



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 101

Thursday, February 29, 2024

Chair: Mr. Ken McDonald



Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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• (1535)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to meeting 101 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans. This meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders.

Before we proceed, I will make a few comments for the benefit of witnesses and members. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you're not speaking. For interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French, and for those in the room, you can choose the earpiece and select the desired channel. Please address all comments through the chair.

Before we proceed, I simply want to remind members to be very careful when handling their earpieces, especially when their or their neighbour's microphone is turned on. Earpieces placed too close to the microphone are one of the most common causes of sound feedback, which is extremely harmful to the interpreters and causes serious injuries.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on February 15, the committee is resuming its study on the scales used by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to set redfish quotas.

I notify the members that the clerk has informed me that the notice of meeting that went out showed that we would be moving to committee business at 5:15 p.m. I've been informed we can extend the witness testimony time until 5:30 p.m. and then begin committee business at 5:30 and go until 5:45 or possibly 6:00 p.m.

As our first panellist today, we have Mr. Jean Lanteigne from the Fédération régionale acadienne des pêcheurs professionnels. You have five minutes or less for your opening statements.

Mr. Jean Lanteigne (Director General, Fédération régionale acadienne des pêcheurs professionnels): Thanks to all.

[Translation]

A big thank you for calling this emergency meeting. Thank you also to Mr. Serge Cormier for inviting the Fédération régionale acadienne des pêcheurs professionnels to appear before you today.

First of all, a short flashback where as soon as the small redfish appeared in the summer of 2011, we immediately sounded the alarm to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and told them that we were going to have significant issues in our fishery and the shrimp industry if we did not act immediately. DFO's only action was to pull out of the drawers a closure protocol for small fish, and for the years 2012 to 2015, our shrimp fishers were forced to concentrate their fishing efforts in areas where there were few or no small redfish. It was not important to protect the shrimp.

As you can see, in the table attached to my presentation here, as early as the spring of 2016, DFO's science team commented on the negative effect that redfish were having on gulf shrimp stocks. Even though we have insisted in each of those years that we allow a redfish fishery in an attempt to reduce shrimp predation, it has always gone unanswered.

On another note, I would like to take you back to 2019 when Bill C-68 was supposed to modernize the Fisheries Act in order to achieve new objectives and thus ensure the sustainability of our fisheries. Let me quote one of the points sought in this legislation: "For our communities, it will keep the benefits of the fishery in the hands of independent fishers and their region."

Not only has this done nothing to protect our shrimp stocks, but the same is true of the recent allocation of redfish quotas, where it is clear that DFO has ignored its own legislation.

Also, I would like to draw your attention to the Gulf Licensing Policy, a copy of which you will find here in the appendix to my presentation. Let's take a look at sections 6 and 7.

Section 6 states very clearly that there is no ownership right for anyone who holds a fishing licence. It is very clear that the Minister has full discretion to issue a fishing licence without regard to history. The same is true for the allowances attached to these permits.

The announcement that Ms. Lebouthillier made on January 26 that she was relying on the history of the past 30 years does not hold water. It is also necessary to pay attention to section 7 of the licensing policy, which states the guiding principles for awarding these permits. Reading the nine points in the subsection, it is even more difficult to understand how the Minister did not take all of these elements into account in the redfish quota allocations that she has just made. You may also recall the Anglehart Jr. et al. court case before Justice Gagné, which clearly established this issue of ownership and distribution of allowances.

Now let's discuss the reality of the situation.

Yesterday we received the administrative list of allocations for the gulf shrimp quotas based on the total authorized catch, or TAC, of 3,060 mt announced by the minister. The highest allocation for us here is 48 mt. The second part of the Minister's announcement allocates a 10% quota of redfish reserved for shrimpers.

Let's see what this can do. Let's be a bit positive and go for a redfish TAC of 100,000 mt. Without going into details, let's consider the case of a fisherman with the highest shrimp allowance. At a price of \$1.25 per pound for shrimp and \$0.40 per pound for redfish, he would have an income potential of \$220,000. However, the fixed operating costs of a shrimp boat are on average \$175,000. It is impossible to operate under such conditions. The solution is to turn to the processing plants, to whom the minister has given the vast majority of redfish allocations in order to obtain a quota in sufficient quantity to make ends meet.

For fishing enterprises of less than 65', in our opinion, this contravenes the law of the owner-operator; for those of more than 65' it is a return to the last century when American and European processors controlled fleets, factories and markets. The story tells us that Messrs. Leblanc, father and son, both worked very hard when they were fisheries ministers to put an end to this practice. Today it's "Back to the future".

How can you, as a minister, as a department, as a government, force our fishing companies to break the law or, even worse, submit to the control of companies that will decide who, when, where and at what price the fisherman will be able to go fishing? Soon, these fishermen will have no choice but to sell their fishing enterprises to these companies or be entirely under their control. These companies will immediately open their arms wide to them because they need their fishing effort, but that is throwing the independent fish harvesters into the wolf's mouth.

In our view, this is a case for litigation against the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. It makes no sense to put in place conditions such as the current situation that force our fishing enterprises to commit illegal acts in an attempt to survive, especially when it is a law of this same department.

Over the past few years, our coalition of shrimpers from New Brunswick, Quebec and the west coast of Newfoundland has asked all successive ministers, LeBlanc, Wilkinson, Jordan, Murray and Lebouthillier, to have priority access to the opening of this redfish fishery with a minimum TAC of 25,000 mt.

We have also asked to be the only ones to fish this resource for the first two years in order to allow producers to develop a market

for this redfish, which is in competition with Norway and Iceland in particular, and thus allow a gradual entry. In 2018, Minister Leblanc made public commitments to this effect.

We have also indicated many, many times to departmental staff that we need 2 million pounds per fishing operation to ensure profitability, the 25,000 mt being a starting quota. Our requests have been repeated multiple times, always without response.

Thanks for hearing me, we're out of breath.

● (1540)

[English]

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

We'll go now to our second witness today. We have only two witnesses in this hour.

Now, from the Quebec Office of Shrimp Fishermen, we have Mr. Patrice Element.

Mr. Patrice Element (General Manager, Quebec Office of Shrimp Fishermen): Thank you very much, everyone, for allowing us to present our point of view on this issue.

I will need to switch to French.

[Translation]

In allocating redfish quotas, Fisheries and Oceans Canada has chosen to rely on the historical shares principle, whereas, based on the criteria of the department's emerging fisheries policy, redfish may, and clearly should be, considered an emerging fishery.

The resulting allocation is inconsistent with the decision-making framework principles and criteria for granting new access, another Fisheries and Oceans Canada directive.

Could Fisheries and Oceans Canada lawfully contravene its own policy? I don't have the legal expertise to say, but the question does arise.

Now let's discuss the offshore sector, which has received the largest share of allocated quotas.

When we discuss the offshore fishery, we're talking about enormous ships that consume phenomenal quantities of fuel both to propel their vessels and to operate their onboard factories. On the other hand, the fish that our fishers catch is processed at plants powered by hydroelectricity and wind energy.

Furthermore, compared to our fishers' operations, the vessels used in the offshore fishery potentially have a far greater impact on sea bottoms and other fish species, such as Greenland halibut, white hake, cod and, perhaps to a certain degree, Atlantic halibut.

These factory ships process and freeze their fish relying solely on fossil fuels. However, all the fish caught by our fishermen is processed using energy from nearly 100% renewable sources at plants in Quebec and more than 70% at others in New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador.

In the circumstances, the decision by the minister will contravene the departmental sustainable development strategy 2023–2027. It will also run counter to the part of the minister's mandate letter concerning the reduction of greenhouse gases. One could even say, without exaggeration, that the decision will run afoul of the Fisheries Act's requirement that the environment must be protected.

We all know that the shrimp biomass in the Gulf of St. Lawrence is not what it has been in recent decades and that, in its present state, can no longer support the industry and communities.

The possibility of partially replacing the shrimp fishery with the redfish fishery would give people, meaning first nations peoples and fishers from Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, and New Brunswick, some hope for better days once that emerging fishery reaches cruising speed and processors have developed or recovered lucrative markets for that new fish.

However, the announcement the minister made on January 26 confirmed what we all expected regarding the shrimp fishery. She virtually sounded the death knell of the Gulf of St. Lawrence shrimping fleet by allocating the largest share of present and future redfish quotas to the offshore fleet. However, offshore fishers can still prosper without those quotas, not to mention the fact that they have little or no economic impact on maritime communities in eastern Canada. I'm thinking here of communities such as Rivière-du-Nord, in Quebec, St. Anthony and Port au Choix, in Newfoundland and Labrador, and communities in New Brunswick where northern shrimp fishing and processing are the main economic drivers. All those communities needed that redfish to avoid the inevitable socioeconomic downturn to which the minister's decision condemns them.

Thank you.

• (1545)

[English]

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

Thank you both for appearing today.

We will now turn to our first round of questions, starting with Mr. Small from the Conservatives.

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for coming out today to take part in this important study.

Monsieur Element, having been an independent owner-operator in the inshore fleet in Newfoundland and Labrador, I certainly

know what it's like to go through hard times and to experience the effects of decreasing prices for the product, quota cuts and whatnot.

What's the experience of the typical shrimp harvester now in your region of the Gulf of St. Lawrence? What are they going through right now?

Mr. Patrice Element: The last two years have been extremely difficult because of the reduced quotas, the lower biomass, the much lower catch rates and the market difficulties. The market for cold-water shrimp has not been as good since the pandemic as it has been for snow crab and lobster, for example, and the cost of fuel has hurt us very much.

I'll let Mr. Lanteigne speak for New Brunswick, but it's fair to say that most of our harvesters in the last two years have lost hundreds of thousands of dollars. It's been extremely difficult.

Again, we knew that 2024 would be even more difficult, but before the decision of the minister, we had some hope that in the long term, significant allocation of redfish would allow us to pull our heads out of the water. Excuse the bad play on words, but the decision made to allocate most of the redfish quota to offshore companies—because we're not talking about harvesters here; we're talking about companies—has more or less killed our future.

Mr. Clifford Small: The effect of the decline in the shrimp on the harvesters has been pretty bad, from what you're saying.

How is this affecting the folks who live in adjacent coastal communities throughout the gulf who make a living in processing shrimp in the onshore processing plants?

Mr. Patrice Element: I will give you the example of our community, the Rivière-au-Renard—Fox River—in Gaspé.

Rivière-au-Renard is a community of about 4,000 people. If you include the two processing plants, the harvesters themselves—the captains and their crews—plus the services like the welding shops and the electronics shops, just in Rivière-au-Renard—a community of 4,000 people—we are talking between 400 and 425 jobs that would disappear if there was no shrimp fishing and processing anymore.

