



Ottawa, Canada K1A 0E6

Mr. Scott Simms
Chair, Committee on Fisheries and Oceans
The House of Commons of Canada
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A4

Dear Mr. Simms,

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I would like to thank the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans for its report, *Newfoundland and Labrador's Northern Cod Fishery: Charting a New Sustainable Future*. I am pleased to receive the Committee's recommendations.

I note that the majority of the recommendations are consistent with initiatives currently being advanced or considered by Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), pursuant to the Departmental Sustainable Fisheries Framework and Precautionary Approach Framework for fisheries.

I would like to highlight that my Department understands the cultural significance and economic importance of Northern cod to Newfoundland and Labrador coastal communities. Accordingly, we continually strive to ensure that fisheries management decisions take into account the best available science information and the various socio-economic considerations to ensure the recovery and long-term sustainability of this key resource and important fishery.

I have noted that your Committee's recommendations are based around four main themes: current harvest levels and management measures; stock assessments, ecosystem approach and science capacity; potential factors affecting the rebuilding of Northern cod; and, towards a future sustainable fishery. I have therefore responded to each recommendation thematically:

Current harvest levels and management measures

Recommendation 1

- The Government of Canada recognizes the historical and ongoing importance of Northern cod to Newfoundland and Labrador coastal communities, and supports the intent of this recommendation. DFO is currently exploring options for an appropriate term that can show a clear link to the purpose of the recreational groundfish fishery. DFO is currently considering the term "personal use groundfish fishery" which would illustrate that the fishery is more than a recreational activity. This terminology is also consistent with the terminology used in other fisheries managed by DFO.

Stock assessments, ecosystem approach and science capacity

Recommendation 2

- The Government of Canada concurs with this recommendation and a public announcement to increase the frequency of Northern cod full stock assessments from three years to annual assessments, starting next year (2017-18) and for the next 5 years, was made on April 19, 2017.

Recommendation 3

- The Government of Canada supports the intent of this recommendation to better incorporate all available scientific information into the peer-review stock assessment processes. DFO assesses the status of the Northern cod stock through its peer review process to which academic, industry and provincial partners participate. Science advice is reached by consensus at these peer-review meetings. As the lead for the Northern cod assessment, DFO considers that the processes in place already integrate all the information currently available from various sources. This includes the information from our partners such as the inshore sentinel survey carried out under service contract by the Fish, Food and Allied Workers (FFAW) and the periodic acoustic surveys on the northeast Newfoundland and Labrador shelves and in Trinity Bay carried out by Memorial University of Newfoundland. Provincial government employees also participate in DFO assessments. The current assessment model for Northern cod was developed by Dr. Noel Cadigan from the Centre for Fisheries Ecosystems Research at the Fisheries and Marine Institute of Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Recommendation 4

- The Government of Canada concurs with this recommendation. Annual full stock assessments will begin for Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) division 2J3KL capelin in winter 2018.

Recommendation 5

- The Government of Canada supports this recommendation. In addition to the upcoming winter 2018 stock assessment for capelin using acoustic data from NAFO division 3L, an investment of \$2.4 million is also planned to support a full acoustic survey of NAFO divisions 2J3KL in fall 2018, a very broad area on the northeast Newfoundland and Labrador shelves. This second survey will serve as a complement to a time series of capelin abundance for the capelin stock in NAFO divisions 2J3KL, with existing and future acoustic data collected from bottom trawl surveys. Based on information from the broader stock area, this time series will form the basis of a new stock assessment framework for the future.

Recommendation 6

- The Government of Canada concurs with this recommendation and has already begun re-investing in science and additional scientists. Budget 2016 provided a substantial investment of \$197 million over five years to DFO to increase ocean and freshwater monitoring and research activities. This includes the hiring of 135 new science staff and the acquisition of new equipment and technologies (such as acoustic and remote-sensing) that will support stock assessments. \$2.4 million of this funding will go toward a capelin

survey in NAFO divisions 2J3KL in the fall of 2018 and will enhance DFO's monitoring, assessment and research capacity on cod and capelin in the Newfoundland and Labrador region.

Potential factors affecting the rebuilding of Northern cod

Recommendation 7

- The Government of Canada supports that Canada's seal harvest is highly regulated and managed through an Integrated Fisheries Management Plan that identifies measures to ensure it is sustainable, safe and humane. Total Allowable Catch (TAC) allocations of grey and harp seals available for harvest have remained unchanged since 2010. The Government remains committed to supporting a humane Canadian sealing industry, and will continue efforts to maintain and access new markets for this resource.
- The impact of seal predation on fish stocks is highly area and species specific. There is no scientific evidence suggesting that consumption of cod by harp seals would be the major driver of cod stocks dynamics. The abundance of capelin is considered a more important factor influencing cod stock dynamics, and as already noted in the response to recommendations four, five and six, further investments in science will enable DFO to better assess capelin stocks. Although capelin can be a significant component of harp seal diet, there is no evidence that harp seals have a negative impact on capelin populations and distribution.

Recommendation 8

- The Government of Canada supports this recommendation to develop a rebuilding plan for the Northern cod stock. DFO, in collaboration with stakeholders, is currently developing a rebuilding plan for the Northern cod stock, guided by the Department's Precautionary Approach Policy. It is anticipated that the plan will be completed in the 2018-19 fiscal year. The rebuilding plan will set out fishery and rebuilding objectives based on ecological, biological and socio-economic factors, reference points and harvest decisions rules for the period of the rebuilding plan as well as performance review timelines. The harvest decision rules will be developed and applied using the best available science on the stock status and ecosystem factors. The rebuilding plan will provide for limited fishing opportunities that do not compromise the rebuilding of the stock out of the critical zone to the healthy zone.

Towards a future sustainable fishery

Recommendation 9

- The Government of Canada is supportive of encouraging management practices that deliver the greatest value and sustainable use of fisheries resources. As part of the rebuilding strategy, DFO is continuing its work with stakeholders on transforming harvesting practices towards the harvesting of high-quality and high-value cod products. DFO is also collaborating with stakeholder groups on Fisheries Improvement Projects for the Northern cod stock which is aimed at improving fishing and management practices to help advance fisheries towards Marine Stewardship Council eco-certification and enable access globally to competitive markets.

Recommendation 10

- The Government of Canada supports openness and transparency in fisheries management decisions. DFO will continue to publish the *Sustainability Survey for Fisheries* annually, which it first published in 2016. The survey tracks and reports on stock status, reference points and progress to implement the *Sustainable Fisheries Framework* policies in the fisheries on all the major fish stocks managed by DFO. Consultations with the advisory committee inform fisheries management decision making and follow open and transparent processes. While fisheries management decisions for the Northern cod stock are already accessible to the public on the regional departmental website, public statements on the rationale for the decisions are generated as required on a case by case basis.

Finally, I should note to the Committee that in recognition of the importance of public access to cod for a food and recreational fishery, the Government announced on May 19, 2017, that the recreational groundfish (cod) fishing season for Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) will continue in 2017 with the expanded season of 46 days of fishing, as introduced in 2016. I have also elected to not implement a licence and tags regime for this fishery in 2017, in light of the views expressed during extensive consultation in NL during the past year. The Department will engage with Canadians in the Atlantic Provinces and Quebec in the coming months on the possibility of introducing a marine recreational fishing licence regime, without the use of tags, for 2018.

In closing, on behalf of the Government, I thank the Standing Committee members once again for their diligence and commitment to preserving Canadian fisheries for current and future generations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'D. LeBlanc', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dominic LeBlanc, P.C., Q.C., M.P.