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Chair

Mr. Scott Simms

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• (1550)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.)): Hello, everyone. Welcome.

This is pursuant to a motion that was passed, put forward by Ms. Jordan of the committee, to invite the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, and departmental officials, to appear on April 19 for a two-hour meeting to discuss his mandate letter and the main estimates of 2016-17.

Mr. Minister, it's nice to see you. The way we will structure this is that we have 20 minutes to open, 10 minutes from you and 10 minutes from Mr. Muldoon, I understand.

I'll let you decide who wants to go first.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo (Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard): I guess I came to the right place then.

The Chair: Perfect.

Minister, go ahead. You have 10 minutes for your opening statement.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It's a pleasure to be here today to discuss the main estimates and talk a little about my mandate letter and what it means for Canadians. Following my remarks, my chief financial officer, Marty Muldoon, will provide a brief presentation on these estimates, which I think will be useful for the committee.

As Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, I am responsible for managing Canada's fisheries and aquaculture, protecting mariners, and safeguarding our waters. A big part of my job is making strategic investments and ensuring strong financial management within my portfolio. Marty will go into a bit more detail on what's in DFO's and the Coast Guard's 2016-17 main estimates, which total \$2.2 billion. This figure represents a 19% increase over last year, and is mainly due to funding for infrastructure projects and acquiring Coast Guard vessels.

To be more specific, I'm seeking \$809.7 million in capital, mostly for the procurement of fleet, machinery, and equipment; \$65.5 million in grants and contributions, mostly to support our aboriginal strategies and governance program as well as our fisheries protection program; and \$1.2 billion in operating, for salaries and other operating expenditures. Additional funding that's related to the recently tabled budget will be sought through supplementary estimates.

While I have your attention, I want to speak about what budget 2016 means for my department and how it relates to my mandate. Over \$197 million was set aside for ocean and freshwater science, monitoring, and research activities. This represents the fulfillment of a key commitment and the largest investment of its kind in fisheries and oceans science in a generation. This funding will allow us to hire new research scientists, biologists, and technicians; invest in new technology; and build important partnerships. Taken together, it will help us make more informed decisions about our oceans, waterways, and fisheries.

DFO, along with Natural Resources Canada, will receive over \$81 million for important marine conservation activities, including designating new marine protected areas under the Oceans Act. We will also receive funding to maintain and upgrade federal infrastructure properties, such as Canadian Coast Guard bases. An additional \$149 million will help improve infrastructure at federally owned small craft harbours.

DFO is one of seven departments and agencies that will share over \$129 million to help our infrastructure adapt to a changing climate and help communities become more resilient to the impacts of climate change.

In terms of investments for indigenous peoples, DFO will receive over \$33 million to extend the Atlantic and Pacific integrated commercial fisheries initiatives. This program will help first nations access commercial fisheries and build sustainable commercial fishing enterprises. Northerners, including Inuit, will also receive \$40 million in federal funding to help build strong, diversified, and sustainable economies across the three territories. One area that will benefit from this investment is the fisheries sector.

In terms of Coast Guard investments, reopening the Kitsilano Coast Guard facility in Vancouver is a top priority. Over \$23 million was set aside in the budget to reopen Kitsilano and expand its search and rescue services to include marine emergency response. The facility will also provide emergency response training to our partners, including indigenous groups, and serve as a regional incident command post in the event of a significant marine incident.

• (1555)

The Coast Guard will also receive \$6 million to carry out technical assessment of the *Manolis L*, a shipwreck off of Newfoundland and Labrador, which began leaking fuel in 2013. Funding for this assessment will help us to find a permanent solution to this issue.

The Coast Guard was identified as one of several departments requiring additional funding to carry out critical mission services. A \$500-million fund managed by Treasury Board will help us address things like acid rust-out. Once funding decisions are made, amounts will be submitted for parliamentary approval through the estimates process.

I sincerely believe that the funding I'm seeking through the main estimates, along with the funding laid out in the budget, will help me achieve my mandate and put Canada on the path to shared prosperity and a cleaner and greener economy.

Before I turn the floor over to Mr. Muldoon, I just want to say I appreciate everyone running down here after votes today. I know it took some scheduling challenges to finally get here, but I'm glad I'm here and look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Tootoo.

Mr. Muldoon.

Mr. Marty Muldoon (Assistant Deputy Minister and Chief Financial Officer, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you.

We've circulated a short deck, a presentation that I'll refer to.

If you wish to follow along, I'm going to begin on slide 3. Most of you will recall that we were here about two and a half or three weeks ago on our supplementary estimates (C) from the previous supply cycle, so I won't dwell on this slide.

If we jump to slide 4, I'll spend a moment, and I'll link a number of numbers that are going to come up as I roll along through the presentation. This particular presentation that we face every year is an interesting one to try to follow the supply cycle and how it affects us. If we look at where we are on the time chart on slide four, we're smack in the middle of having tabled and received royal assent on the main estimates, and the interim supply for those main estimates. That was all occurring during the months of February and March.

As well, the government tabled budget 2016. We're ahead of that as we roll into what these main estimates include for today's discussion. I'll be trying to figure out how to answer questions where they may be relevant to the budget 2016, but those items will all come in future supplementary estimate exercises that are to the right on this particular chart.