It's a catastrophe. Putting it on the scale of Quebec City, we're talking about 80,000 jobs.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you.

What do you think the number one factor is in the decrease of the shrimp biomass in the Gulf of St. Lawrence?

Mr. Patrice Element: Everyone agrees that the three factors are predation by redfish, higher water temperature and lower oxygen content. People don't agree on which one is the most important factor, but if you're asking me what I think personally, I think that predation by redfish is the most important factor.

There are four areas where the stock is found. The estuary zone in the gulf is the one area where the stock is in relatively good health and the biomass is in better shape, and that is the one area where there are few or no redfish.

• (1550)

Mr. Clifford Small: Of all the groups negatively impacted by the rise of the redfish biomass, of all the groups that sought quota, who would be the most negatively impacted?

Mr. Patrice Element: It would be all the shrimpers, of course, without a doubt.

Mr. Clifford Small: The minister's right hand, Adam Burns, was here at the last committee meeting, and he was asked at that meeting how much redfish would be required by the typical owner-operator enterprise to make them viable. Did I just hear you say that it was about 1,000 tonnes per enterprise?

Mr. Patrice Element: I'm sorry. Can you say that again?

Mr. Clifford Small: On the amount of redfish that would be required by the typical enterprise to make it viable right now, did I hear you say it's about two million pounds?

Mr. Patrice Element: Mr. Lanteigne said that.

Mr. Clifford Small: Oh, I'm sorry.

Do you agree with Mr. Lanteigne?

Mr. Patrice Element: We would need a much more significant amount than we have now and can hope for in the future, with only 10% of the allocation. I would say that something in the range of a million pounds or two million pounds would be....

Again, it depends on a lot of factors. The cost of operations and the price that we get—

Mr. Clifford Small: I have one more question that I want to get in right now.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): You have nine seconds, Mr. Small.

Mr. Clifford Small: Do you think the minister has done everything she can to work on behalf of the owner-operators in the Gulf of St. Lawrence to develop this redfish fishery, knowing that the biomass has been swelling since around 2012-2013? That's when they realized it was there.

Do you feel this minister has lived up to her responsibility to owner-operators in the Gulf of St. Lawrence?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): We'll have to leave it for you to answer in a further round.

You're well over time, Mr. Small. Thank you.

We'll go on to our next questioner now, from the Liberal side. That is Mr. Cormier, who's online.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Lanteigne and Mr. Element, thank you for being with us.

I know it isn't easy right now. Mr. Lanteigne, we had a chance to meet recently and do some brainstorming. I only have six minutes,

and I'd like to use this time with you to find out what kind of help you need.

First of all, Mr. Lanteigne, how many pounds or tons of redfish do you think each shrimper should be allowed to catch?

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: We think the minister's plan isn't working and won't work. It's with a view to forgetting shrimp altogether that I said earlier in my opening remarks that we wanted a starting quota of 25,000 tonnes allocated exclusively to shrimpers.

More specifically, you're asking me what the necessary number of pounds or tonnes would be. Right now, from what we're hearing, the market price for redfish is 40¢ a pound. So two million pounds would allow for an income of \$800,000, which is a minimum threshold that would allow our shrimpers to get through the crisis. So to answer your question, I would say that a quota of two million pounds of redfish is required.

If we don't have that, among the assistance measures that would allow us to survive in the long term, there are—

Mr. Serge Cormier: That was going to be my next question.

Aside from increasing the quota, what kind of assistance do you need? Do you need help with licence buybacks, loan guarantees or programs, for instance? We're not just talking about captains, but also deckhands and factory workers. I'm talking about everyone who depends on shrimp.

What do you want to see in an assistance plan? What do you need?

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: Should things not change, we believe that virtually no shrimp industry in Atlantic Canada would be able to continue to operate. We'd then have to look at a licence buyback program.

We've started to work with our fishers on that. These fishers are going to do everything they can to try to survive, because this fishery is important to them. If it doesn't work, we'll have to set up a licence buyback program. We'll also have to go back to the drawing board, go back to previous years and find an agreement with the department. As you just said, it may help resolve the situation of people who own a fishing business, but what about the deckhands? What will happen to them?

This week we heard Mr. Burns say that he was working with other departments. Offering employment insurance benefits during the first year is not a panacea. In my opinion, the plan really has to be redone and we have to work with the department to give those redfish allocations to the people who need them.

• (1555)

Mr. Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Lanteigne.

I will now turn to Mr. Element, but Mr. Lanteigne can add his comments if he wishes.

The redfish fishery is supposed to open on May 15. Whether you're entitled to 25,000 tonnes, 50,000 tonnes, or 100,000 tonnes, it doesn't matter if you can't catch, process, and sell that product. Mr. Lanteigne started talking about it, but I'd like to give you an opportunity to comment on it, Mr. Element.

What other type of assistance could we think of to help the industry, to help these people get through these difficult times and to hope that one day the shrimp fishery will be back and that some of these people will still be in the industry at that time?

Mr. Patrice Element: I think the main problem isn't necessarily the quota we have this year, but the one we won't have in three or five years. This has been repeated, and it's been recognized by most industry stakeholders, both fishers and processors. There's a market and a harvesting and processing capacity to be developed in this fishery.

As Mr. Lanteigne mentioned—and this is something that we have also been saying for a number of years on the Quebec fishers' side—you have to start gradually, to be able to develop and fish in a sustained and environmentally responsible manner. On the processing side, they have to equip themselves to process in large quantities and develop markets.

As Mr. Lanteigne said, our people want to continue to fish, to do what they like and what they do well.

In addition to what Mr. Lanteigne mentioned, in the extremely difficult context of the last two years, if we manage to harvest enough redfish to be able to continue in the long term, we will certainly have to think about transitional measures to help us survive.

Mr. Serge Cormier: That's why, Mr. Element and Mr. Lanteigne, it will be important to quantify these things, not just for us, the committee members, but so that everyone hears what you need.

[English]

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

That's actually your six minutes right there. If the witnesses wish to reply in response to further questions, they're able to do that.

We'll move on now to MP Desbiens.

[Translation]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens (Beauport—Côte-de-Beaupré—Île d'Orléans—Charlevoix, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank my colleagues around the table for allowing me to begin this emergency study on the crisis among shrimpers in my area and in Acadia.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for joining us. We appreciate it. I also know that a lot of people are listening to us.

Mr. Element, you talked about the redfish fishery as a new fishery. A new fishery means a new perspective, a new way of doing things, for you and for the department.

Is that what you mean by a new fishery, with new quotas that aren't based on historical shares, for example?

• (1600)

Mr. Patrice Element: Yes, exactly.

In its New Emerging Fisheries Policy, Fisheries and Oceans Canada defines new fisheries as, "Fisheries involving new species and/or stocks that are not utilized or not fully utilized, and not currently covered by a management plan."

I'm not a legal expert, but obviously redfish meets all of those criteria. So Fisheries and Oceans Canada did not have to respect the principle of historical shares. This is obviously a new fishery.

This is a choice that the government has made, that Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the minister have made, for reasons that, frankly, we have no idea about. In our minds, this defies all logic and practically all the criteria and policies that Fisheries and Oceans Canada has established.

It is indeed in that sense that we were talking about a new fishery. It's not just our opinion; it's actually a new fishery, so it should be treated as a new fishery. Once this fishery starts, we'll have to review, rethink and redefine the way we do things.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: You're talking about transitional measures. From what I hear, redfish isn't the Klondike. You can't just snap your fingers and suddenly break even with redfish. You need a serious marketing plan. New money will probably have to be invested as well.

What do you think the priority transitional measures should look like?

Mr. Patrice Element: Mr. Lanteigne can add to my answer, but I'll start by saying that we have fishers who have gone through very difficult years. The fisheries sector is, by definition, a variable sector. There are good years and there are bad years. It usually balances out. In the case of shrimpers, however, the last two years have really been very difficult. It's reasonable to expect that people will be able to get through bad years and hope for better days. In our case, we've just had two extremely difficult years, and we expect 2024 to be the same. Whether in the fishing industry or elsewhere, no business can run deficits equivalent to a quarter or half of its revenue and hope to survive.

Investments will indeed have to be made in both the harvesting sector and the processing sector, and we hope that the various levels of government will be there to help us.

There's also the fact that the accounts are empty. At the moment, many fishers are technically bankrupt, I would say. But we have to take steps to ensure that, when redfish fishing and redfish processing become a sustainable and lucrative industry, our people, both in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada, will still be there to fish for it.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Do you want to add anything, Mr. Lanteigne?

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): I'll pause there for a second. We're going to stop the clock.

Apparently Mr. Lanteigne lost power, possibly because of the storm taking place. We will suspend for a few minutes to see if we can get him back online.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Mr. Chair, it's the same thing here. I think I was cut off or it froze. The same thing happened here. We just lost everything.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): You were right at the end of your six minutes, Mr. Cormier, so I'll advise the witnesses that if they wish to answer your question, they can.

• (1600) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1605)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): We will resume. We have Mr. Lanteigne back online again.

We'll go back to you, MP Desbiens.

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: I guess we forgot to pay the electricity bill here recently. There's no more money in the bank, so....

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): You have two minutes remaining.

[Translation]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you.

Mr. Lanteigne, I would have liked you to add a comment. I don't know if you heard my question.

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: Unfortunately, I missed the question because I just rejoined you.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: What do you think the transitional measures should look like in the immediate future?

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: As far as redfish quotas are concerned, as long as we manage to obtain them, if we want to guarantee a certain profitability for the fishing enterprise, or at least guarantee it a minimum income to ensure its survival, there should be support and monitoring measures.

Mr. Cormier asked earlier what quota would be necessary. We don't know, because we don't know what price we would get on the market. However, support measures are needed, not necessarily to ensure a profit, but at least a break-even point.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: It would make it possible to stay afloat, if you'll pardon the pun.

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: Exactly.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: There are countries that exploit redfish and have a market for it. Would it not be a good idea to follow the example of those countries, to see how they operate and how they have developed their market?

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: I had the opportunity to go to Iceland to see how these people work. Get this: they greeted us nicely, took us to their factory, welcomed us in their cafeteria and served us coffee, period. In other words, they thanked us for coming, but they certainly weren't going to give us their secrets.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: They didn't want you in their hair.

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: No. It was very clear.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you.

[English]

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

We'll now go to Ms. Barron, please, for six minutes.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

My first question will perhaps be for Mr. Lanteigne.

My question is around the changeover from fishing northern shrimp to fishing for redfish. Can you share a little bit more about the costs associated with that, the gear changes and what that looks like in principle?

