Having established a shared direction through the national strategy, we are focused on implementation. On March 31, the government announced $81.7 million over five years to advance Atlantic salmon conservation. Of this funding, $70 million will be directly invested into the ground conservation initiatives undertaken by indigenous organizations, provinces, conservation groups and other partners. In addition, a central feature of the strategy is to establish a network of focal Atlantic salmon rivers, helping focus conservation efforts where they can have the greatest benefit while recognizing the ecological, economic and cultural significance of these rivers.

Our approach also draws on international collaboration, particularly through the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization, where Canada works with other countries across the north Atlantic that face similar challenges.

Ultimately, success will be measured not only by the conservation actions we take but also by their contributions to healthier, more resilient and sustainable wild Atlantic salmon populations. The Government of Canada's $81.7-million commitment represents the largest federal investment in Atlantic salmon recovery in history, and it marks an important milestone in conservation efforts. These challenges are significant, and a recovery will take time. However, through strategic investments and continued collaboration with indigenous peoples, provinces and partners, we are taking concrete actions and steps to support the future of wild Atlantic salmon in Canada.

We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

● (1535)

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you for that. You were in time.

We'll start now with the first round of questions for six minutes.

Mr. Small, go ahead, please.

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

I'd like to welcome to this very important study our government officials who are here today.

Since 2017, this committee has conducted three studies—one on Atlantic salmon, one on striped bass and one on pinniped predation—all of which identified seal predation as a detrimental factor to recovery of salmon stocks. In addition to that, we had the Atlantic seal science task team, which the current Liberal government commissioned to produce a study.

All of these studies highlighted seal predation as a factor that is extremely detrimental to the recovery of our precious Atlantic salmon, yet a multitude of Liberal ministers have failed to act on the recommendations in these various reports.

Are we wasting our time here? Will seal predation ever be dealt with by this current government?

Mark Waddell (Director General, Fisheries Resource Management, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Seal predation is a complex issue, as I'm sure the member is aware, in that we have our trade—a significant amount of trade—with the United States and, as such, the Marine Mammal Protection Act imposes certain restrictions on the ability of countries to harvest seals and to look at that without a scientific evidentiary basis.

Clifford Small: That's duly noted, Mr. Waddell, through the chair.

I understand the commercial trade side of it, but we're talking about salmon rivers that are being inundated with seal predation. That's not a commercial fishery. Wild Atlantic salmon are not fished commercially. To protect these precious runs from seal predation, how can you say that would have an impact on the trade of commercial species?

Mark Waddell: It is possible to issue a nuisance seal licence under the marine mammal regulations, based, again, on scientific evidence, and there is a challenge associated with said predation. At present, we have not issued those because we've lacked the scientific evidence to do so.

● (1540)

Clifford Small: Why do you lack the scientific evidence when we've had three reports out of this committee and the Atlantic seal science task team report that have called for action to deal with seals that are living in estuaries? You've seen the pictures of seals living in the estuary of the Grand Codroy on the west coast of Newfoundland.

What will it take for you to take action?

Mark Waddell: Another alterative that is available to commercial harvesters, of course, is personal use seal licences. We've made those widely available and we have seen an uptake in terms of the application and availing of said licences. What we are not seeing, however, is a harvesting of seals under those.

Clifford Small: I understand, but through the chair, the minister just committed $82 million to stabilize and rebuild Atlantic salmon populations. If we don't protect the existing broodstock, what are we going to be left with?

How much of the $82 million is going to be committed to the science you're lacking to find out for sure if the witnesses are actually right? They come and sit here and give of their valuable time and pour out their hearts to tell us of their observations. How much of the $82 million could end up funnelled down to protect our broodstock from seal predation?

Mark Waddell: I'll let my colleagues speak to the investments this government will be making. However, I would note that depredation is one of many causes of the decline in Atlantic salmon, so we will be exploring that in greater detail.

Clifford Small: You say that seal predation is one of many causes of depredation of Atlantic salmon. What's been done to address the recommendations of the 2017 study on the decline of Atlantic salmon populations?

Mark Waddell: We can provide you with those responses.

Clifford Small: In March of this year, the minister committed $413 million over five years to support the recovery of Pacific salmon populations. Basically one-fifth of that—$82 million—was committed over the same period to stabilize and rebuild Atlantic salmon populations.

We've had multiple witnesses come before this committee over the course of this study who say that this 5:1 ratio in financial commitments to the two coasts for salmon rebuilding represents a double standard. Why are these witnesses saying that there's a double standard in the commitment to Atlantic salmon versus the commitment to Pacific salmon?

Diane Allan: While the government has made significant investments in Pacific salmon, I think there's a paradigm of difference in the fact that there are 43 distinct populations across five major species—chinook, coho, sockeye, pink and chum—in the Pacific, while there are 19 populations in the Atlantic region. The strategies are at different lengths as they move forward.

Clifford Small: You're saying it's 5:1 in populations.

Okay. Let's look at the provinces. We have 5:1 in terms of provinces that you're dealing with here. You have Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, P.E.I., Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. That's five provinces versus one on the west coast. How do you respond to that?

Diane Allan: The strategy is really about ensuring that we engage with partners—provincially and with indigenous peoples. The process is really a joint relationship whereby we're moving different implementation strategies that are regionally focused and that are focused on particular livelihoods and socio-economic issues that are relevant for a particular province or community.

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

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

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

My questions will be for Ms. Allan.

Ms. Allan, for the benefit of those following this committee, let's get a few facts correct.

What is the commercial quota for seal in Atlantic Canada?

● (1545)

Diane Allan: Unfortunately, I don't have that data. I'm wondering whether or not colleagues here might be able to provide that.

Robert Morrissey: Somebody does.

Wasn't there a quota allocation of 400,000 animals?

Mark Waddell: You are correct, Mr. Morrissey.

There is a quota allocation in the vicinity of that number. We have not had a total allowable harvest established formally for several years because we do not approach it.

Robert Morrissey: Nobody pursues it.

What was the quantity harvested the last time, roughly?

Mark Waddell: I could confirm that for you in a few minutes, sir.

Robert Morrissey: Okay.

This notion.... Often the Conservative side pretend to want to have a cull or commercial..., but then they say something different on the docks where fishers are present. They know of the retaliation that Atlantic Canada's fishery could face from the United States government, as well as from the European Union.

Could you opine on, if we put a cull in place, what reaction would come from those two primary markets?

Mark Waddell: Certainly.

As touched upon previously, I think the response from the United States could be rather severe, recognizing that we have some $6.1 billion in trade with them on an annual basis.

Robert Morrissey: Seventy per cent of our product from Atlantic Canada goes to the U.S.

Mark Waddell: That is correct.

Robert Morrissey: Espousing that, if the minister could somehow put in place an arbitrary method to reduce the seal herd outside of the commercial quota that is available now, would it trigger this reaction from the U.S.?

Mark Waddell: It would need to be very sound, scientifically speaking, with well-rationalized numbers in terms of the take that could be possible. You're on the right path, sir.

Robert Morrissey: What about the European Union?

Mark Waddell: The European Union is a slightly different matter with regard to its import regulations. We have been broaching this with it for several years now and did so as recently as earlier this spring, as it's committing a review of its import regulations. It has yet to make a final determination on those, but we're continuing to advocate for Canadian interests.

Robert Morrissey: Okay.

That speaks to the seal issue. Obviously, it will have an impact on the salmon population. Nobody has disputed that. However, the solutions to reduce the seal herd are quite limited because, as of this date, nobody has pursued it commercially.

Mark Waddell: That is correct.

The capacity is there, Mr. Chair, for greater uptake should industry have an interest in pursuing that.

Robert Morrissey: Okay.

Ms. Allan, you made a reference in your statement that DFO "works to ensure that fisheries remain" stable. The salmon are not stable.

What's the department's opinion on striped bass? That's one that I don't think the Americans are terribly endeared to. What's the position of the department? We've heard evidence given here that a 400-tonne allocation on bass would be required to begin dropping the population.

I'm surprised at the difference between science in the department and what people observe, including myself. Bass are showing up in areas they never showed up in before, yet we're reluctant, in my opinion, to take any steps to reduce the growth of that fish species, let alone reduce it.

Diane Allan: I know I can turn to Mark. He's an expert in this space, so he'll be able to answer your question.

Mark Waddell: Thank you, Diane. I'm not sure about the expertise, but nonetheless....

The department has taken successive steps over the last several years to advance recreational harvest, increasing the bag limits in successive years—in 2018, then again in 2024. This now brings us up to four fish per day for recreational harvesters. Members of the committee are likely familiar with the fact that there are no licences associated with recreational harvesting in Atlantic Canada. As such, we don't have definitive numbers regarding participants.

Equally, we've sought to increase the number of fish available through a communal commercial licence, bringing that up to 175,000 fish.

● (1550)

Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Mr. Waddell.

Mr. Chair, I would like to turn the rest of my time over to my colleague Mr. Weiler.

Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Morrissey and Chair.

I'd like to move the motion that the committee undertake a three-meeting study on Pacific herring stocks and fisheries. I circulated this notice of motion last Friday.

Mr. Chair, Pacific herring play a critical role in our marine ecosystems, particularly as a food source for salmon, marine mammals and seabirds. They're also very important to commercial fisheries, first nations and coastal communities throughout British Columbia.