• (1610)

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: As you know, they are already trawler boats, so it is basically a switch in the trawling equipment itself. It's a question of a new net, and of course it does mean some changes on deck. Right now most of them have a separator on board to remove smaller fish from shrimp. This has to be removed and some material has to be changed there.

However, there are no major changes there. The winches are the same. The trawl door will probably be the same.

The big equipment is a new set of nets. The actual figure that we have is anywhere between \$100,000 to \$150,000 per boat in order to make that transition.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you.

That's a big cost. I'm wondering what you're hearing from those out on the water around the implications of those costs.

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: It is a big cost, and it's been said by the managers of the AFF fund that we could access that fund for that purpose, so at least there's that possible help from that program at DFO. Are there sufficient funds for everybody? That's another part of the equation, but we've been told that we could access that.

Obviously, we're not going to start spending money that right now the guys don't have, and they're not going to do that for the minimum quota that has been allocated. It just doesn't make sense at all to purchase a set of new gear to do one trip or two trips. It doesn't work.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: What do you think might happen, then, if people can't afford to make this change and the quota is not high enough to sustain or justify this change? What options do you think will be left remaining to those people?

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: There are minimal options there. You'll see two things, basically.

One is boats remaining in the boatyard and not going on the water. That's for the guys who can at least wait maybe a year or so. The other case is a "for sale" affair, basically. That's what it is. There's no way out. There are no other solutions possible for them. There are no other resources they can access.

It just plainly doesn't make sense that our own government is forcing fishermen to sell their enterprises and on the other hand giving quotas to companies that don't need it. It's pure nonsense.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: If the quota was increased for the local fishers, what would that look like as far as switching over to the redfish fishery? What would be the changes to fishers that would have to be considered in their day-to-day operation?

I'm not a fisher, so I don't know what that would look like in principle. What are some of the considerations if that redfish quota were increased to the local fishers? Do you feel that this is a sustainable fishery to move over to? Do you think that this will produce economic benefits for fishers moving forward?

I'd like to get your thoughts on that, please.

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: It's like if you're playing cards and you just have one or two left in your hand. You don't have that many choices.

In the only options that we had, the first one was shrimp, which is basically gone, and the second one is redfish. In doing that, the option that we're trying to work on with some staff at DFO is to start with some quotas. Then, as Mrs. Desbiens was asking, is there a way that we could work out a plan to maximize that resource, get a better revenue out of it? Right now we're talking about 40¢ a pound, but we do firmly believe that you should just let the industry work, and then we're damn sure that we can work out a plan to get a better price for that fish.

However, right now we're going to start with a fish that is very small, basically used for bait. Before we do develop some potential markets, we need to work on that, and quality becomes an issue there.

• (1615)

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: I have only 15 seconds left, so I'm not going to do that to you. I appreciate the information you provided.

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

We'll move on to our next round now. Mr. Perkins, you have five minutes.

Mr. Rick Perkins (South Shore—St. Margarets, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, witnesses.

Let's start off with a quick answer. I believe both of you were involved in some element of this DFO consultation process, which I guess is continuing next week.

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: Yes.

You said a quick question and a quick reply.

Mr. Rick Perkins: That's perfect.

Monsieur Element...?

Mr. Patrice Element: Yes.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Thank you.

As you probably watched, when we had DFO officials here earlier this week, a lot of us questioned whether or not the 25,000 tonnes—which the minister mentioned as her minimum in the news release—was enough, and that it appeared, from all the documents I've seen that were shared at those committees, that the science said it could be anywhere from 88,000 tonnes to 312,000 tonnes. Is it your understanding that this would be done within that range, year after year in the next few years, or was that just a single-year level?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Patrice Element: Do you want to answer the question, Mr. Lanteigne?

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: Go ahead, Mr. Element.

Mr. Patrice Element: Okay.

[*English*]

I'm pretty sure Jean would concur with me that we all know and we've all said that we need to develop that fishery gradually, for all the reasons mentioned before. The issue for us, in my humble opinion, is not what we're going to have to harvest this year but what we're going to harvest in three or four years down the road.

To come back to the answer that Jean gave to Mrs. Barron, we need to have enough quota to justify the required investments—which, by the way, are much lower for shrimpers than for anybody else.

Mr. Rick Perkins: I appreciate that.

To follow up on that specific point that you made, I think it was you or Monsieur Lanteigne who said a million pounds to two million pounds would be needed, at a minimum, for viability. If that's the case, how many licence holders would that be? How much overall quota would be required, as a minimum for this year, for economic viability, just for the inshore fishery?

Mr. Patrice Element: At this point, if we include first nations, we have between 80 and 90 shrimp licences in the gulf. At the actual price of 40¢, the number quoted by Mr. Lanteigne of two million pounds is about what we would need. As Jean said, we all hope, and I firmly believe, that three or four years down the road we're going to increase significantly the price of that fish, which will mean that we will probably require less fish in the long run in order to be profitable.

Mr. Rick Perkins: I appreciate that.

With that amount just for inshore, that would require a couple of hundred million pounds just to be viable in the first year, plus some portion allocated to the offshore with the historic allocation. Is there a market for that much redfish right now? I understand there may be processing capacity—and that's a bit of a question, according to DFO—but is there really a market to sell that? I understand there are millions of pounds already frozen that weren't able to be sold.

Mr. Patrice Element: In the long run, I firmly believe that there's going to be a market. With the increasing worldwide demand for redfish, and for fish and seafood, I firmly believe that this fish can be sold at a very fair price somewhere, once we have put it on the market, so the answer is yes, there is a market. There probably is one now, but it needs to be developed, because it's a new product.

• (1620)

Mr. Rick Perkins: Even the experimental quota that was allocated in the last couple of years wasn't caught, primarily because there didn't seem to be a market for it. Is that not the reason?

Mr. Patrice Element: One processor told me, last year or the year before, that he would need at least.... Maybe 100,000 tonnes might be too much this year, but what we had in the last few years was not even enough to send a couple of containers to Asia, or something like that, so it was not enough to develop a market. We need a minimal amount to develop a market. We need to prove to people that we can send them a significant amount of fish.

The other thing is that the scientific quota is just that. It's for projects and to advance science. It's not necessarily meant for commercial use. Well, the fish is sold, obviously, but it's not necessarily meant to develop a market. The quota is used to advance science. Those are the reasons that the quota is there.

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

We will move on now to Mr. Cormier again for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Element and Mr. Lanteigne, I want to review with you what we were talking about earlier, in other words, the types of assistance.

As we said, even if you get an allocation of 300,000 tonnes, in the context of the opening of the fishery, you don't know if you're going to be able to sell the fish, or at what price, and so on.

I want us to talk specifically about one aspect. Can you tell me whether or not you'll be able to provide numbers on what you think you need for your respective fishers? I'm talking specifically about the owners. Will you be able to provide these figures to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and to the redfish advisory committee that will be holding meetings soon?

Will you do that?

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: The answer is yes. As soon as we know what the tonnage is going to be, we can make that calculation.

Mr. Serge Cormier: That's perfect.

I would like to go even further.

Mr. Lanteigne, you're also part of an association of crab fishers. You cleaned up the seabed, so to speak, with a few crabbers, such as picking up lost traps, and so on.

Could shrimpers do the same? Could we send fishers out to sea to pick up this ghost gear? Could another type of assistance be included in a range of assistance measures?

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: Absolutely. The crabbers themselves will tell you that the shrimpers have boats that are better equipped to do that kind of work. The answer to your question is yes. It's entirely possible to do this type of work.

Mr. Serge Cormier: That's perfect, thank you.

Mr. Element, the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development appeared before the committee, and he said that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans had done a terrible job in terms of scientific surveys. I don't know if I used the right adjective, but he did a bad job in this area, particularly with respect to fish stocks in several types of fisheries.

Could scientific surveys also be part of the range of assistance measures? Could we send fishers out to sea to conduct these surveys with scientists from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, for example? The purpose of producing these reports would be to provide you with a little help, on both sides. Would that be possible?

Mr. Patrice Element: Absolutely. For years now, we've been offering the help Fisheries and Oceans Canada with their scientific surveys, collecting data to help their scientists complete their surveys.

By their own admission, they lack information on when they are not at sea, that is, more or less 10 months a year. The answer is yes. We would be able to do it, we would like to do it, and it would be beneficial for science.

Mr. Serge Cormier: That's perfect.

Mr. Lanteigne, I'll come back to you.

Fishers want to be entitled to a certain number of pounds or tonnes of redfish. But there's a very big difference between an individual quota and a competitive quota, isn't there?

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: Yes.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Could you quickly explain to my colleagues and others attending the meeting what a competitive quota would mean instead of an individual quota? In the case of a competitive quota, it's quite a bit more complicated to establish a fishing area.

So I'll let you comment on that.

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: It will be very easy to answer your question.

I will lay out two situations.

In the first situation, say you want to get funding. You go to your financial institution and ask for \$100,000 or \$200,000 to run your fishing business. They ask you whether you have an allocation. You say no, because it's a competitive quota. You will be refused funding and told to come back later. This type of quota doesn't get financing.

In the second situation, your boat breaks down. This actually happened here last spring. A fisher launched his boat, went out to sea and the engine blew. If there is a competitive quota, the fisher can't wait two months for the motor to be repaired before they go back out fishing. The other fishers will have taken the quota, and the fishing will be over. Quotas for competitive fishing don't work. Fishers absolutely must have, at the very least, individual allocations. This is what we call individual quota fishery or IQ fisheries.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Okay.

I don't have much time left, but I would like to tell you this: I know that what happened is not what you wanted. I know it's not what you expected. Still, there is a 10% allocation and it can be increased. You heard what I said last time, when I asked officials about the additional quotas that could be given to shrimp harvesters.

I have something to ask of you: We need you at the table. We need you at the meetings of the Redfish Advisory Committee. We need your statistics and your ideas.

I think that the minister is willing to look at all these options. We need to have numbers, we need to propose a whole range of measures on how we can help owners.

However, Mr. Lanteigne and Mr. Element, we must not forget the men and women on deck, the plant workers and the plants that will depend on the shrimp and redfish fishery for years to come.

I'm counting on you to provide us with the information that the committee and the government need to make their recommendations, the information that the minister also needs to make her decisions.

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: Okay.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Lanteigne and Mr. Element.

• (1625)

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Cormier. You're over your five minutes, actually.

We'll move now to MP Desbiens again for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

We have identified a number of solutions.

Last week, the Bloc Québécois organized a work table with a good many shrimp harvesters, many stakeholders from all over Quebec. We also highlighted certain problems with the way the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, or DFO, operates, their failure to listen and lack of consideration.

Next week, at this consultation table, do you think you will be properly heard and that you have enough clout and influence to ensure that the quotes are revised in your favour and people stop considering historical shares?

Mr. Jean Lanteigne: Madame Desbiens, I'm going to make a comment on this subject that relates to the question Mr. Cormier asked earlier.

We ourselves suggested to the department that it set up a work table to study all the questions Mr. Cormier raised earlier, but we're still waiting for an answer. We have been asking for two years. That didn't start this morning. It's as if we were always talking to a wall. They listen to us and say they've heard us, but nothing ever happens.

To come back to your question, more specifically, we don't have that much confidence in advisory committees precisely because that is not an exchange, a real work table, where everyone agrees to make their contribution. Everyone has a position. DFO officials are there, but they don't say much. It's the person chairing the meeting who does the talking.

[*English*]

That's it. That's all.

[*Translation*]

A report is then produced, but we don't even see it, so we don't know what was presented in Ottawa. We're told that our ideas were presented, that our suggestions were submitted, but we have no proof of that.

On Tuesday of this week, we heard the DFO representatives you questioned. Personally, I've never heard so many lies over such a short time. I'll tell you what I think: I have never seen such a bunch of liars. We're being flat out lied to! If you wanted to rattle me, you pushed the right button.

Mr. Patrice Element: With regard to advisory committees—

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Thank you. That is right on the time for MP Desbiens.

We'll move on to MP Barron for two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair.

I'm happy this round, and I'm going to be passing my time on to Madame Desbiens.

Thank you.

• (1630)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: I sincerely thank my colleague, Ms. Barron. I'm very grateful to her.

Mr. Element, I'll let you have your say, because we weren't able to hear you earlier.

Mr. Patrice Element: My comments are somewhat along the same lines as Mr. Lanteigne's.

You asked whether we felt we were properly heard at the advisory committees. Unfortunately, at these advisory committees, we feel that things are being imposed on us while we are told that we're the ones who decided them. That's what the overall tone is like.

When it comes to redfish, in particular, we think the solution would be to revise the allocation percentages to the various fleets in favour of shrimp vessels. For us, the decision is totally inexplicable, both in terms of sustainable fishing criteria and the protection of the ecosystem.

We still have hope. We live on hope these days. We hope that the decision will be changed, but that will take some help, especially from—

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: To conclude, we're missing the voices of those people who had the historic shares. They were supposed to be here today, but they are not. We're missing those perspectives. We're also missing the input of the Minister of Environment. It would be great if he could come and give us his views on this. If the committee could hear from these people, what would you say?

This morning, at around nine o'clock, the *Mersey Venture* was out at sea. She was skimming the Gully Marine Protected Area. It's not clear in what context this happened.

Does all of this worry you?

Mr. Patrice Element: There are certainly problems associated with the return of large vessels to the gulf. For example, this could affect the amount of incidental bycatch of vulnerable or commercially important species. These vessels also have a much greater impact than ours on the seabed and on the ecosystem in general.

Yes, we are worried about this, not only because we represent shrimp harvesters, but also because we are people from the maritime regions. There's a reason why these vessels haven't been in the gulf since the 1990s. I don't claim to be impartial, but there are impartial people out there who are extremely concerned about the return of these large vessels.

When you make a trawl tow of 150,000 pounds in one go, you can accidentally do irreparable harm to certain resources or species, such as white hake or cod. Indeed, we're not talking about resources, but species.

So, yes, we are worried about the potential impacts of these vessels on the ecosystem, which are in no way comparable to what we're currently seeing.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you, Mr. Element.

[English]

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

That concludes this hour of testimony

I want to thank both witnesses for their expert testimony today, and for their time and for appearing.

We will suspend for a few minutes while we transition to our next round of witnesses.

• (1630) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1635)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Welcome back, everyone.

Welcome to our second panel today.

We have, on Zoom, as an individual, Dominique Robert, professor and Canada research chair in fisheries ecology at the Institut des sciences de la mer, Université du Québec à Rimouski. Also, from the Coopérative des capitaines propriétaires de la Gaspésie, we have Claudio Bernatchez. From the Fish, Food & Allied Workers Union, we have Jason Spingle, the secretary-treasurer.

Thank you for taking the time to appear today.

You will each have five minutes or less for your opening statement.

We will start with Mr. Dominique Robert, please.

[Translation]

Dr. Dominique Robert (Professor and Canada Research Chair in Fisheries Ecology, Institut des sciences de la mer, Université du Québec à Rimouski, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all committee members for having me here today.

I am a professor and Canada Research Chair in Fisheries Ecology at the Institut des sciences de la mer of the Université du Québec à Rimouski. Since 2018, my research team has been working in collaboration with Fisheries and Oceans Canada researchers to study the ecology of the redfish resurgence in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The aim of this research is to understand the environmental factors that control redfish recruitment, diet composition, growth, and movements in the gulf. I therefore consider that I am familiar with the redfish file.

I was first asked to comment on the scales used to allocate the redfish quota in relation to the critical situation faced by shrimp harvesters. The 10% share of the 25,000 tonne overall quota allocated to shrimp harvesters was considered very disappointing by them. I can well understand their disappointment, given that once this 2,500-tonne allocation is divided among the 80 existing shrimp fishing licences, it only represents about 70,000 pounds per licence, a quantity that would not enable a captain to make a profit from this fishery.

Many observers decried the fact that, as it happened in the past, the offshore sector got the lion's share of the fishery, with 58.69% of the total allowable catch. However, it would have been difficult for the minister to ignore historical shares in the redfish fishery when setting allocations. One criterion consistently used by the department to establish shares when reopening a fishery, or when moving from a competitive fishery to a fleet sharing system, is the consideration of historical shares.

I have been working for a long time on Atlantic halibut in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. This is a species for which the fishery went from marginal during the period from 1970 to 2000 to very lucrative starting in the 2010s. At the time of the rapid resurgence of the stock, it was also necessary to settle on a formula for sharing the quota among eight fleets, and such a formula, based on historical shares in the fishery, was established in 2007. In 2011, Ernst & Young was commissioned to evaluate this sharing scheme. The firm based its analysis on the management of several other stocks and concluded that the consideration of historical shares was appropriate. It was therefore expected that historical shares would be considered for the redfish fishery, like they have been for other stocks.

With respect to the critical situation faced by shrimp harvesters, I think that even a substantial increase in their share of the redfish fishery could not easily compensate for the disappearance of shrimp. Over the 2000-2020 period, shrimp harvesters landed an annual average of around 25,000 tonnes of shrimp. However, the value per unit weight of shrimp is far greater than that of redfish. For example, in 2021, harvesters received \$1.75 per pound for shrimp compared with just \$0.50 per pound for redfish. This factor of 3.5 implies that a lucrative situation would require annual landings of 87,500 tonnes of redfish. Such landings are probably not viable in the short term, because of the lack of markets for the resource, or sustainable in the long term, given the high natural mortality that is causing a rapid decline in the redfish stock.

Rapid changes in the waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, including rising temperatures and falling oxygen levels, will certainly lead to other difficult situations. The Greenland halibut stock can be expected to keep decreasing rapidly or collapse in the short term, and some snow crab stocks will likely follow this trend in the medium term, as the system continues to warm. The current shrimp fishery crisis could quickly spread to other fisheries, a situation that could further damage the economies of coastal communities in five provinces.

For these reasons, I recommend that the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans extend the scope of the present study beyond redfish quota allocations to identify a range of solutions to, first, support shrimp harvesters in the short term and, second, increase the resilience of the fisheries sector in the longer term by establishing strategies to prevent the future crises emerging in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

● (1640)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Thank you. That was a few seconds under five minutes, so that's perfect.

Now we'll go to Mr. Claudio Bernatchez for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Claudio Bernatchez (Director General, Coopérative des Capitaines Propriétaires de la Gaspésie): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

For the purposes of this exercise, I will refer to the documentation available from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, or DFO.

I'll start by reminding the committee that in 2019, amendments were made to the Fisheries Act to provide a framework for the conservation and protection of fish and fish habitats. This was done in three ways: ensuring the protection of fish and fish habitats and integrating the tools needed to do so; providing certainty to industry, stakeholders and indigenous groups; and fostering the long-term sustainability of aquatic resources. I will come back to that a little later.

Following the survey conducted in 2015, Science Advisory Report 2016/047 on redfish stated the following:

The arrival of large Redfish cohorts will most likely have a significant impact on the ecosystem in the area, especially due to increased predation on small invertebrates and fish.

That same year, Science Advisory Report 2016/012 on shrimp mentioned a sharp increase in redfish bycatch in the shrimp fishery. Two years later, Science Advisory Report 2018/032 on redfish stated the following:

The massive increase in Redfish has important repercussions for the ecosystem. Increasing predation among other things is contributing to the Northern Shrimp decline in the Estuary and Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Alarm bells were ringing so loudly, they could even be heard by the deaf.

After two more years of government inaction, Scientific Advisory Report 2020/019 revealed the following:

In the research survey in 2019, Redfish accounted for 90% of the total captured biomass as compared to 15% between 1995 and 2012. This relative biomass of Redfish is unprecedented and could have important ecological impacts on other species.

However, we hear nothing but radio silence from the Government of Canada.

What more can we say at this point? How can we sound the alarm on the impact of redfish on shrimp and other species?

Our valiant scientists raised the issue again in Research Document 2023/036:

Northern Shrimp consumption roughly quintupled between 2017 and 2021...reflecting the long-term growth of the 2011-2013 [redfish cohorts].

Meanwhile, these same scientists estimated that shrimp consumption by redfish totalled 213,000 tonnes in 2021, or 38 times the catch recorded by shrimpers in 2023, which was 5,500 tonnes.

For more than a decade, the industry, together with DFO scientists and managers, has taken a precautionary approach that was intended to ensure sustainable fishing of northern shrimp. Despite that, shrimpers in the St. Lawrence have practically nothing left to fish. Ironically, we learned last month that unit 1 redfish stocks were themselves at risk in the medium term, even before the commercial fishery was opened.

Since 2016, how has the Government of Canada discharged its responsibilities to ensure the protection of shrimp and other species, such as turbot, which is equally affected?

What measures have been put in place to promote the sustainability of these species?

How can the government claim that its January 26 redfish quota announcement provides a modicum of predictability for independent fishers and coastal communities in the St. Lawrence?

A number of industry stakeholders are ready to co-operate on developing and integrating an ecosystem approach, one that supports integrated fisheries management in Canada, in a non-partisan way, for the benefit of fisheries resources and coastal communities.

• (1645)

[English]

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

We'll now go to Mr. Jason Spingle for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Jason Spingle (Secretary-Treasurer, Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you to the committee for taking the time to hear from the Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union today.

Our union represents over 14,000 working people in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, the vast majority of whom are employed in the seasonal fishing industry.