While the committee, I believe, examined aspects of the Pacific herring fishery about 20 years ago, we haven't undertaken a comprehensive examination in recent years of Pacific herring stocks and their ecological importance. There are ongoing questions about the health of herring stocks, the factors affecting their recovery and the effectiveness of current fisheries management practices. It would be valuable for the committee to hear from scientists, first nations harvesters and other stakeholders to better understand these challenges and identify opportunities to support healthy herring populations and sustainable fisheries over the long term.

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

Mr. d'Entremont, you had your hand up.

Chris d'Entremont (Acadie—Annapolis, Lib.): Yes.

I'd like to amend that motion.

[*Translation*]

I propose adding the following after the last paragraph: "That, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee asks that the government provide a comprehensive response to its report".

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Are there any comments on the amendment?

(Amendment agreed to)

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): We'll move on to discussion of the motion as amended. Is there any discussion?

Mr. Small.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Chair.

I read this motion as an attack on the commercial herring fishery in British Columbia. I'd like to say that for the record.

When I see the list of interests that are going to be brought here as witnesses, I see just one group that depends on commercial herring fishing. The commercial fishermen are one of about half a dozen groups that are going to be testifying here. It seems this study is being built to hear from foreign-funded ENGOs in order to push for the demise of the herring fishery in British Columbia.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Is there any further discussion?

Would you like a recorded vote?

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 7; nays 3 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): We will move on with our questioning. We have Mr. Deschênes for six minutes.

● (1555)

[*Translation*]

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

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

Deputy Minister, you said that the amount invested in the strategy to halt the decline of salmon was substantial, even historic, at nearly $82 million. This was announced on March 31, 2026.

What concrete measures have you taken since then to halt the decline of Atlantic salmon?

Diane Allan: I'll turn the floor over to Ms. Ladell.

Kate Ladell (Director General, Ecosystems and Biodiversity Management, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you for the question. I'll answer in English, if I may.

[*English*]

Since the announcement of the funding, our primary focus has been to ensure that we get that money out the door to go towards projects that support Atlantic salmon conservation and restoration in the water and on the ground. The majority of our funding—$70 million of that $81.7 million—is intended to go out the door of the department. We're looking to get that funding to shovel-ready projects this year, because the funding was only announced in the spring.

We worked very hard over the course of the summer to identify recipients who could take that funding and work to advance projects specific to Atlantic salmon conservation. Those are things like barrier remediation to improve connectivity, protection of cold-water refuges for Atlantic salmon and improvements to fisheries management activities. We're working with partners who are available to get that money out the door this year.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Ms. Ladell, as I understand it, no projects have been approved to date. No concrete steps have been taken since last March. Instead, you have broken down the funds according to how they will be used.

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: I wouldn't say that. I would say that concrete action has been taken since March. We're working to get the funding out the door to recipients who can—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: No funding has been allocated. I'm trying to understand what's been done over the past seven months. You say that $70 million will be invested in projects on the ground. That's a decision you've made over the past seven months. You've decided to fund habitat restoration. Is that correct?

Have you determined how you will allocate that amount? For example, how much will be invested in studies in the marine environment? One possible cause of the decline, at least as a hypothesis, is that something is happening in the Strait of Belle Isle. There may be high mortality among young smolts.

What portion of the $82 million will be invested in marine research?

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: We have not come up with different definitive amounts going here or there. We have come up with priorities and criteria for the funding. Those are based on years of consultation that we've heard—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: So, what are the priorities?

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: The priorities are things like restoring in-stream and riparian habitats, protecting cold-water refuges, doing more research to understand the causes of declines both in—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: When you talk about research aimed at understanding the causes, does that include marine research?

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: If the projects that will be submitted are projects that will be researching some of those causes, then those are some of the criteria that we would consider.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Of the $82 million, how much is allocated to scientific research? You mentioned habitat restoration, but how much funding is there for marine research?

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: We haven't come up with a distinction between this much going to research and that much going to habitat restoration. In these initial stages, we're setting up the criteria to fund projects that will go out the door. We have to wait to see what people want to study and the projects they wish to—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Before inviting project proposals, we usually establish criteria and areas of focus. Are we simply looking to restore habitats? Do we want to conduct scientific research in the marine environment? Have you determined that yet?

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: Scientific research is part of some of the projects that could be funded, in addition to...I got through a few of them, but there are more criteria for things that we're willing to fund: for example, indigenous-led conservation activities, stocking and enhancement activities, investments in infrastructure to support program delivery, and actions to improve fish passage and river connectivity. These are all some of the biggest threats to Atlantic salmon that have emerged.

● (1600)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: What portion of the envelope will be dedicated to Quebec's salmon rivers?

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: We have not allocated funds province by province.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: So there will be calls for proposals.

Will the funding for these projects be spread out over five years, or will there be calls for proposals every year?

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: Yes, over five years.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Okay. So there will be calls for proposals for—

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: Excuse me, but the call will be for four years, because.... We're in November. For this year, we had to provide dedicated, directed funding to those recipients who showed they had shovel-ready projects that could get out the door.

The call for proposals will start April 1. We have to give recipients time to put together a proposal, submit the proposal and receive the information. These will be for multi-year, high-impact and high-value projects.

What we've heard from people is that there are a lot of really great organizations out there that are doing really important work on the ground. A lot of those are funded in smaller increments, and what they are looking to see are some of those big investments that can really help move the needle on some of the biggest threats to Atlantic salmon.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: How are you going to—

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Deschênes. That's six minutes—actually, you're a little over.

Next we go to Mr. Hardy for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Gabriel Hardy (Montmorency—Charlevoix, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being with us today.

It's clear that today's study focuses on salmon and that, to protect a species, we need to consider its ecosystem in order to understand its predators and so on. Striped bass have been protected since 2004. This protection has had significant repercussions in Montmorency—Charlevoix and elsewhere. I've travelled between Chicoutimi, Rimouski and Repentigny, to places where there are tomcod, and all around L'Isle-aux-Coudres. We're told, after all, that striped bass are exceptionally effective predators.

I'm wondering whether you've conducted a recent study on striped bass and their overpopulation in the St. Lawrence River, even as far as Chicoutimi. Are they predators of smolts? I'm asking because our study focuses on salmon.

Mr. Vigneault, could you answer?

Bernard Vigneault (Director General, Ecosystem Science, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): I thank the member for his question.

Yes, this is definitely something we monitor closely through rigorous scientific work, particularly to track the striped bass population, since Fisheries and Oceans Canada, or DFO, is responsible for managing the striped bass stock in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence. However, we also conduct research into its role as a predator. It's a generalist predator that can feed on all kinds of forage fish in rivers.

We also collaborate with non-governmental organizations and universities to conduct tagging studies, among other things, to better understand the distribution of striped bass.

Gabriel Hardy: Based on your current research, are you finding that striped bass are exceptionally effective predators of smelt, capelin and, now, salmon in the Malbaie River?

In Rimouski, I've even been told that crabs are being found in the stomachs of striped bass.

Do you have any data indicating that this is beginning to affect the ecosystem, or are you managing each species separately?

Bernard Vigneault: The population in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence is in the caution zone, while the population in the St. Lawrence River, which I believe is the one you're referring to, is expanding. We're working with the Government of Quebec to assess the population's new distribution and status. In addition, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, or COSEWIC, will conduct an assessment to reassess the species' status, which will open up a whole range of management options for the Government of Quebec.

Gabriel Hardy: I'm glad you brought up COSEWIC, whose assessment has been awaited for four years. I've had discussions with people in the Quebec government, and they're ready to move forward as soon as the species is removed from the list of protected species. The scientific data indicate that they're currently able to regulate recreational fishing, among other things. However, what we're being told at COSEWIC is that we're four years behind because there aren't enough staff to publish the assessment.

We're talking about ecosystems. Are we allowing an entire ecosystem to deteriorate simply because there aren't enough staff in the offices, even though all the fishers are telling us there's a serious problem?

Bernard Vigneault: No. I want to reiterate that the study will be presented at the next COSEWIC meeting in November. So we'll follow up on that. Currently, studies on striped bass predation show that it's a generalist predator. Therefore, we have no evidence that it has an effect, for example, on lobster stocks in the Gulf of St. Lawrence or anything like that.

● (1605)

Gabriel Hardy: So, in your view, it's still anecdotal when fishers tell us that they're finding just about anything. Sometimes they find dead fish. They're not allowed to keep them, of course. You say you don't yet have evidence that there will be an effect and that striped bass are generalist predators, but in the Malbaie River, for example, where they're present, do you think smolts are at risk?

In Chicoutimi, people told me they'd never seen striped bass in their lives. I even heard from someone who said it was like introducing northern pike into a trout lake. People had never seen pike before; it's not a predator they're familiar with. But at some point, they realize there are no more trout. Eventually, they make the connection between the two and conclude that something new has arrived.

Is that something you're observing?

Bernard Vigneault: Scientific research on this is ongoing. So far, the studies that have been conducted, particularly in Quebec, haven't shown that striped bass is a disproportionately significant predator. However, this is indeed a concern, and research is ongoing. We're conducting this research with partners within the department and with external partners. When the call for proposals is issued to allocate funding under the new strategy, partners may submit proposals for projects addressing this issue.