I'm here today on behalf of the 4R Gulf of St. Lawrence shrimp and otter trawl fleet based on the west coast and the northern peninsula of our province.

The majority of this fleet of owner-operators live at least three to four hours from the next major centre. They live in a rural, culturally important way of living that is based around the inshore fishery. This fishery of northern shrimp for the past couple of decades and longer has provided a modest and sustainable standard of living to the region; however, climate change and changing water temperatures have resulted in an ecosystem shift. The northern shrimp resource has declined drastically in recent years, while redfish populations have grown substantially, and redfish have become a major predator of the shrimp.

These harvesters have no other fisheries in which to diversify their businesses and have to put considerable effort into preparing for a return to redfish as a just transition. Without redfish, this fleet has no future. Many are facing bankruptcy if they are not given a viable path forward. The path was available and then wasted with Minister LeBouthillier's January 26 decision.

Allocating the entire coastal-based fleet less than 25% of Unit 1 redfish is a far cry from the at least 50% needed to ensure financial solvency and economic sustainability for the region. Nearly 60% of the share will go to the corporate-owned offshore fleet, a small group of factory freezer druggers that will not land or process product in Canada, rather than the 30 or so in our province and others, as you have heard here, in Quebec, New Brunswick and throughout Unit 1, independent owner-operators who support the sustainability of resource-dependent coastal communities.

The allocation key announced for the emerging commercial Unit 1 redfish fishery reflects that of the historical redfish fishery of the 1970s and 1980s and is not comparable to the present day. Today the offshore sector is fundamentally different, with vessels now designed to replace onshore processing with factory freezer equip-

ment to process seafood at sea. This was not the case in the 1970s and 1980s.

It is important to emphasize that the landings of the offshore fleet are not subject to minimum processing requirements. They concentrate profits with other corporations and not workers, and the offshore is already the largest quota holder for fisheries in Canada.

In contrast, every vessel in the inshore fleet is a small business on the water that is operating under the federal owner-operator requirements as well as under provincial legislation that requires that all landings must undergo primary processing at an onshore facility within the province. A majority allocation to the offshore fleet not only denies inshore harvesters of opportunities but also denies hundreds of onshore plant workers meaningful work and adjacent communities of crucial tax revenues, severing the community's connection to the resource almost entirely.

Our union believes that the minister has very clearly failed in her responsibility under the federal Fisheries Act by not prioritizing social, economic and cultural factors as well as the preservation and promotion of the independence of independent licence holders.

As cited in 1977 by the Honourable Roméo LeBlanc, a man who is known as the greatest minister of fisheries in our history and for our organization and members and was then the Liberal minister of fisheries and oceans, in a speech explaining his decision to ban offshore vessels from outside the gulf from being allowed to fish inside the gulf, said, and I quote:

Who gets first crack at these fish? Here I must say that I have a clear bias for the inshore fisherman. Not because of some romantic regard, not because of his picture on the calendars, but because he cannot travel far after fish, because he depends on fishing for his income, because his community in turn depends on fisheries being protected.

DFO has been outspoken in their commitment to ensuring sustainably managed fisheries; however, no such work has been undertaken by the offshore to establish viable harvesting methods that do not impact other valuable fisheries and habitat in the gulf.

• (1650)

Over the last decade, inshore harvester organizations in the Gulf of St. Lawrence have contributed hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of work towards developing a sustainable redfish fishery for the inshore fleet. Our union has worked with harvesters via funding through the Atlantic fisheries fund to develop sustainable gear modifications and practices to nearly eliminate Atlantic halibut by-catch to demonstrate ocean stewardship.

In conclusion, without an alternative fishery, any reduction in access to northern shrimp has a direct and detrimental effect to communities on the west coast and northwest coast of our province. The 4R Gulf of St. Lawrence shrimp otter trawl fleet has the capacity—along with our colleagues, whom you've heard from here—to land the entire redfish quota, and the innovation from the experimental fishery to do so skilfully.

To summarize, we believe that a reversal of this decision is warranted to ensure fish stocks are managed to the benefit of those who live adjacent to the resource for the betterment of Canadian communities and Canadian workers.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Spingle. It was a little bit over time, but I think that's okay.

We'll move on to our first round of questions now. Mr. Small will be starting off, please.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for taking part in our study here.

My first question, Mr. Chair, is to Mr. Spingle.

Mr. Spingle, you know I was an independent inshore fisherman myself. I was an owner-operator, like a lot of the folks you represent. Can you paint a picture of what's going on right now in the 4R fleet that you represent?

Mr. Jason Spingle: Yes. Thank you for your question, MP Small.

I mentioned that this fleet was the basis for the fishery on the northern peninsula for many years now, and it provided most, or a good portion, of the processing work.

As you probably know, but I will just highlight, the shrimp stocks have been declining precipitously. To quote our chairperson, Mr. Rendell Genge, who was one of the first harvesters to ever fish shrimp in the gulf in the late 1960s, even though we saw a decline in the past 18 months, no one could have ever figured that the drop would have been so quick and so fast.

People have been borrowing against their savings. They've been borrowing from the financial institutions. Some of them made investments a few years ago to try to stay in and secure a future when DFO implemented the idea of combining enterprises.

I've had conversations with basically each and every one of these individuals as a group, as well as individuals. Many people will not make it through 2024 without some help. Some might not make it anyway. It's a very bleak situation. For a proud group of harvesters—as you said, people who supported their communities and the region for so long—it is difficult to see that, particularly since I've worked with them for 20 years of my career.

● (1655)

Mr. Clifford Small: Would you say that the rise in the redfish stock has decimated their livelihood from shrimp? Is that a fair statement?

Mr. Jason Spingle: There's definitely a very strong correlation.

The redfish are staying further to the north. We know temperature is a factor. I've been to most of the assessments, up until the last one. We know that there's particularly juvenile shrimp in the bellies of these redfish. They're just getting at the size now where they're going to consume shrimp even at a higher rate.

There's another telling factor with the surveys. Basically, the estuary is the smallest area in the gulf. I'm sure everyone here is familiar with it. If you look at the overlap of redfish and shrimp from that survey, basically the only place where the shrimp are holding their own is in the estuary. That's the only place in the deep waters of the gulf where there are no redfish. For whatever reason, the redfish don't want to inhabit there. That's from DFO's own work.

That's a very telling picture to me. It's hard to argue with that correlation. There's no doubt about it. I don't think there's a doubt in anyone's mind that redfish predation is the single biggest factor in the decimation of the shrimp resources.

Mr. Clifford Small: Is it fair to say that redfish are putting shrimp harvesters out of business right now?

Mr. Jason Spingle: I think it's a very fair statement to say that this the biggest contributing factor, yes.

Mr. Clifford Small: The current government, with its six consecutive fisheries ministers, has had a lot of time. They've known that redfish have been proliferating for the last eight years. Are you satisfied with what the government has done in preparation for what we see today, in the bloom of the redfish fishery, to help prepare harvesters and processors to be ready? In terms of what they've done to add landed value to that product, have they done everything they could?

Mr. Jason Spingle: No. They put out the Atlantic fisheries fund, which was certainly a help, but there was no work led by DFO. The work on bycatch, on species split, is a complicated issue, but there are two species there. One is much less abundant than the other, so you need a plan for that. We have Atlantic halibut, which you heard has exploded. That's so important. It's a big part for a lot of fixed gear harvesters in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and for their livelihoods.

We've done a lot of work, but we led that work. When I say “we”, I mean harvesters, the FFAW. We work with the processors, and I know some of my colleagues on the line here in New Brunswick and in Quebec have worked on the same issues as well. We worked with Dominique Robert to learn a lot about it. It's good to see Dominique here. He's a colleague who turned into a friend, and I appreciate seeing him. We've done groundbreaking work on Atlantic halibut to find out where they spawn in the wintertime and where they inhabit.

The bottom line is that no, DFO did not do the work, MP Small, and there could have been more support given for us to do more work. There's still more work that needs to be done here. This will be a transition.

• (1700)

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Small. That's your six minutes. We will move on to Mr. Cormier once again.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Bernatchez, thank you for being here. I think you probably heard the comments of Mr. Lanteigne and Mr. Element, who appeared just before you.

How many tonnes of redfish, across all provinces, would these shrimper fleets need to overcome the crisis?

Mr. Claudio Bernatchez: I don't think anyone can give you that figure today. What we're looking for right now is ways to overcome the current crisis. You know as well as I do that redfish will not help solve the problems of 2024.

Mr. Serge Cormier: I asked you this question because we are hearing a number of figures from both sides. I think you said you were expecting more since the minister's decision. However, you also just said that, even if the fishery opens this year, it won't be a gold mine, and that everyone knows it: Fishermen are still going to have a hard time of it.

Earlier, I put the following questions to your other colleagues. What do you want as a transition plan? What do you need? Do you need a licence buyback, loan guarantees and so on? Have you informed Minister Lebouhiller or her officials of what you need? What are the estimates of these costs? Have you done all this work?

Mr. Claudio Bernatchez: Firstly, it's not so much about adding redfish quotas to independent fishermen as it is about the first part of the quota allocation that needs to be given to fishermen. We can't have a disastrous allocation key, like the one announced on January 26. This will be the first part of the solution, which will allow bankers to tell our shrimpers to be a little more patient before giving up.

As for other solutions, it's unfortunate that the Canadian government didn't discuss them beforehand, as early as 2016 or, more importantly, as early as 2018. People now have a knife to their throat and are being asked to find solutions. I haven't been in the industry long, but I know that several letters have been sent to previous ministers.

It seems that the Government of Canada is not taking the fisheries seriously. In the last eight years, it has appointed six different people to head this department, which is so important to many coastal communities. However, we have to take it seriously. When the government says it wants to consult the industry, it has to listen and come up with real solutions.

Mr. Serge Cormier: For the committee, the government or the minister, are you going to present—perhaps for the fifth or sixth

time, as you said—your needs in the context of a transition plan to help shrimpers?

Mr. Claudio Bernatchez: I can already tell you that, in order to rationalize Quebec's shrimp fleet, we would have to spend \$26 million to buy back half the licences. Does the government really want to reduce the number of fishermen? We have to ask the question and get a clear answer too.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Okay.

Look, I only have six minutes and I want to make sure my message is understood. You have to say what you need. I understand that, as you said, buying back licences won't necessarily solve all the problems. We want to keep these people in the industry, such as deckhands and plant workers. We have to take everyone into account.

Mr. Robert, you mentioned that the minister would have had difficulty making a different decision, because she had to respect the historical shares. I think you also know very well that ministers have a certain amount of discretion.

I want to put things in perspective and I want you to know, Mr. Bernatchez and Mr. Spingle, that this is in no way an attack on shrimpers. I just want us to paint a broad picture of what might happen in the future. Let's suppose that the shrimp fishery closes and that, in 15 years' time, it comes back with a vengeance and hundreds of thousands of tonnes of shrimp are fished, if not more. Could the future Minister of Fisheries and Oceans say that he will respect the historical shares, but that he will also give 10% of the shrimp quotas to crab or lobster fishermen who are in difficulty, as we have just done for redfish with the shrimpers?

• (1705)

Dr. Dominique Robert: These are certainly decisions that can be made. At present, the person who holds the position of Minister of Fisheries and Oceans has the power to make any decision. However, based on what we've seen in the case of other species, historical shares are an important factor. That's what I said. Of course, I have nothing against the idea of leaving a share of quotas to fleets that are at risk, quite the contrary.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Should priority be given to inshore fleets when the resource has to be shared?

Dr. Dominique Robert: In the case of inshore fleets, we're often talking about people who have a fishing licence for a single species.

Mr. Serge Cormier: I meant shrimpers.

Dr. Dominique Robert: Yes, absolutely. We agree on that. If their resource runs out, they don't have a safety net. That's the big difference. So, for that reason, I would say yes.

However, I would invite the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans to look at strategies to increase the resilience of coastal fisheries in the long term. It's a major challenge, and other fisheries are at risk of finding themselves in the same situation.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Thank you, gentlemen.

[English]

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

We'll move on now to MP Desbiens for six minutes, please.

[Translation]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our valued witnesses.

Mr. Bernatchez, I found your portrait of the situation since 2016 very interesting. We've been seeing the various elements of the crisis facing fishermen for a long time now, particularly in Quebec, but also in the Maritimes in some respects. We can see the extent to which the way the Department of Fisheries and Oceans operates no longer works, whether it's the current quota allocation system or the way the department factors in local measures or knowledge. We are faced with this reality. In this respect, Mr. Robert's comments were very interesting. He said that we absolutely must build on resilience, particularly among inshore fishermen.

In the light of what some scientists have said, I wonder whether we don't need to do some fundamental work on the quota allocation system, the criteria and the historical shares, when we are in a context marked by major changes, particularly with regard to climate, biomass and predators, some of which apparently cannibalize each other, because there are so many of them.

In this context, to save the fisheries, to save the boat, isn't it necessary to look at a new way of doing things?

Mr. Claudio Bernatchez: If we don't, we'll all be contributing to the decline of the fisheries sector in Canada.

The general culture in this sector is the same as it was before Jacques Cartier, when the Basques came to Canada to fish as much as they could in order to fill their boats before returning with their cargo to Europe. This culture of quantity still exists today: we want to bring full boats back to the quayside to fill plants, then containers, and ship the products of our fishery all over the world. We haven't learned from the past. We're repeating the same mistakes.

Right now, issuing licences that have been given value has become the main problem for fishing companies. Here, along the coast, some licences are being sold at ridiculously high prices. It doesn't make any sense to have to pay such sums to practice a trade. What's more, I'm hearing things today that lead me to think that we're not even bothering to take a global view of the situation.

Earlier, we were talking about recovering ghost gear and saying that it would be a good idea to send shrimpers out to do this type of work. We could do that, yes, but some fleets are already doing this work as part of existing programs. So we're saying that we're going to try to solve one problem by creating another.

Let's take the time to stop and look at the big picture and take an ecosystem approach to fisheries once and for all. This will enable decision-makers to embrace the concept of integrated management. Similarly, let's listen once and for all to science and industry, and let's get politics out of the decisions that are made in the Canadian fisheries world.

• (1710)

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Mr. Bernatchez, what you're saying is music to my ears. I don't know what else to tell you.

To make their voices heard by the government and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, fishermen demonstrated last Tuesday. I was at the Salon Fourchette bleue, in La Malbaie, with my leader, Yves-François Blanchet, and a few members. We heard their rout.

Not only is an entire economy being undermined, but so is an entire socio-economic existence which, I know, is not always quantifiable. Has the government been made sufficiently aware of the fishermen's rout? In your opinion, has the government understood the repercussions of its decisions on coastal populations?

Mr. Claudio Bernatchez: Ms. Desbiens, I'm a bit confused about this.

We were happy when our current Minister of Fisheries and Oceans was appointed. She's from our region and she knows the fishing industry well, having grown up there. I liked to say at the time—and Jean Lanteigne could corroborate this, as could Jason Spingle—that she was going to favour coastal communities in her announcements. However, even today, I can't believe that the announcement she made on January 26 was hers. That's how bad it is.

To answer your question, I think some people understand. However, when the time comes to make decisions, what interests are taken into account? Are they economic or social interests? Do we want to continue to occupy the land of these communities scattered across the eastern part of the country? Are we focusing on the various colours of Canada's electoral map, red, blue, yellow or other, with a view to the next elections? Where do we stand in Canada in this respect? How seriously are we taking the real impact of fisheries on our communities?

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you, Mr. Bernatchez.

[English]

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

We'll move now to Ms. Barron for six minutes.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair.

First of all, welcome to the witnesses. Thank you for being here.

My first question is for Mr. Spingle.

Welcome, Mr. Spingle. It's nice to see you again.

I want to ask you about the shrimp plants in Newfoundland. We know that they deliver huge benefits to the municipalities. I am wondering if you can share whether these plants have the capacity to process redfish.

Mr. Jason Spingle: They absolutely do. I've talked to processors. These plants have the capacity, with some reasonable investment in the machinery in the plants, and the workers have the expertise to work on either shellfish or groundfish.

We have these plants, like one in Port au Choix, which was probably the first shrimp plant in Newfoundland and Labrador. There are over 100 workers there. Redfish could really be there, I would say, for August, which is really the primary time, right up until January or February. We're talking about almost full-time work for most of the year here, with redfish in particular.

I really appreciate the question. I also want to say that we did have the experimental fishery in one of our plants—we don't represent members in every plant—and we had a call just a couple of days ago from a chairperson at Beothic Fish Processors Limited on the northeast coast. Their plant bought some of the experimental redfish in December of last year. That was a real benefit to some of the workers, with the crab fishery being delayed and everything that happened this year.

We have the plants, we have the boats, and we have the expertise. What would be very, very difficult here is looking at Port aux Basques, because we don't have to go hundreds of miles here. We're talking about three or four hours of steaming, as we call it. That's travel in these boats, travelling at about 10 knots. We're talking about being on the fishing grounds. To stand up near Port aux Basques on a clear day and have to see factory freezer fishing is going to make this very, very difficult.

Further to that, my fear is—I wouldn't be a bit surprised, and we have to get this changed—that the people who are going to fish in the offshore are going to look to not use one of the factory freezers that are already fishing in Atlantic Canada. They are going to look to get one built or buy one overseas at \$150 million, and furthermore, be probably looking for government money to fund that.

If you go to Port au Choix or Rivière-au-Renard or Caraquet, you'll see the boats that are there and ready, with some minor investments or a reasonable investment in gear—a new net, maybe some sounding equipment, or, as was said previously, some minor on-deck adjustment—to bring in this quality fish to these plants and really be a transition from the shrimp.

The final point, I would say, is that it may not be as much a pound. I appreciate that. I think Dominique had a good point there. That's why we need a transition plan of the kind they had for the auto industry a few years ago. I thought, listening to the television, that GM and Ford—not to pick on either one—were done if they didn't get the government investment. They deserved it and they should have had it, and they got it, and they got back on the right track, and things went forward again. That happens in major industries.

My understanding is that this is what our governments are here for, but why reinvent the wheel? We have everything in place to do it properly, as was outlined very clearly by Claudio. Other than to

say you don't see a future for these communities... If that's what they're saying, they should say it, the people who are making these decisions. If not, let's work together and make a transition that will allow us to continue with a good economy and our way of life.

Thank you.

● (1715)

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Mr. Spingle.

You just answered a lot of my questions there in your response, so that's great.

Could you just reinforce what the impacts would be to municipalities if these plants are not processing shrimp and if they're not processing redfish? What would be the impacts on local communities if that happens?

Mr. Jason Spingle: These plants are often the sole source in these communities, anyone would say, contributing hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars in revenue and in tax revenue through the work that they do. What you will see is a diminishment of not only the community the plant is in, but also the surrounding area as well. It's a deterioration in all infrastructure and in tourism, and I agree that tourism is so important.

We went up to the demonstration. I've been on the south shore of the Gaspé Peninsula before, but we went around the northern tip. I was told by my colleagues how beautiful it was, but I have to say it's right up there with parts of Newfoundland, for example. If you take Rivière-au-Renard or Port au Choix out of the picture, and many others, are you going to have a vibrant tourist economy? I would say you won't. It'll be a diminishment.

It's all part of a package. It's all part of a way of life. Without being too philosophical, I think our cities are great, and I love to visit them, and I know there's going to be some transition, but we're a better country because of our rural communities. Some of them fish. Some of them mine. Some of them do forestry. We're a much better country in that way, and we cannot lose that. This decision points to something different here, and I'm not sure that some people see it.

Thank you.

● (1720)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Spingle. Thank you, MP Barron.

We'll move on to the next round with Mr. Perkins for five minutes.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Just a second. I have to get my clock going, Mr. Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): We have one here.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Yes, I know, but I tend to go on, so I like to keep track myself.

Thank you, witnesses.

Mr. Spingle, I'll start with you. Is there any way to manage or to work in the fishery unless you have stable quota allocations that allow harvesters, regardless of their size, to make investments to fish?

Mr. Jason Spingle: The fishery is like any entrepreneurial business based on a commodity. There are ups and downs in the fishery. I'll quote again the speech from our chair at the rally in Grande-Rivière last week. He said he's faced difficult times because of quota reductions and/or price reductions and interest rates and fuel rates, but he's never really been faced with the situation where he's been told that basically he's done.

I appreciate where you're coming at, Mr. Perkins. It's good to see you again as well.

This fishery closed in 1994, and I think that goes back to Minister LeBlanc's decision. What I would say again is that there's a group of people who have lived—that's who they are, and that's where they're from—in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The offshore was given an opportunity to move. I would say, to quote a former DFO bureaucrat on another issue, they were rewarded handsomely with the resources in the South Labrador Sea, the shrimp and—

Mr. Rick Perkins: As you know, I have limited time, and I have a couple of other questions for you, if I could.

Thank you.

Mr. Jason Spingle: Really quickly, I would say that there's always some risk, but people deal with the ups and downs. When you take away the lifeline—

Mr. Rick Perkins: No, I get that, but I want to follow up with my next question.

DFO has been doing science on this for a while, and in most things DFO and the minister seem to act at a pace that's slower than the movement of a glacier. In this case, the redfish biomass was estimated, in 2019, at 4,300 kilotons, and now it's down to about 2,500, a 42% decline, according to the latest science, while DFO dithered over the last five years trying to figure out what to do.