Gabriel Hardy: I like the idea of working with partners and all that, but we're already four years behind. Fishers are telling us that the situation is becoming urgent because they're no longer able to carry out their commercial fishing activities, since the resources they're supposed to be harvesting are no longer there.

Are you making a commitment? Is anyone saying that we have solutions, that we're listening to fishers and that, starting next summer, there will be quotas for recreational fishing, for example? Could this be a scientific approach to moving towards something with at least some degree of control?

Bernard Vigneault: I just want to remind you that COSEWIC is an independent organization separate from Fisheries and Oceans Canada. We cannot make any commitments on its behalf. Fisheries management—

Gabriel Hardy: Let me stop you right there. COSEWIC falls under the responsibility of Environment and Climate Change Canada, and when I spoke with the Minister of the Environment, she wasn't aware of the issue at all. When I speak with people at Fisheries and Oceans Canada, they tell me they can't get involved in this matter because it doesn't really fall under their responsibility, but rather under that of an independent organization. Then, when we approach the organization that's supposed to oversee this, it isn't aware of the issue. So right now, we're caught in an administrative maze that is allowing the species to take up space and harm the ecosystem.

Bernard Vigneault: We are fully involved and provide scientific data to COSEWIC. We are not responsible for COSEWIC's workload or work schedule, but I understand your point.

Thank you.

[*English*]

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

We'll go to Mr. Cormier.

[*Translation*]

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

I'll address all five witnesses.

If you've heard my colleagues talking about striped bass from the outset, it's because most of the witnesses who have appeared before the committee have raised the issue of striped bass and its effects on Atlantic salmon populations in various regions. I think it's also our role to ask you these questions to understand how you view this factor. You've been saying for some time now that there are several factors, such as climate change, warming waters, predation and striped bass, for example. I think Ms. Allan was the first to mention this in her opening remarks. However, once again, it's important to understand how you view this species.

So, I'd like to hear from all five of you.

Mr. Vigneault, do you believe that striped bass contribute to the decline in Atlantic salmon populations?

Bernard Vigneault: I thank the member for the question.

As you know, it's not a general factor that applies to all populations—

Serge Cormier: Is it a factor, yes or no?

Bernard Vigneault: There is the particular case of the Miramichi River, which is being studied. Some tagging studies have raised concerns. They show a lower survival rate among smolts than in other rivers. This is part of the research DFO is conducting with its partners. We need not only to find evidence of predation, but also to determine how much the striped bass population would need to be reduced to have a significant effect on salmon populations. That requires a great deal more scientific data.

Serge Cormier: All right. We'll come back to that later.

Mr. Gaudet, you're from the Moncton area, where you work for DFO. You're certainly familiar with the rivers of New Brunswick. Do you think striped bass have an effect on Atlantic salmon populations in the Miramichi and Restigouche rivers in New Brunswick?

Mario Gaudet (Director, Fisheries and Harbour Management, Gulf Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): I'd like to thank the member for the question.

With regard to striped bass, it's important to note that the department is still consulting a variety of groups and has heard the concerns they have raised. Since 2018, I think we've increased access to striped bass for recreational fishers and first nations. We're currently examining the issue of balance, but it's important to remember that the striped bass stock is still within the safety zone, according to our precautionary approach.

● (1610)

Serge Cormier: Perfect.

Now, Mr. Vigneault, I want to come back to what you said about the need for more scientific data.

In 2021 and 2022, we did a study, here in committee, on striped bass, and some of you said that striped bass did not eat small Atlantic salmon. I think that, without even doing more scientific research, with other scientists who have appeared before the committee since the beginning of this study, we can see that there is already evidence that striped bass eat small Atlantic salmon when the salmon return to the sea, or even to the river. We are saying that more scientific research is needed, but we already know that it is a predator and that it has an impact on populations.

That said, I would like to know one thing. You're saying that you've increased the quota of striped bass that first nations can fish on the Miramichi River. I think it was 150,000 to 175,000. However, we know that first nations don't fish all of that striped bass quota, so incentives are being put in place to reduce predation, but unfortunately, the quota hasn't been reached.

What can be done to transfer the remaining first nations quota to other groups that could help reduce the striped bass population and, at the same time, promote the recovery of Atlantic salmon populations?

Mario Gaudet: In terms of validating the information you just mentioned about the impact on other fisheries, the department has allowed pilot projects in various fisheries, including lobster, alewife and Atlantic silverside, to determine the impact of the interaction with the species, as well as the extent of the interaction. These are steps—

Serge Cormier: Mr. Gaudet, the quota has been increased to 175,000 catches, but it hasn't been reached. Why not give the remaining quota to other groups to help restore Atlantic salmon populations in those rivers?

Mario Gaudet: In terms of the quota allocated to first nations, they can designate people who can fish for them, but—

Serge Cormier: Do they want to do that? Have they done so?

Mario Gaudet: To give you an overview, last year, there were only five first nations that expressed interest, and this year, there are nine. We don't have the final landing data yet, but there seems to be an increased demand for the species.

[*English*]

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

Now we'll move again to Mr. Deschênes for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you.

I would like to follow up on my colleague's questions, because I think they are quite timely.

As part of the strategy to halt the decline of salmon populations, we understand that a lot of money will be invested in research and habitat restoration. However, there are also measures to be taken with regard to predation. We can see that, in terms of striped bass, the authorized quota is not being fully fished in the Miramichi River.

What concrete measures are you going to take to ensure that fishers fish the quota authorized by DFO?

[*English*]

Mark Waddell: I'll kick us off, perhaps, and my colleague can comment as well.

The department has taken successive progressive actions in terms of raising the recreational harvest and increasing the number of pieces available to first nations, but also through the—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: The commercial fishing quota for striped bass has not been met. What are you doing about this? Are you taking any measures to ensure this quota is met?

[*English*]

Mark Waddell: Those are discussions that could come through the advisory committee in concert with all participants in the fishery.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Mr. Waddell, I don't want you to talk to me about advisory committees; I want to know whether you are taking steps to ensure that the quota authorized by DFO for commercial striped bass fishing is fished.

DFO estimates that 175,000 striped bass can be fished. What measures are you taking to ensure that this fish is caught?

● (1615)

Mario Gaudet: With regard to monitoring landings, it is important to ensure that we have all the information before making any decisions.

Alexis Deschênes: My question does not concern monitoring.

What measures are you taking to ensure that the quotas you allocate are actually fished, with a view to promoting the conservation of Atlantic salmon in the Miramichi River?

Mario Gaudet: As for first nations, we consult with them as well, because the quota has been allocated to them and we are trying to ensure that it is fished.

Alexis Deschênes: Allow me to conclude that you are not taking any action. That is my understanding. Apart from the consultations, there is no plan. Is that correct?

Mario Gaudet: There are pilot projects.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Deschênes. You can carry on for—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: I see I only have five seconds left.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): We'll move on now to Mr. Hardy for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Gabriel Hardy: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to address all the witnesses.

This is very interesting. Earlier, we were discussing technical details and the works. We're waiting; we want to make sure of certain things and we want to carry out studies. The reality is that the studies are four years behind schedule. Further upstream—I'm not talking about Montmorency-Charlevoix—you have allocated quotas that have not been met. That is my understanding. They haven't been met, so you're not protecting the other species that will be affected, yet you keep saying you're going to carry out studies, make sure of this or that, and then proceed by trial and error.

Furthermore, I also find it hard to understand what the problem is when it comes to recognizing the expertise of fishers on the ground. They say they can no longer catch their quotas for other types of fish because they're only catching striped bass.

Recently, I went to Trois-Rivières to meet some fishers who catch tomcod. This fishery has been in existence for nearly 100 years. They say they can no longer catch these fish because their customers are only fishing for striped bass. Do these people need a study that has been four years in the making and which may or may not lead to anything? Are we going to wait until there's nothing left before we finally realize that something needs to be done? That's the sort of answers you're giving us.

How long will it take? Can you guarantee that by 2027, things will be sorted, you'll make progress and it'll be done, or can you only give us answers like “maybe”, “probably” and “one day”?

Mario Gaudet: It should be noted that the stock is still within the precautionary range. The department has nevertheless taken proactive steps by allocating substantial quotas to first nations. Furthermore, it has increased the daily catch limit for recreational anglers. From there—

Gabriel Hardy: I must intervene, because what you have just said is really important.

From a certain point in the river onwards, we are allowed to fish for striped bass, and yet you say that you are increasing the quotas to control its population. People can catch more of them, but beyond a clearly defined line, we're no longer allowed to fish for them. In Montmorency—Charlevoix, all the way to Chicoutimi, Repentigny and Trois-Rivières, we're no longer allowed to fish for them at all. I find that hard to understand. If there are plenty of striped bass in the upper reaches of the river, in my view, that fishery should be allowed to continue. There are no customs barriers for fish. The reality that fishers see on the ground is that there are quite a few of them and that this is causing problems for everyone.

Why not take the same approach as you did for the upper reaches of the river? You could simply say that you're going to open the fishery with strictly controlled quotas, that this is a scientific approach, that we'll see how many fish we catch and that we'll proceed gradually.