In all of this that you've seen, why has it taken so long for DFO to recognize that there was a fishery here that was available to harvesters, from both the inshore and the offshore, that could be harvested, but we're five years since they hit that level, and they still haven't done anything.

Mr. Jason Spingle: Yes, I guess we were all hoping that the size would be more in line with what was known about the biology of the species. In saying that, I think that we probably should have started developing it more, for sure, earlier on, and certainly we need to start developing it now.

Mr. Rick Perkins: DFO is supposed to manage the fishery based on a diversity of the ocean, a balance sort of idea, so that things don't get out of hand and we harvest things so that one species isn't impacting the other, but in the five years they've been waiting, it looks like what they allowed to happen was a decimation of the shrimp fishery while they couldn't figure things out.

How many times, whether it's 30 years ago with the northern cod and all these things, do we have to go through this in Atlantic

Canada when DFO can't seem to get their act straight until it's too late?

Mr. Jason Spingle: No doubt there's a lag there for sure. We're accused of being too aggressive sometimes in the industry, I would say, but certainly there's often a lag. I think the poetic justice—not the justice, and I guess it's the opposite term here—is that we put on more and more grates to eliminate bycatch, to protect Atlantic halibut and redfish and all these species in 1994, and that very technology that promoted conservation is now part of the reason, arguably, that shrimp harvesters are at a commercial breaking point.

• (1725)

Mr. Rick Perkins: What should the TAC be?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Thank you, Mr. Perkins. Maybe the witness can answer in another round.

Now we move on to Mr. Morrissey. Go ahead for five minutes.

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

My first question is for Professor Robert.

Professor, from your research, when did you think the redfish stock in the gulf reached a commercial fishing biomass status?

Dr. Dominique Robert: It's a matter of length of the fish. The length at which redfish can start being fished is 22 centimetres, and that was reached three or four years ago for a fair proportion of the large cohorts.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Again, since you're not a fisher and you're not with DFO, from your research, can the stock currently sustain a higher catch ratio than has been announced?

Dr. Dominique Robert: Yes. The science advice says that the stock could this year be fished at a much higher ratio, but the difficulty, as Mr. Spingle mentioned, is to be able to extract the resource without catching the other redfish species and without catching other species of commercial interest like halibut or catching endangered species.

It would be difficult to increase the quota by a lot in a situation where the experience is lacking. We're just starting. We don't have the experience, and it would be, I think, difficult to get clean catches the first year.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Thank you. Since this committee will eventually make recommendations on this fishery, would you recommend to this committee to recommend that the inshore fishery should be prioritized on the catch allocation over the amount announced by the minister?

Dr. Dominique Robert: It's difficult for me to say who should be prioritized. If I could give a personal opinion, of course, I worked a lot with inshore fishermen. I know well the fishing communities all around the Gulf of St. Lawrence. I know very well how difficult the situation is, so—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Professor, who would benefit more, and which group has the least alternative options to survive economically, inshore or offshore?

Dr. Dominique Robert: Right now it's inshore, given that most harvesters have quota only for one species. Therefore the shrimp harvesters, if they can only fish shrimp and cannot fish anymore, are of course more vulnerable.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Thank you.

In your comments earlier, I believe you recommended to extend the scope of this study to examine the impacts of climate change on other stocks. What warning signs are you alluding to?

Dr. Dominique Robert: As I was mentioning, the system keeps warming. It will keep warming in the short term and in the mid term as well. The cold-water species that we have in the gulf—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Professor, are you confident that we're seeing climate change warming in the gulf that is unstoppable at the moment?

Dr. Dominique Robert: At least in the mid term. We know that it's warming at the surface—that's climate change—but it's also warming in the deep layers from an inflow of the Gulf Stream. It's warming both at the surface and at the bottom. The warming is really fast right now, so the cold water species are set to decrease in abundance, which will lead to other crises if we don't do anything.

• (1730)

Mr. Robert Morrissey: These, I believe you would agree, are the species that are the most valuable to the inshore fishery in Atlantic Canada. Is that correct?

Dr. Dominique Robert: Yes, with the exception of lobster.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Do you see an impact on lobster?

Dr. Dominique Robert: It's a positive impact. Lobster is a species that reacts positively to the warming, but the cold water species—snow crab, northern shrimp and Greenland halibut—are in trouble.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Thank you, professor. My time is up.

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

We'll move on again to MP Desbiens for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to take a moment to make sure that I'll be able to speak when we begin to discuss committee business later on, because my notice of motion is related to what happens next.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): I will see hands raised when we go into committee business.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Perfect. Thank you very much.

I'm told that I have to read the motion now. So I'm taking my time to table my notice of motion, which is as follows:

That, as part of the present study on the criteria used by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to set redfish fishing quotas, the committee invite Ms. Sylvie Lapointe,

President of the Atlantic Groundfish Council, to testify and answer questions from members of this committee for one hour; that, as part of this study, the committee invite the Minister of the Environment, Mr. Steven Guilbault, for one hour to answer questions from members of this committee; that this meeting be held prior to the drafting of the report on this study.

I would like us to discuss this when we talk about committee business later on.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): As I understand it, you've put your motion on notice.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Yes.

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Do I have any speaking time left, Mr. Chair?

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): You have one minute.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: I'm so lucky! Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Robert, since when have scientists like you been sounding the alarm about the scarcity of shrimp, and about the solutions that should have been found, when we were making that observation, to help shrimpers who only fish for shrimp? How long have you seen this urgency?

Dr. Dominique Robert: Shrimp has been in decline for several years. However, the decline was gradual. It really accelerated over the last three or four years, when shrimp became part of the redfish diet and the temperature continued to warm up. It was around this time that we became aware of the combined impact of warmer temperatures and redfish on shrimp.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: If we had acted immediately when we saw that redfish were the biggest predator of shrimp, do you think we would have the same problem today?

Dr. Dominique Robert: As I mentioned earlier, shrimp is a cold-water species. Its abundance would still decline, even in the absence of a predator like redfish. Redfish accelerate the impact of the ecosystem on shrimp, but current warming means that the habitat available for shrimp is diminishing rapidly in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

In 10 years' time, whether there are redfish or not—

[English]

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

We will move now to MP Barron for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair.

I appreciate the information that was being provided. I would like to see the remainder of that answer written and provided to us, if possible, from the previous witness.

Mr. Spingle, I have a question that's been brought to my attention that I'm hoping you might be able to shed some light on. It is specifically about the problems that may occur from an independent inshore harvester having to lease redfish quotas from the off-shore.

Can you provide some insights into any problems that may result?

• (1735)

Mr. Jason Spingle: In the business world, it comes down to whoever is willing to fish it for the least amount of money. We see our counterparts in your beautiful province, MP Barron, in B.C. We've talked to colleagues at international conferences about people having to pay three-quarters of the value of the shore price just to go fishing.

You can say that people will be fair, but it's a big debate about business and morality. We know that people are in difficult situations. Besides that, when you have something like halibut, you have some flexibility to at least make some money if you had to buy that quota in the water, but when you're dealing with redfish, which we know right now is, and probably always will be, of a somewhat lower value, it's not going to put most of our members in a very good position.

I think there can be some flexibility, for sure, but they need their own allocations. All the independent owner-operators who are now going out of business because of shrimp need a significant portion of their own allocations to have an opportunity for viability.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair.

I only have 24 seconds, and my question is too big to fit into those 24 seconds, so I'm going to let it go and thank the witnesses.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): I want to thank the witnesses for appearing today. Thank you for your testimony.

We will now move to committee business.

On the notice of meeting, we had drafting instructions as the first item of business.

I saw Mr. Perkins with his hand up.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to put forward a motion that—

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): I have a point of order. We were here to discuss the—

Mr. Rick Perkins: We're in committee business. You can move a motion in committee business. You guys did it two weeks ago.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Well....

Mr. Rick Perkins: If I could speak, Mr. Chair, to my motion that I'm proposing, given that the important study we're doing now on redfish actually interrupted our emergency study on elvers, I just want to make sure we get back to it, so I'm going to propose a motion that reiterates the motion that we already passed in terms of the witnesses who would appear, which include the RCMP, the Canada Border Services Agency and the CFIA. We asked for the minister as well with that motion, which we all unanimously passed. I would add that we've had a number of people write since then, and there are whistle-blowers on this issue who would like to appear in public.

With that, I'd like to move the following motion:

“That, given that the committee passed a motion calling for an emergency study to examine DFO's plan to prevent violence in the elver fishery, the committee agrees to (a) renew its invitation to Erin O’Gorman, President of the Canada Border Services Agency, which is responsible for preventing the illegal export of elvers at our borders; (b) renew its invitation to the Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Mike Duheme, as the organization responsible for contract policing in Nova Scotia; (c) renew its invitation to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans to appear on this emergency study to examine departmental plans to prevent repeated violence and the illegal export of elvers;”

—hopefully, the minister will appear this time—

“(d) prioritize the future regularly scheduled meeting slots towards this study, until completion;”

—I believe that would be for the next two meetings when we sit in March, and those meetings would also include—

“(i) whistle-blowers working in the illegal elver fishery with knowledge of its operations, and organized crime elements, to be conducted in camera;”

—we've all had emails, I think, from the clerk, distributed on those witnesses—

“(ii) officials from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency;”

—whose testimony from the department in our first meeting showed that it was certifying exports of elvers from the Toronto airport, even though they were illegal—

“(e) and that the committee resume other scheduled business following the completion of the urgent elver study that we interrupted with the redfish study.”

• (1740)

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

I saw Ms. Barron with her hand up.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair.

There are a few things. I am just noticing that this version is updated again. We should have put version 2.0, version 4.0 and so on, on these motions, because I'm starting to get confused now. I notice there's an addition in the whistle-blower section. It's not on the last version that was given to me that I have in front of me on paper. There's a piece that—

Mr. Rick Perkins: It was on the one that was circulated by the clerk. It's always been there.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: I'm not seeing it on the version that was given to me.

Regardless, we'll have to consider that one point, because that's the first time—

Mr. Rick Perkins: We had that conversation beforehand too, about the whistle-blowers appearing—

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Yes. I'm sorry.

Through the Chair, if I could clarify, I can see where the miscommunication is happening now. It's not the point around the whistle-blowers; it's the addition to the whistle-blower point. It's just that the wording is different.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Okay. I'm sorry.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: It's not the point itself. Thank you, Chair, for allowing us to sort out what we're talking about there. It's just that there was some different wording added to the point.

I would like to clarify what's being asked here. My understanding was that the original emergency motion on this issue to have two meetings, which we agreed to as a committee. My understanding was that the intention here was to have the meeting that's already been agreed upon, with the first half for law enforcement and the second half for whistle-blowers.

With that caveat, I want to point out that if we're able to get the minister here, and I would like to highlight that would be great to see the minister here.... We're not seeing the minister coming to committees as much as I would like. If we can get the minister here to talk about this important issue, I would most definitely support an addition of another hour. Ideally, as the minister has already been requested to come for the supplementary estimates, it would be great to have the minister here for the whole meeting, instead of just one hour for the supplementary estimates.

I just want to clarify, because the mover of the motion said “two meetings”. Is it in fact two meetings that are being asked for? What does that look like? The wording of the motion itself is very broad. It just says to “prioritize the future regularly scheduled meetings”. I feel that we need to clearly identify what we are agreeing to with that wording.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Go ahead, Mr. Perkins.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Sure. Those are good points.

The reasonable idea—the original motion, which this motion repeats—assumed that the minister would come with officials. She didn't. We just had officials. That's how that would have been off in one section. Unfortunately, that didn't happen. What we ended up with was just officials.

Normally, we would have had the minister and officials for an hour, and then officials. That would have been the normal case. Then, on the plan, the second meeting would have been the law enforcement agencies that were requested. That's not the way it worked out.

The idea is that of the two meetings in March, in the first one, the first hour would be on what I would call law enforcement issues—CFIA, RCMP and CBSA. I haven't put C and P in there because they were here already with the departmental officials. The second hour of that meeting would be with the whistle-blowers. Then the second meeting would be with the minister. Given that we've had three or four requests in for the minister, we could do an hour on elvers and then the second hour on the estimates, which I think we need to do as well, and knock it off.

That would be the intent. I wrote it this way because sometimes it provides the clerk with a little more flexibility in scheduling. You may want more precision, but that's the thinking behind it.

• (1745)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Go ahead, Mr. Kelloway.

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): The old saying is, “I'm just a country lawyer,” but I'm not even a lawyer—I'm just from the country.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Mike Kelloway: When I'm reading this, I'm just a little.... A bit more clarity would be good, MP Perkins. Walk through this again with me. Tell me about March 19.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Go ahead, Mr. Perkins.

Mr. Rick Perkins: March 19 would be the first meeting after we come back. The first hour would be the RCMP, the Canada Border Services Agency and the CFIA. The second hour would be with the whistle-blowers.

Then on March 21, the second meeting would be two hours with the minister, with one hour on elvers and one hour on estimates.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Then we have two meetings, though. This will be the second meeting on March 19. Is that correct?

Mr. Rick Perkins: That will be the second meeting, but the intent with the original motion was that the minister would be here with officials, which she wasn't. It was said at the time that she would come another time because she couldn't be there on the date that officials were here. I'm just following up on the commitment that she would come to discuss elvers at another time, even though we had only allocated that.

We have the time on March 21 to do both. She should appear on estimates before they have to be reported back to the House.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Are there any further questions?

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Is it possible to get a two-minute suspension to have a conversation?

Mr. Rick Perkins: Yes.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): We can, if we can keep it short. We have been postponing drafting instructions.

We'll take a very short recess.

• (1745) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1745)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): We will resume.

Is there any further discussion?

Go ahead, Mr. Kelloway.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: What we would propose as an amendment to Mr. Perkins' motion, with respect to March 19, is that the whistle-blowers and other folks would come, other than the minister. The minister would be here for one hour on March 21, and the RCMP and the CBSA in the second hour.

• (1750)

Mr. Rick Perkins: Can you go over that again? What's in the first meeting?

Mr. Mike Kelloway: On March 19, it would be the whistle-blowers—

Mr. Rick Perkins: That would be for two hours—

Mr. Mike Kelloway: —and whoever. On March 21, it would be one hour with the minister, and the second hour would be the CBSA and the RCMP.

Mr. Rick Perkins: It would also be the CFIA.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Yes, it would also be the CFIA. Sorry.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): MP Barron is next.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: To clarify, what you're suggesting is that it's the same number of meetings, but now the minister is not coming.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: The minister wouldn't be here on March 19; she would be here on March 21 for one hour.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: I'm trying to figure out exactly what the amendment is, because isn't that what we had agreed to in the beginning?

In the beginning, we talked about the law enforcement people and whistle-blowers coming for the first meeting. For the second meeting, we talked about the minister and supplementary estimates C. The difference is that the entire two meetings are taking up one group instead of having two groups. Is that the difference? Can somebody clarify the difference, please?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Perhaps Mr. Perkins can clarify.

Mr. Rick Perkins: I think, if I understand you correctly, the first meeting on the 19th would be for two hours with the whistle-blowers, and the meeting on the 21st would be one hour with the law enforcement agencies—

Mr. Mike Kelloway: The three that you mentioned.

Mr. Rick Perkins: —and one hour with the minister on estimates.

I appreciate the compromise you're trying to propose.

I go back to.... I don't know if I'm allowed to say this, because he's in the chair, but I go back to MP Arnold's statement at the last meeting about the challenge we've had in getting the minister to appear here on issues. We've issued a number of invitations to her, and she's never available.

We know that if she's available on the 21st for one hour, she can be available on the 21st for two hours to deal with at least two of the three or four things for which we've asked her to appear and for which she has not yet appeared. I think that's not a lot. She's been minister since the summer and she's been here only once, for one hour, which I don't think is enough for ministerial accountability to Parliament.

I would still prefer to do the whistle-blowers for an hour, the law enforcement folks for an hour, and then have two hours with the minister in the second meeting, one hour on elvers and one hour on estimates.

That's my....

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Go ahead, Mr. Morrissey.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Just as a clarification, she has been minister for less than a year and has appeared here once. The last minister, in the former government, appeared twice over her whole term, which—

Mr. Rick Perkins: I wasn't here then, so I don't really care.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Nor do I, but the minister—

Mr. Rick Perkins: Is that your standard?

Mr. Robert Morrissey: No. The minister is available. Every minister, of the six we've had, has been before this committee multiple times. I agree that the minister should be here. The minister would be available to come in on supplementary estimates. Actually, when she's here, there's nothing stopping anybody from questioning her on the items that are there.

The point that I find irritating, quite frankly, is the idea that she isn't available. She's been here, and she's been minister for less than a year. Again, I'll confirm this: In the former government, before us, the minister, throughout her whole term, was before the committee twice over years and years.

Thank you, Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): MP Barron, you had your hand up.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you.

Thank you for clarifying. When I heard that the minister was coming, I thought it meant the minister was coming to talk about elvers. That's where my confusion was coming from.

I will, of course, go with the will of the mover of the motion; however, I want to reiterate that I also agree that it would be preferable to have the minister here to be able to talk about this issue.

My observation, as a newer member of Parliament, is that I am seeing ministers talk about issues at other committees more regularly than what we are seeing at this committee. That's my lens of comparison right now. I feel that the minister should be here talking about this important issue and the issues that we brought forward earlier.

I would prefer to see the meetings set up in the way that's been proposed by the mover of the motion.

• (1755)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Go ahead, Mr. Perkins.

Mr. Rick Perkins: I could propose a compromise, if you like. The elver hour could be split between elvers and redfish, if you like, and then we could do estimates in the second hour.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Is that a formal amendment?

Mr. Rick Perkins: I can't amend my own motion.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Somebody would need to....

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Could the clerk or the analysts read back where we are, then, with the meetings? Could one of the members...? I'm just asking for someone to clarify.

Madame Desbiens, do you have something?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: I have nothing against discussing the fisheries crisis with the minister. However, this should not detract from my notice of motion option from earlier, which could be added later before giving instructions for drafting the letter. My motion is important too. So we could put it after that, complete the whole thing and move on to something else, on our regular schedule afterwards.

So I'd be happy to talk to the minister for a few minutes about the shrimp and redfish crisis.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Mr. Perkins, are you clear on that?

Mr. Rick Perkins: If Madame Desbiens wants to move a motion after we're done mine, that's fine.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): We have to get through one motion. Is your motion being amended or not?

Mr. Rick Perkins: I can't amend it.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): No.

Go ahead, Ms. Barron.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: I'm just curious if we feel it would increase the likelihood of the minister coming if we amended the motion. Otherwise, I don't know if it's worth it. If the minister is not going to come, then the minister is not going to come.

I could amend the motion, and we could keep amending, if it's the will of the committee for us to amend the motion and to put it

out to the minister to see if she's able to come on the issues. I think it would be great to get some answers to what's happening around the redfish at the same time. I'd be happy to move the motion for us to have the one hour with the minister to talk both about the situation with the elvers and with the redfish.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Is it the will of the committee to pass the motion as it was originally submitted, to see what the clerk can do with that and to see what the minister can do with that?

I see nodding heads around the room. All in favour and none opposed?

(Motion agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): The motion is carried.

We have less than a minute left.

At the previous meeting, while I was not in the chair, I suggested that we at least get moving on with the submission of drafting instructions for the IUU study. I don't know what the committee feels at this point about whether we can get that done so that the analysts could work on it during four out of the next five weeks that we're not going to be here.

Mr. Rick Perkins: We'll spend the time on the first version anyway.

Mr. Ken Hardie: They should get our input before they start writing.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: I don't feel comfortable with that.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: No. Chair, this was an extremely important, in-depth study.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Chair, Brian Mulroney died.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Oh, really? Oh, no. I'm sorry to hear that.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Chair, I don't think we have time to deal with this.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): I take it there's not consensus around the room to submit drafting instructions, but we could certainly plan towards that in our next two weeks back. We can perhaps plan at the beginning of the meeting, when we come back in two weeks, to make sure we get it done. Otherwise, we may not see that report by June.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Chair, I would agree with you that maybe there's consensus at the committee. If you could rephrase, then we could agree with it.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): If everyone agrees, we can see if we can start early or can extend late, but the first order of business at the next meeting is drafting instructions.

Is everyone agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): Mr. Small, go ahead, quickly, before we have to adjourn.

• (1800)

Mr. Clifford Small: Mr. Chair, I don't see why we can't have our recommendations in to the analysts by Friday. We've been sitting on this witness testimony for a month. The analysts are going to have a two-week break now, and then a two-week break afterward.

I'm not saying the analysts are going to have a break and not work at all, but it's a good opportunity for the analysts to move some of this work out of the way and to not have everything piled on, with all the demands on translation that we've seen.

Can the committee agree, if we have our recommendations in, that the analysts can then come out with some kind of a version based on what we get in to them by the coming Friday or next Friday?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Mel Arnold): I've just been told by the clerk that we have a hard stop at six o'clock. We're past that now, so I'm going to have to adjourn.

The meeting is adjourned.

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