Why say no and wait more years? Why not just admit that we may have been wrong and that we'll work as a team with the local community to move forward? Why just say no, again today, and harm the ecosystem? Protecting the ecosystem is, after all, what everyone here is aiming for.

Kate Ladell: I would like to thank the member for his question.

[*English*]

I think it's important to note that, when we're talking about striped bass, there are three distinct populations of striped bass. There's one in the St. Lawrence River estuary. There's one in the southern gulf of St. Lawrence. There is one in the Bay of Fundy.

These are all different populations, and they're designated differently under the Species at Risk Act. The St. Lawrence River population, which is the one I believe you're speaking of, is currently listed under the Species at Risk Act as endangered, which means that you cannot fish for it.

[*Translation*]

Gabriel Hardy: I understand, but fishers in the field have been waiting for this study for four years.

I'll tell you about another matter which is very interesting.

In 2021, the government referred the striped bass assessment back to COSEWIC, stating that DFO would commit to actively participating in it and working with COSEWIC. Between 2015 and 2025, DFO's budget tripled, whilst COSEWIC says it lacks resources. On the one hand, they're receiving three times as much money, and on the other, COSEWIC says it doesn't have the resources to publish the study.

Is this really collaborative work, or is it more like working in a vacuum?

● (1620)

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: I think it's important, as my colleague mentioned.... COSEWIC is a separate entity that is responsible for assessing the species.

[*Translation*]

Gabriel Hardy: I agree with you, but DFO has committed to collaborating and working with COSEWIC. DFO's budget has tripled in 10 years, while COSEWIC tells us it lacks the staff to carry out the study.

What sort of collaboration is it if you are unable to provide the necessary staff to carry out a study, to make progress and to stop protecting one species at the expense of an ecosystem?

Telling someone to "go ahead" is not collaboration.

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: We collaborate very closely with our colleagues in Environment and Climate Change Canada. It's very important that COSIWIC is considered an independent organization providing science.

[*Translation*]

Gabriel Hardy: COSEWIC says it lacks staff for the study.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): That concludes your five minutes, Mr. Hardy. Thank you very much.

Next, we move to Mr. d'Entremont.

Chris d'Entremont: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I haven't asked a question on this one yet because salmon is not a big issue in southwest Nova Scotia. That's because there are no salmon left. The Tusket, the Sissiboo, the Annapolis, the Medway and the Shelburne rivers were all huge salmon runs when I was younger. Yes, I'm getting old, but I remember my grandfather fishing for salmon. Acid rain and other issues came along, so there are no more salmon on those runs.

It heartens me a little when I hear some of our presenters talking about programs and processes happening across the Bay of Fundy and on the Saint John and the St. Croix.

At what point do we decide that salmon are in trouble and we need to change the way we're doing things? I don't want to see what happened to the rivers in my area, southwest Nova Scotia, also happen to these very productive rivers in New Brunswick, Quebec and Newfoundland. We've had to transition to different things, as that just doesn't happen in my area. I think we can all agree that we're in trouble, but where are we in this process? Is it too far gone, or does the department think we can bring in a save here?

Diane Allan: The intent behind the strategy is, in fact, to advance what we need to do with partners and colleagues in order to address the issue of that decline. We're obviously very concerned about the decline and therefore working in partnership with the locals—indigenous people and whatnot—who are very critical for us. We're advancing the work collectively so mitigation measures and management measures are done in a local context, in order to address all the issues there.

I'm going to turn to Kate.

Kate Ladell: Further to what my colleague was saying, the strategy very much recognizes that we are at a pivotal point for Atlantic salmon and that we have to do things a bit differently.

What we've heard loud and clear is that salmon continue to decline despite continued research and investments. These recent investments represent a significant investment to, hopefully, really focus in on some of those key threats and move the needle on recovery. We're looking at how we can partner with organizations, fund indigenous knowledge and do some of those high-impact, large-value projects in areas that need it most. We have taken a focal-river approach, looking to advance conservation and recovery action for Atlantic salmon in those rivers where we think we can have the most impact.

We've identified very clear commitments. The force of nature strategy commits to restoring 10 million square metres of Atlantic salmon habitat. We are working, over the next four years, to really make a difference through very targeted investments that can move the needle for Atlantic salmon.

● (1625)

Chris d'Entremont: In our area, there has been a lot of talk of changing watercourses, doing watercourse management and getting the rivers back. There's been a history of seeding those rivers with limestone and trying to get the acidity back up. It goes on. We've had 50 years of trying different things and different processes. We haven't necessarily gotten as far along as we'd all hope.

What I didn't get out of the answers I heard was the predator management piece. Salmon are going somewhere. They're coming back. Somewhere along that process, they might be caught, or they might hit some kind of adverse environment and not get all the way back to the headwaters of that river. We now have striped bass giving them a lot of grief. The issue of seals keeps getting brought up in this committee, over and over again.

What are we going to do about these factors? We can go and ask people what they think and what they want to do, and go and try to find partners. We know that there are major threats that we as a government, or you as a department, should really be grabbing hold of, but you seem reluctant to actually do them. Where are we in the management of those things that are taking the small salmon out of the water?

Kate Ladell: I don't think I'm best placed to speak to management of the salmon.

I would turn to my colleague in the gulf region.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Can we keep it short? We're at five minutes.

Mark Waddell: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As the member knows, there are no commercial fisheries anymore at this stage. We are actually controlling the factors that we can control. Certainly, with regard to striped bass, this is where we've been taking more progressive and sustainable measures, recognizing that this stock remains in the cautious zone.

Equally, to loop back on the question previously with regard to seal predators and predation, we saw 31,000 harp seals taken out in 2024 and just over 2,100 grey seals taken out in 2024 as well.

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

We now move on to the Conservatives.

Mr. Gunn, you have five minutes, please.

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

It's nice to chat with you again, officials.

First, I want to get your guys' take on this: What would you define as “soon”? What type of time frame would you put around that?

Kate Ladell: Is that in the context of—

Aaron Gunn: If you said you'd be releasing a plan “soon”, what do you think most Canadians would take that to mean?

Kate Ladell: I'm sorry. Which plan are you referring to?

Aaron Gunn: I'm just asking what “soon” means to you.

Kate Ladell: I think it really depends on what we're speaking of.

Aaron Gunn: Well, to me, it's less than a year, which is how long the people of my riding have been waiting to find out what the government is doing regarding the salmon aquaculture transition plan.

I'm sure none of you are surprised to know that in my riding, the salmon aquaculture of Atlantic salmon is a major driver of the local economy. It supports thousands of jobs and families in Campbell River, Gold River and Port Hardy. People rely on that industry and those jobs to put food on the table, pay their mortgages and plan for their future. One year ago, the minister and subsequent government department officials promised an update on the salmon aquaculture plan soon—a transition plan that, without modification, would essentially kill the industry and take with it all those jobs. I think that is not in question. That was back in 2025. It's now almost 2027.

It was also inferred that there would be an announcement in May, in June, in July and in August. It is now November. There is still no update, no clarity and no assurance to all the people who work in this industry. I'm sure you can appreciate this; jobs and livelihoods rely on this government announcement that just hasn't been forthcoming.

This is my question to you: What is going on? Is the government still planning to make an announcement? When can it realistically be expected?

● (1630)

Kate Ladell: As you know, the draft salmon aquaculture transition plan for British Columbia was published in September 2024. It served as a basis for over 120 consultation and engagement sessions with first nations, communities, industry and other stakeholders in B.C. A significant amount of feedback and written submissions were received through the process. The government is reviewing all the different perspectives and considering how it can best move sustainable aquaculture forward in B.C.

For any additional questions on this, we will have to get back to you in writing. This is not my area of expertise.

Aaron Gunn: We still don't have any kind of.... Right now, the industry and everyone who works in it are basically saying it is going to collapse entirely if they don't get any clarification in the next.... The way aquaculture works, as I'm sure you know, is based on cycles.

As of right now, is it fair to say there is still no update from the department on what's happening and no timeline for when an update might be provided?

Kate Ladell: I'm not in a position to give you an update beyond what I've already stated, but I'm happy to get back to you in writing.

Aaron Gunn: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

Do you know if the department is weighing the fact that there is now a new provincial government in British Columbia that is open to sustainable and responsible aquaculture?

Kate Ladell: I'm not in a position to answer that question, but I'm happy to get back to you in writing.

Aaron Gunn: Okay. I want to see if there are any other questions I might like to get answers to in writing while I have you. No. That sounds good.

I'm going to give the rest of my time over to my colleague Mr. Small.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Gunn.

My next question is with regard to the river guardian program. I understand that it's been farmed out to Public Works and is no longer through DFO. Is that correct, Mr. Waddell?

Mark Waddell: That is a question we'd have to look into and get back to you on.

Clifford Small: In turn, the river guardian program is contracted out to a third party.

I've heard from guardians that there are times when they're staking out a poaching operation and they're pulled off their stake because they're running into overtime. How much of the minister's $82-million announcement will be used to rectify situations like this, where the broodstock is clearly not of the utmost importance; rather, it's the budget of the third party contractor?

Mark Waddell: I will turn to my colleague Ms. Ladell, who can speak in some greater detail with regard to river guardians.

Kate Ladell: What I can tell you is this first year in Newfoundland, there were fishery guardians. The department initiated a new contract and a statement of work with Seawatch Inc., which is an organization out of St. John's. The initial contract is for one year, with an option to renew to up to three years. There were 89 fishery guardians on strength for a total of 4,700 inspections—

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): I'm sorry.

Your time is up, Mr. Small. It was a short amount from Mr. Gunn.

We'll go back now to the Liberal side and Mr. Cormier again.

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

All of the witnesses who came to this committee in the last four meetings proposed solutions or ways that we can improve the Atlantic salmon stock. Let's put them to you now.

What are your solutions? I'm not sure who's responsible for giving recommendations, for example, to the minister, and then she takes a decision. What solutions are you proposing so that we can see the Atlantic salmon population go up again?

Kate Ladell: The solutions we're proposing are solutions that we've heard over the course of much consultation and engagement, not only in the development of our national strategy but also.... Most recently, following the announcement of funding, our minister went out to many communities. She heard many of the same suggestions for solutions that I've heard spoken at this committee.

First of all, we have to come together. We have to collaborate. Atlantic salmon has a vast range. There are over 1,000 rivers that span multiple provinces—

Serge Cormier: Ms. Ladell, I'm going to stop you there.

On collaboration, all of the groups that came to this committee said they've collaborated for years. There's been enough collaboration. Now it's time for solutions, and decisions need to be taken.

Let's put aside collaboration. What are your solutions? What are you proposing?

● (1635)

Kate Ladell: Some of those solutions tie to how we have to create the conditions for Atlantic salmon to thrive. Those are things like barrier remediation, where we know Atlantic salmon are not able to move up the rivers, so we have to work with partners to address that. There are cold-water refuges and making sure that Atlantic salmon are given the conditions they need and that there are protections put in place when water temperatures become too high.

We're making sure that we're working with our indigenous partners, who have been here for thousands of years and have so much local and indigenous knowledge, so that when we are developing solutions, we're working with them to come up with those answers.

There's more enforcement that needs to happen, making sure that we're out on the rivers, looking, and making sure that the right activities are happening at the right time.

Habitat restoration—

Serge Cormier: That's perfect.

So far, with what you just named, I think we're already doing a lot of that. There's a lot that groups are already doing in habitat restoration and cold-water refuges. They're all already doing these things.

I'm going to come back to some decisions.

For example, I totally understand that climate change has an effect on Atlantic salmon, with the warming oceans and mortality at sea.

Almost 100% of all of the witnesses who came said striped bass will be the number one thing that we can at least...do and try to see if there is a positive impact in years two, three or four on the returning stock. Why don't you want to act? I don't understand.

There were 175,000 striped bass available for first nations, but again, we're not catching all of the quota. Why are we not giving this quota to other groups? Why are we not saying, “Hey, you're not taking all the quota. We respect that you're first nations. We respect your rights. We know that, but we have to act here”? Why are we not going ahead and saying, “Let's harvest the full quota and let's give it to other groups”?

I think it was Mr. Gaudet or Mr. Vigneault who said some other groups, like the gaspereau group, have tons of striped bass in their nets, but they were not able to retain them this year because of a decision that came from DFO.

Why can't we act on this striped bass situation right now? It should be easy.

Mark Waddell: We have been taking progressive action. One of the things that we have been mindful of is, as you've referenced, the fact that there hasn't been full utilization of the quota provided to first nations. We understand that there are market development issues with regard to that in terms of them trying to serve what would in essence be a food fishery, providing a commercial product to restaurants and the like, rather than serving a bait fishery. That is their aspiration, and they are keen to produce and serve that fishery.

In conjunction with that, though, we have been looking at—

Serge Cormier: Mr. Waddell, this is the last question.

Do you think we operate too much on policy and not on what's really happening on the ground? When was the last time you guys went on the rivers and saw what's actually happening? When is the last time some of you actually fished for Atlantic salmon or striped bass?

Mark Waddell: I have not had the opportunity to fish Atlantic salmon in several years now, unfortunately, being based in Ottawa. However, I would love the opportunity. I'm sure my colleague has been out more readily than I have proven to.

Serge Cormier: It's important for all of you to understand what's going on on the ground. It's important for all people to understand what's going on in our rivers and not take decisions only in an office. I respect your job, but it's important to do that.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): We're over the time now. Thank you.

Serge Cormier: If we're not doing that, unfortunately, we're not going to find some solutions.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): You'll have to answer that in the next round.

We're moving on now to Mr. Deschênes, for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We are discussing all the causes of the decline in Atlantic salmon. Habitat restoration is important, and it is equally important to ensure that striped bass quotas are met. Furthermore, there is the issue of seal hunting and predation by seals.

What do you intend to do to encourage greater seal catches, given that there are also significant quotas in this regard, but that they are not being met?

● (1640)

[*English*]

Mark Waddell: I think that proves to be one of the ongoing challenges in terms of having that uptake pursued. That is something we work on in conjunction with our Canadian industry to seek to develop commercial harvest opportunities. Working again—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: With regard to the development of a commercial sector, what do you intend to do to promote the development of the seal industry?

[*English*]

Mark Waddell: We continue to work, primarily with the European Union, on regaining access to that market.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: I think that's rather unlikely, but let's take the Quebec market as an example. Demand for seal products exceeds supply. So there is already a market in Quebec and, probably, across Canada for these products, particularly in restaurants. Personally, I think there is a problem with the hunt itself. It's complicated for the hunters to carry it out. Moreover, a study on the marine mammal regulations will be conducted here in due course. I hope we will be able to put forward some very concrete proposals to make things easier.

I understand what you're saying. There may be discussions with the European Union. However, apart from that, what other measures is DFO taking to encourage more seals to be caught in relation to the allocated quotas?

[*English*]

Mark Waddell: Again, it's not necessarily the quota that's the issue. It's the actual uptake of the quota, if I properly understand the question. That is something where, through the personal use licences, we've sought to increase the number of harvesters, recognizing that there's been a bit of a gap in labour force development in terms of—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: How can we increase the number of hunters?

[*English*]

Mark Waddell: We've made those licences more available and—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: How did you go about it?

[*English*]

Mark Waddell: Perhaps my colleague can speak in more detail.

[*Translation*]

Mario Gaudet: The department has, in fact, issued seal hunting licences for personal use, but this was as part of a pilot scheme. It is also working with fishers' organizations to try to provide guidance to participants, in particular by offering them training.

That said, yes, there do seem to be people interested in this area.

Alexis Deschênes: Are you referring to seal hunting for personal use?

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you. That's two and a half minutes now, Mr. Deschênes.

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

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

Thank you so much to the witnesses here for appearing today. I certainly appreciate it.

I'm going to jump right into the questions. Perhaps I will direct my questions to Ms. Allan, but by all means, hearing from whoever can answer them best would be most appreciated.

It's my understanding that the Liberal government has reduced or is reducing approximately 551 full-time positions at DFO by 2028-29. Can someone please tell me how many positions supporting the Great Lakes science and fisheries management are being eliminated?

Diane Allan: I'm not sure if any of my colleagues have an answer to that in particular, but we're happy to submit it in writing.

Chris Lewis: Okay. Thank you very much.

Since we're studying Atlantic salmon, I'm hoping I'll get an answer for this one. How many positions in the Atlantic salmon assessment programs are being eliminated?

Bernard Vigneault: There was a reduction as part of the biodiversity facilities in Mactaquac and Coldbrook.... The number of employees is still to be determined, because we're trying to place our staff under the workforce adjustment process in other positions, with some of them going to other priorities related to Atlantic salmon, the stock assessment—

Chris Lewis: Thank you, Mr. Vigneault.

What date do you believe you'll have that answer for us? When will that assessment happen and when will the other employees be redistributed, as an example?

Perhaps Ms. Allan can answer that.

Diane Allan: There is a formal process that is earmarked by the collective agreement of each employee. The process is usually a journey of several months for decisions by employees to determine whether they wish to alternate or whether or not they wish to stay as a priority, and then we position them in a priority position. It varies from one employee to the next.

As the process is still under way, the details of that particular number are yet to be available, but we would certainly be able to return with information in writing.

Chris Lewis: Thank you very much.

On the process of not having a date, there is a date for Atlantic salmon. It's an arbitrary date. Every day that goes by and we lose folks to protect Atlantic salmon—both on, obviously, Atlantic salmon, but also with Ontario not being restored—is another day that goes by when we don't have a fishery.

I was hoping for more of a plan, but I appreciate the very honest answers. Thank you.

This is for Ms. Allan again, please, or whoever you need to answer this. Your department has a national mandate to manage and recover fish stocks. It is my understanding that Atlantic salmon stocking is being carried out on Lake Huron and St. Marys River by Michigan's DNR—I'm sure you're aware of the Michigan DNR, as I very much am—and Lake Superior State University.

The Lake Ontario Atlantic salmon restoration program relies on provincial funding, non-governmental partners and imported genetic broodstock. This seems like a complete mismanagement by the Liberal government.

Why is DFO leaving Great Lakes Atlantic salmon restoration to provincial agencies and Americans when your mandate is to manage and recover depleted stocks?

● (1645)

Diane Allan: Mr. Chair, I don't believe any of my colleagues would have an answer to that, unfortunately, so we will have to look into it and get back to the committee in writing. We don't have all the right experts, unfortunately, around the table. That's an unfortunate outcome. I'm sorry about that.

Chris Lewis: Very well. Please, don't be sorry, but thank you.

The Liberal government has committed hundreds of millions of dollars to salmon hatcheries and enhancements in western and eastern Canada—$686 million on the west coast and $81.7 million in Atlantic Canada. However, there is zero direct operational funding for Atlantic salmon restoration in Lake Ontario.

Does anybody have an idea as to why that is the case?

Diane Allan: The Atlantic salmon strategy and the Pacific salmon strategy have been the focus that we have put forward. I can go back and determine whether or not there is a strategy internal to Canada, but unfortunately, I would not be able to answer the question at this moment.

Chris Lewis: Okay. Thank you very much, Ms. Allan.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): I shall act as chair for a few minutes to allow my colleague to speak.

Mr. Connors has the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Paul Connors (Avalon, Lib.): Thank you.

A warm welcome and thank you to the witnesses here today.

It's great to get a chance to speak about Atlantic salmon.

I want to start off with a statement that was made here during witness statements, and I want to get your response. I'm not sure who would answer it, but I'll take opinions from everybody. The statement was, basically, that there's no single cause for decline of the Atlantic salmon, but rivers are depleted before DFO start rehabilitation.

How would you respond to that? Can you give us some examples of what you've done or what you haven't done in order to be able to address that?

Bernard Vigneault: The issue is not with waiting for the client to take measures to restore fish, like the restoration of habitat and other measures. The issue is with the negative impact of stocking and enhancement. There's very clear literature now that the fish that come from stocks that have been impacted are less fit than wild fish.

International organizations, like NASCO, which we mentioned earlier—and we are developing a science advice on that—are promoting, for Atlantic salmon, the use of an enhancement measures, just as a last resort measure, with a strong approach to mitigate the negative impact of the enhancement. That's specific to stocking, though. We're not talking about all the other measures we can take to protect the fish in the rivers, like those in the cold-water habitats and the warm-water protocols—all the other measures that are able to sustain the wild population.

It's the wild population that has the best genome and is best fit to survive in the current conditions. We need to protect those genetics specifically. There's clear evidence that, when it's mixed with stocks that have been kept in captivity and so on, there's an impact on their survival and so on.

● (1650)

Paul Connors: Thank you.

It was also stated that “research cannot be a reason to delay action”. That was from a Newfoundland salmon angler who runs a business.

Going back to what you just discussed, Mr. Vigneault, there was a lot of discussion around a lack of production of salmon hatchery, salmon peal and everything like that.

I know science takes a while, but is there anything we can do to speed up that process?

Bernard Vigneault: As I alluded to earlier, we are finalizing a peer-review science advice process that looks exactly at that question—what the risks are in doing enhancements and what the options are in terms of mitigating these risks—which would fit into the stocking policy that will go for public comments and follow so that it will enable activity.

There are still a lot of areas that require research for the benefit of Atlantic salmon. We alluded to an ecosystem approach. Marine survival is a core issue. We're doing a lot of work with international partners to look at the migration of fish to make sure we understand whether there's risk of interception or other interference.

The marine environment, broadly speaking, over the entire range, has changed very importantly, and we see major diminution of the stock on both sides of the Atlantic. That's an area of active research, as well.

Paul Connors: I think I only have about 40 seconds left.

Ms. Ladell, in the opening remarks, there was talk of management measures for retention limits, catch-and-release closures and that. Do fishery officers or river guardians have the tools and resources required to appropriately monitor the recreational salmon fisheries?

Kate Ladell: I am not from conservation and protection, so I would like to take that question back and have our conservation and protection officers respond in writing.

Thank you.

Paul Connors: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Thank you, Mr. Connors.

I now give the floor to Mr. Arnold for five minutes.

[*English*]

Mel Arnold (Kamloops—Shuswap—Central Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for taking the chair for a few moments so that I can have a chance to ask questions here.

I have to say that I'm really disappointed today. At our last fisheries meeting, I moved a motion to delay this panel's appearance here to make sure that the witnesses were prepared to answer questions on three cited studies: the one on Atlantic salmon in 2017, the striped bass study and the pinniped study. Unfortunately, Mr. Cormier and the Liberals opposed that, and Mr. Cormier should be the one most embarrassed by this because it's his questions that aren't being answered. He's asked, “What are your solutions?” You weren't able to answer.

Mr. Lewis had questions on—

Serge Cormier: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Mr. Cormier, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Serge Cormier: I think the officials responded to some of our questions. If Mr. Arnold is just trying to play politics here, I think everybody can see it. They responded to some of the questions on previous reports.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Thank you, Mr. Cormier. You will have your turn later, as there is still time remaining for the Liberal Party. I believe Mr. Arnold is raising a point that will lead to a question. There is no point of order here.

You may continue, Mr. Arnold.

[*English*]

Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Hardy was not able to get answers to questions he had about Atlantic salmon. We wanted this panel to be prepared.

In 2017, the committee tabled a report on Atlantic salmon. The government's response to that report cited over $574 million in federal funding and also cited the wild Atlantic salmon conservation policy. According to DFO's web page for the policy, “The goal of the Wild Atlantic Salmon Conservation Policy is to restore and maintain healthy wild Atlantic salmon populations.” In the 10 years since that government response, has DFO succeeded in restoring and maintaining healthy wild Atlantic salmon populations?

It's a simple answer, yes or no.

Diane Allan: This is a complex issue that requires more than DFO partners to be able to address the Atlantic salmon decline.

● (1655)

Mel Arnold: So, you haven't established or been able to restore or maintain healthy Atlantic salmon stocks.

Diane Allan: It is a partnership effort that works across many partners to do what is appropriate to address a complex series of pressures and issues that the Atlantic salmon are faced with.

Mel Arnold: You haven't restored salmon—as the policy said it would.

The government response to the 2017 report stated that this policy would “help ensure that several of the Committee's recommendations are incorporated into DFO's ongoing program-of-work.”

Which recommendations from the committee's 2017 report on Atlantic salmon have been incorporated into DFO's ongoing program of work?

Diane Allan: Every recommendation that came out of the Atlantic salmon report in 2017 was factored into the development of the strategy and the engagement that we had with colleagues around the Atlantic community to be able to really fast-track policy direction in terms of getting grants and contributions into the hands of those who could draw solutions and call for those proposals to come in so that we can actually address the issues that are cumulative effects rather than just particular indications of DFO particular measures.

Mel Arnold: Thank you.

Mr. Waddell, you said that you don't have the science to deal with seal predation. DFO's budget tripled over the past 10 years. Why don't you have that scientific data?

Mark Waddell: We do have science with regard to seal predation, with regard to—

Mel Arnold: You said earlier that you don't have that proof, that you don't have that information.

Mark Waddell: To issue nuisance seal permits or licences with regard to specific seals, we do require greater evidence.

Mel Arnold: So, you don't have that information. After 10 years and a tripling of DFO's budget, why not? Has it been made a priority for the recovery of Atlantic salmon?

Mark Waddell: I'm not able to address that question.

Mel Arnold: You're unprepared again, as I said in my opening comments. Has the minister or the minister's office demonstrated that Atlantic salmon are a priority matter?

Diane Allan: The fact that the government has invested $81.7 million demonstrates there is a priority.

Mel Arnold: That's 10 years after the 2017 report, correct?

Diane Allan: This is a very substantial investment in history. I can go back and see what other investments were put forward in the past decade. I unfortunately am not able to answer that because I was not part of the department, but I'm certainly able to provide it in writing.

Mel Arnold: On the eve of the 2025 election, the government released Canada's national strategy to ensure the future of Atlantic salmon, 2024 to 2036. Publishing words and announcing dollars does not guarantee solutions for Atlantic salmon. If they did, the committee would not be doing this study again that we did 10 years ago. What assurance do we have as committee members that recommendations that we make this time will be followed by DFO this time around? I noted in the government response to the 2017 report some of those recommendations were not even addressed.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Alexis Deschênes): Please keep your answer brief.

Diane Allan: I will now yield the floor to my colleague, who may have a summary of some of the recommendations that have been implemented.

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: What I can say is that the recommendations from the 2017 report were incredibly important and they informed and helped shape much of the strategy and the landmark investment.

[*Translation*]

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

I now give the floor to Mr. Cormier for five minutes.

Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to return to what my colleague said earlier.

We are asking what has been done in relation to previous reports, and my colleague has also just said that $81 million has been invested and that we would not have needed to carry out a study if this had been done before. One could say the same thing about Pacific salmon, for example. Given the millions of dollars that have been invested, one might say that a study is unnecessary, but that is not true. We carry out studies precisely because we want to know where we stand, where we are heading, and what solutions are being proposed. That is what I want to focus on: the solutions.

Ladies and gentlemen of the public service, earlier I asked you some questions about the solutions you wish to implement. I know we've talked about collaboration, but that's already happening. I may be a little impatient, but that's because I've been fishing for salmon for the last 25 years. If I asked you whether you'd ever had the chance to fish for salmon, whether you'd been out on the rivers recently, or whether you'd ever fished for striped bass, for example, it's because, in some salmon rivers, there are sometimes far more striped bass than salmon. It frustrates me a little to see the decline in salmon stocks over all these years and to realize that, despite the solutions proposed by various groups and witnesses, unfortunately, we have never managed to reach the point where we might have achieved positive results.

We can certainly blame ministers and politicians, but, at the end of the day, you too, as public servants, do your job and put forward recommendations to the government so that they can be implemented. So, I want to come back to the science.

Several scientists have come to give evidence to the committee. I'm not talking about scientists from DFO—they didn't come—but about scientists who carry out a great deal of research with their respective groups and former scientists from Fisheries and Oceans Canada. There was specific discussion of restocking Atlantic salmon rivers using hatcheries. Some groups say it is possible to practise aquaculture, for example, with wild salmon. This involves catching them, rearing them to adulthood and releasing them into the rivers. Several witnesses also told us that DFO scientists were opposed to one of these proposed options.

Why do some DFO scientists say this is impossible, while other scientists, who are just as well educated and competent as they are, say it is possible? Why isn't it being done?

Can anyone answer this question that many witnesses have raised before the committee in recent weeks regarding the possibility of restocking rivers again?

● (1700)

[*English*]

Bernard Vigneault: I think the science has evolved, especially in terms of genomic science and looking at the new tools for genomics. I made reference to the NASCO recommendation. That's from 2024, so it's very recent. There is an emerging consensus that there are very significant risks for activity related to stocking, depending on the river and on the type of stocking activity. That has to be undertaken very carefully, because that could actually be counterproductive. That could be misadaptation and could lead to stocks that will not survive in the wild and not lead to healthy stocks. We're looking at—

Serge Cormier: DFO scientists have access to some of those new whatever methods. Do you share that with other scientists from other groups, and in particular, groups dealing with salmon?

Bernard Vigneault: Absolutely. In particular, there is right now an advisory process that's ongoing with scientists from Norway, the Université du Québec and New Brunswick, and scientists from Parks Canada. I alluded to it earlier. We will be providing an assessment of those risks and how some of them can be mitigated. That could inform the stocking policy, so that across stakeholders that are interested in stocking activities they have the latest information on the risks, and they can propose methods that minimize those risks.

[*Translation*]

Serge Cormier: Does the Government of Quebec manage the striped bass in Quebec's rivers, or is it the federal government that manages this resource?

Bernard Vigneault: It is the Government of Quebec that is responsible for the scientific research and management of the striped bass in Quebec's rivers. We collaborate with them, naturally, on a scientific level, particularly to inform COSEWIC's decisions.

[*English*]

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

We're moving on to Mr. Deschênes for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for you, Deputy Minister.

Have you identified the $54.5 million which, according to the latest budget, was to be cut from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans for 2026–27?

Diane Allan: Thank you for your question. In fact, I am the assistant deputy minister, not the deputy minister, of Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

Indeed, I said that we would be able to write to you regarding all the budget cuts made at Fisheries and Oceans Canada. At the moment, we are working on the collective agreement to ensure that staff have the opportunity to apply for posts or to rotate with other staff members.

So, I do not have the exact figure to hand, but I can provide you with a written response.

● (1705)

Alexis Deschênes: So, what measures have been put in place to get closer to the figure of $54.5 million?

[*English*]

Diane Allan: My colleagues in human resources monitor this carefully. At this point, it's a very comprehensive monitoring exercise, but we are still in the process of allowing alternations for individuals who have identified that they want to be a priority employee. They're given preferential status to come back into the department. Those are the areas where that work is still under way.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: So, you have a voluntary redundancy scheme.

Diane Allan: Yes, it is a voluntary redundancy scheme.

[*English*]

It's also people who have been identified that they're priority status. They usually are given reasonable work for a period of time. The process is not uniform across the public service. DFO did use a particular process to facilitate those who wanted early departures and whatnot.

The numbers are fluctuating as we speak, and January is officially the date where early departures will be recognized. That's also an element we have to take into consideration in terms of what the actual numbers are.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: So I understand that the cuts are mainly being made in human resources, in terms of staff numbers.

Is the conservation and protection program affected by this?

Diane Allan: Once again, I will have to respond to you in writing regarding all the areas and programs affected by the cuts. So, if you could bear with me, I will be able to draw up a report for you detailing exactly where the cuts have been made.

Alexis Deschênes: I'd like to ask you a very brief question.

Parks Canada also plays a role in the management of Atlantic salmon. Budget cuts have been announced at Parks Canada. Does this jeopardize the success of the strategy to protect Atlantic salmon?

Diane Allan: Unfortunately, that is a question you will have to put to Parks Canada. I am not in a position to answer on behalf of Parks Canada.

Alexis Deschênes: Do you have any concerns about this?

Diane Allan: At the moment, I have no information regarding the cuts made by Parks Canada. So, unfortunately, I cannot answer that question.

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you.

[*English*]

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

Mr. Small, you now have the floor for five minutes.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Chair.

My question will be for Mr. Vigneault. It's regarding the salmon enhancement program that Cooke Aquaculture is sponsoring on the Petitcodiac River in the inner Bay of Fundy.

We have it on good authority that the Miramichi Salmon Association and two adjacent first nations want to duplicate the program that Cooke is sponsoring on the Petitcodiac River. They've applied to bring a similar program to the Miramichi River.

Why was that application denied?

Kate Ladell: I can start, and then I will turn it over to my colleague in the gulf region.

My understanding is that it—

Clifford Small: My time is pretty short. I'm sorry.

Kate Ladell: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. Do you want me to respond?

Clifford Small: Go ahead.

Kate Ladell: Okay.

My understanding is that it's not an identical study.

The Cooke Aquaculture study on the Petitcodiac River has the fish being reared in saltwater net pens, whereas the Miramichi proposal is fresh water.

I'll turn it over to my colleague in the gulf region who's more familiar with the proposal.

Mario Gaudet: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I won't go into details about the proposal itself. The only thing I will say is that it has to go through proper approvals. We also need a stocking policy to make sure we're in line with the government.

Clifford Small: We're told that the minister was lobbied to not approve that stocking program because it would alter the gene pool. That's for capturing smolts born in the wild, rearing them to adults and letting them come back so they can avoid predation at sea.

Why would there be pressure from an ENGO, as we're told, on the minister, telling her not to allow this because it would tamper with the gene pool, when you have 80 salmon hatcheries in British Columbia?

Kate Ladell: I'm not aware of the lobbying of which you speak.

What I can speak to is that we have heard from many stakeholders recommending stocking as an important management tool in conjunction with other tools.

This is why you heard my colleague reference that we are developing a stocking policy. We are hoping to have a first draft of that policy—which will be going out to Canadians—early next year, in spring 2027. We're hoping that policy will aim to mitigate the risks, provide direction for stocking proponents and provide predictability and stability for hatchery operators.

● (1710)

Clifford Small: Thank you, Ms. Ladell.

Mr. Chair, at this time, I'd like to move that we resume debate on a motion I put forward in the last committee meeting to have the Prime Minister's wife, who is the chair of the 12th Our Oceans Conference, come to this committee to discuss her role, lay out the things she wants to do and explain how she'll spend the budget of $1.2 billion that her husband laid out for her.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): That's a non-debatable motion, so I have to call a vote.

(Motion negatived)

Clifford Small: Do I have time left?

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): No.

Now we'll move to the Liberal side again. I'm not sure who's taking this round.

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

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

Thanks to the witnesses. It's been quite an informative hour and a half here—for me, especially.

Ms. Ladell, I think you talked about striped bass being on the species-at-risk list. Were they ever not on the species-at-risk list? I've heard, here, about how prolific striped bass are. How did they move from being a species that was prolific to a species at risk?

Kate Ladell: I think that it's not an easy, non-complex story, but I will do my best.

There are three populations, as I mentioned. The St. Lawrence River population, which is currently listed as endangered, was initially repopulated using southern Gulf of St. Lawrence fish. That resulted in a reassessment in, I believe, 2012, when it was determined that they were identified as extirpated or endangered, and then, most recently when they were reassessed, they were assessed as endangered.

This is now, as we heard, being reassessed, because it has been determined that, because that population was not an original population, there's more study that needs to be done to understand whether it is its own unique population or not. It does mean that the population remains listed as endangered. However, the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence population had been assessed as special concern, and what I can tell you is that was put forward for a decision to the minister and to the Governor in Council who have decided not to list that population. That will be published in the Canada Gazette on November 4, but it is publicly available. It was registered on October 23, so that decision has been made.

There remains one more population, the Bay of Fundy population, which was assessed by COSEWIC as special concern, and no listing decision has been made yet.

Ernie Klassen: Thank you.

Mr. Vigneault, I think you mentioned that we were seeing a slight increase in the St. Lawrence in that salmon stock. Is that correct?

Bernard Vigneault: The salmon stock has been declining in all regions in the recent year, including in the St. Lawrence. They have been stable in some areas for some time, but the general trend across Newfoundland, the gulf, the Maritimes and Quebec has been decline for the salmon population.

I might have been referring to the striped bass, as pointed out, that reintroduced population for which there are reports of expansion of their range in different streams. That's a subject of active research by the Province of Quebec and partners.

● (1715)

Ernie Klassen: Thank you.

I'll go back to you, Ms. Ladell. I think you were cut off when you were talking about some of the projects that were shovel-ready. I'm just wondering if you could expand a little bit on that.

Kate Ladell: I will do my best, noting that none of these have been made public yet because we're still negotiating the contribution agreements, so I'll speak in more general terms.

There are projects that we're working on with partners in multiple provinces throughout the range of Atlantic salmon to do work that will enable barrier remediation to improve connectivity, work that will protect cold-water refuges, work to improve fisheries management activities through enhanced tools and investments in indigenous-led conservation and enhancement activities. Those are the kinds of projects that are ready to go and that we're putting funding towards this year so that they can advance work and objectives.

Ernie Klassen: I just want to clarify that some research projects would also be coming forward through that funding.

Kate Ladell: For this first year of funding, there weren't any directed projects for Atlantic salmon research specifically but, when there is an expression of interest for multi-year funding for years two to five, research is very much an eligible activity that can be funded as part of the overall criteria for the funding.

Ernie Klassen: Okay, because it's obvious that some research needs to work in conjunction with that.

Can you just briefly, in the time left, talk a little bit about some of the indigenous communities and what part they play in all of the projects?

Kate Ladell: Absolutely. Indigenous peoples are a key part of all of the funding that we are putting forward. In fact, in our criteria, we strongly suggest that people applying for the funding work and partner with indigenous peoples, because it's recognized that they have a lot of expertise, knowledge and capacity on the ground to be able to inform and enhance the implementation of these projects.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Klassen. That's your five minutes. It was five-plus, actually.

We have a shortened round remaining. We have time for four minutes with the Conservatives, four minutes with the Liberals and two minutes with the Bloc.

We'll go to Mr. Small with the Conservatives for four minutes, please.

Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We've had quite a bit of talk here today about striped bass. In the Bay of Fundy, there's a slot size of 68 to 150 centimetres. In the report that came out of the last striped bass study, it was recommended that the 65-centimetre upper slot size be removed.

Mr. Vigneault, how would you compare the egg production of an 80-, 90- or 100-centimetre striped bass to that of four 50-centimetre striped bass, with your expert knowledge?

Bernard Vigneault: The science advice we have produced on that time slot is to keep the larger individual explicitly, because they have a larger potential spawning fecundity. The idea is that this species is subject to a failure in spawning success over multiple years. This would be a way to mitigate the potential diminution of the population. In 2024, less than 13% of the striped bass had that larger size.

Clifford Small: We're hearing about the severe striped bass predation problem, but if the large breeders continue to be in the population, then the population is going to continue to explode. That's not really addressing the striped bass predation, with that slot size of 50 to 65 centimetres. It was recommended in the last report that this be changed. Why wasn't it changed?

Bernard Vigneault: Based on the science, as I mentioned, that's a species that was very low but has been rebuilt. From a conservation perspective, that's the science advice. There are obviously other considerations. That stock is in the cautious zone. The science advice remains to protect that larger class of the population, to buffer for potential difficulties and reproduction in future years, which has happened in past populations.

● (1720)

Clifford Small: Okay. That doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me.

Mr. Chair, I'm going to turn over my time now to Mr. Gunn.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Mr. Gunn, you have a minute and a half.

Aaron Gunn: Mr. Chair, I'd like to put it to this committee to resume debate on Mr. Small's motion.

I'm coming from the ethics committee, where this issue has been talked about a lot. I think we would all like to give the Prime Minister's wife an opportunity to explain her new position and what she's doing with the $1.2-billion budget.

Chris d'Entremont: On a point of order, once the motion happens, there's no debate on it, so you have to have the vote on that immediately.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): There have actually been other proceedings since the motion was debated the previous time, so I will allow it again.

Chris d'Entremont: On a point of order, let's follow the rules as the rules are laid down.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): He moved the motion.

Can I ask the clerk to call a recorded vote?

Serge Cormier: Mr. Chair, as a clarification, we already voted on that motion today. Can we vote again on the same motion?

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Yes, I've clarified that there must be proceedings in between when a motion is presented and when it is presented again. We have had some questions in between, so it is permissible.

Serge Cormier: Is that from the clerk, Mr. Chair, or from you?

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): It's from the clerk and from my whip's office.

I will ask the clerk to conduct the recorded vote, please. Thank you.

(Motion negatived: nays 6; yeas 4)

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): That is all the time for the Conservatives. If we have the resources, we'll carry on with four minutes with the Liberals and two minutes with Mr. Deschênes before we wrap up.

Paul Connors: Thank you.

I want to go back to the indigenous.... We had Chief Jenny Brake here from the Newfoundland federation. She said they had limited authority on conservation. There were direct impacts on the community and their rights. She talked about how conservation efforts and whatever we do must be done with first nations. When we're doing science, we should take in traditional knowledge.

Can you give us your views and opinions on those thoughts?

Bernard Vigneault: I think it's part of the strategy overall. As my colleague mentioned earlier, recognition of the importance of indigenous knowledge is also part of the subset of delivering science for Atlantic salmon. We are in discussion right now with several first nations to collaborate on different projects related to Atlantic salmon. It's beneficial for the delivery of the science. We get their input on the design of the monitoring. We get their participation as experts as part of our science advice process. It's key to reinforcing the science advice we produce for the department.

Aside from the delivery of the science and the science advice, there's additional consideration and consultation when it comes to decisions regarding the applicability of that advice for the management measures.

● (1725)

Paul Connors: Thank you.

I have one other thing for clarification. When we're discussing Atlantic salmon, and Pacific salmon comes up, I'm wondering what the difference is between the goal of restoring Pacific salmon and what's used for Atlantic salmon in terms of stabilizing and rebuilding. Can you explain whether there's a difference between the two?

Diane Allan: The population types within the Pacific and Atlantic are different. The numbers are different and the species are different. The chinook salmon, for example, is quite in decline and is actually one of the main prey for the southern killer whale. The restoration of that particular population is an important part of what has been proposed in the Pacific salmon strategy.

In Atlantic Canada, we heard loud and clear that a solution cannot be done by the Government of Canada alone. It has to be in partnership with colleagues. The strategy in Atlantic Canada does demonstrate pillars whereby we're advancing indigenous nations' views. We're advancing a variety of things that are locally decided and locally driven to be able to drive the outcomes that the Atlantic community is looking for.

Paul Connors: So there's no link, really, between the wild Atlantic salmon and Pacific salmon or the aquaculture on the Pacific coast. There's no link.

Diane Allan: I'm sorry. Could you perhaps expand what you're asking for? Is it in aquaculture that you're looking for—

Paul Connors: Yes—or the Pacific salmon and aquaculture on the west coast. There's no link to what's happening. This is a study on Atlantic salmon. So there's no link between the two.

Diane Allan: On the question about aquaculture, as my colleague mentioned earlier, the government has demonstrated a particular decision. We have engaged with a series of colleagues and partners across the country. We're assessing the information. At this point in time, the current decision remains.

Paul Connors: How much time do I have?

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Your time is up. Thank you.

We'll move now to Mr. Deschênes for the final two minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Ladell, I would like to return to what you said a few minutes ago.

In the Canada Gazette, a decision is soon to be announced stating that striped bass found in areas where it does not occur naturally will no longer be considered a protected species. Could you give us a little more detail on the decision that was made?

Was it made under the Species at Risk Act?

Will this decision open the door to recreational fishing for striped bass in the St. Lawrence River fish stock?

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: I'm glad you asked this, because it gives me an opportunity to correct the record, which I was going to do anyway. There are three populations. The one I was speaking to, for which the decision has been made to not list, is the southern gulf of St. Lawrence population. That had been assessed as a special concern. The GIC made the decision to not list it as a special concern. That population is now not listed. That notice will come out in the Canada Gazette, part II, on November 4.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: In the southern gulf stock, recreational fishing for striped bass is already permitted—in Quebec, at any rate. What does this decision change?

[*English*]

Kate Ladell: The decision right now to not list doesn't change what has been happening up to now, because it wasn't listed. Now it just makes it very clear that it is not listed. The decision has been made.

In terms of the questions around what that means, I would turn to my fisheries management colleagues. It continues to be managed under the Fisheries Act as per usual.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: I see; it doesn't change much.

Out of the 175,000 catch quota, how many fish are actually caught? We know that the full quota isn't fished. You mentioned figures for 2026 that haven't been published yet. In 2025, where were we, roughly speaking?

● (1730)

[*English*]

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

That wraps up all of our time here, but I understand—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Mr. Chair, Mr. Gaudet just wanted to give a figure.

Do you have it, Mr. Gaudet?

Mario Gaudet: Yes.

Last year, out of the 175,000 catch quota, approximately 54,000 individuals were harvested by first nations.

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Mr. Connors, I believe you're seeking some clarification on something that was said today.

Paul Connors: I want to make a correction.

I referred to Chief Jenny Brake. I should have referred to her as Chief Jenny Brake, president of the Qalipu First Nation.

The Vice-Chair (Mel Arnold): Thank you. That's noted.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here today. Your testimony will help guide the committee in developing the report. Your time is appreciated.

I have been advised by the clerk that the chair has noted that there will be no meeting this Thursday because of budget lock-up and the budget being presented on Thursday. Our next meeting will be Monday, November 16.

The meeting is adjourned.

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