With regard to a couple of numbers to follow along—if I can take you all the way to last year—in the top left corner, one is \$1.889 billion. That number I'm going to show you again shortly. You'll see in each of the successive quarters that we increased our estimates to operate with, ending the year with \$2.39 billion. Now we're asking you to consider our main estimates for 2016-17. The “you are here” arrow points down at \$2.241 billion, just a slight drop from last year's ending position, but a rather marked increase from last year's starting position of \$1.889 billion. I'll explain that in a minute. The primary driver, of course, will be no surprise.

Let's move to the next slide. It was already covered in the minister's remarks, and, again, I've just highlighted that we're smack in between opening with our main estimates but not yet able to portray the increases that will come in year. That's the essence of this slide.

Let's move to slide 6 and take a minute here. I've just bored you with a couple of interesting numbers. Let's see them again here, and then I'll explain a little about how the estimates are working for the organization.

The minister highlighted that we are proposing for your consideration, \$2.2 billion in main estimates. The increase over last year's starting point, or the \$1.889-billion number that I showed you, is a \$352-million increase. This table is a replication right out of the printed main estimates. You would remember that from seeing part II in the bigger books that you have access to.

The top three numbers in this table are the numbers that the committee will be asked to support. The next two, in the row with the *S* beside them, are called “statutory” and they're not actually a voted item. They're a number that is provided to us under the various acts. So the “employee benefit plans” has a number that is provided directly to us.

You'll notice the final item, “Minister of Fisheries and Oceans – Salary and motor car allowance”. By the very structure of the way that the ministers' offices work in a departmental setting, this very small number—and it is small; there are no extra thousands—comes from two portions of the parliamentary process. There is a Salaries Act for the minister's augmented salary, being a minister, and there is the Parliament of Canada Act, which allows for the small item here for a motor car allowance.

You see this year that we have a statutory increase of \$1,400, which is a very small increase. Those amounts, again, are provided to us. They go through the main estimates, but they're not part of the voting structure.

The minister already gave you the summary at the bottom. The big player here—and I'm going to go through a few of them—is the federal infrastructure initiative funding from budget 2014. This is year two of that. As well, often before this committee, we are talking about the ebbs and flows of the national shipbuilding strategy, so I'm going to talk about how that is moving along.

Every year, we need a top-up. I was just here, as you'll remember, on the supplementary estimates (C), talking about the fuel for the Coast Guard. It's about \$15 million to \$20 million every year, which we need on top of the base funding that we have for fuel for Coast Guard icebreaking and other services.

If I could ask you to join me on slide 7, here are the actual numbers behind that \$351 million. I'll just take a couple of minutes on a few of them that are most notable. Number one on the list, federal infrastructure, is \$291 million.

- (1600)

Fisheries and Oceans was a recipient of an approval of \$551 million over two years. This is year two, so it's that number plus the third number down of \$25.4 million for the lifeboats for the Canadian Coast Guard. Those two numbers combined are year two of FII.

If you'll quickly do the math in your head, that's \$316 million. I'm already over the \$315 million increase because that increase is a net number. I'm going to take away a little here in a minute.

It's \$181.8 million for the Coast Guard's offshore fisheries science vessels. This is turning out to be a very good story. Those of you who are members of the committee from the last few years, you'd know I've been here numerous times saying we're moving money out to future years because the shipbuilding isn't keeping pace. I mentioned with the supps (C) that in fact it has turned the corner.

We have three of these vessels, three copies of this particular vessel, that are going to come off the production line of the Vancouver Shipyards. This is the next installment. When I was here three weeks ago we were bringing in \$116 million of the expenditures for 2015-16. Now you see we're up to \$181 million for this particular year, and we'll start to see those vessels, that production, reaching its conclusion shortly.

In the fourth down, there's that incremental funding. It was just in the supps (C) and it's again here. As a reminder, this is an "up to" funding limit for us. If we spend it burning fuel in those vessels serving Canadians, we can access this funding. If we don't, it stays in the fiscal framework.

Before I move to the bottom of the page, I want to re-enunciate. This federal infrastructure money that's on this page is only for all infrastructure funding not announced just recently in budget 2016. We'll likely be back to see you very shortly in supps (A) to bring in whatever funding was allocated to us. You'll recall that one of the big chunks was \$149 million for the small craft harbour program and a further \$49 million for the Canadian Coast Guard for specific greening initiatives at some of its facilities where we're going to look at solar power as an alternative source of energy.

At the bottom, I mentioned in my remarks we've got a lot of money coming in. That adds up to well over \$351 million. Some of

our funding profile at the bottom of this page—and I'm going to move to the next slide—is funding that's leaving our organization.

On this particular page, we notice what's called a decrease in the funding profile. This is not a take-away. What's happening here is we've had an extremely successful procurement with Bell for the light-lift and medium-lift helicopters. I think I regaled you last time we were together that we've now taken delivery of the first 15 of the light-lift. Those are coined the Bell 429s, and we're now in this year starting to ramp up toward the Bell 412s, which is our medium-lift platform.

In addition, with this new money after this particular year, we're going to buy the flight simulator for the training.

The \$66.8 million leaving our organization is a signal the program of acquisition for the first 15 is complete. We have to reduce our approvals in our main estimates to the new lower expenditures that will occur in 2016-17 as we move forward. Again, it's a good story. These have been delivered on time and on budget.

There are a few more here on slide 8. Pre the budget announcement, which the minister just noted on Pacific and Atlantic integrated commercial fisheries, we had not had a renewal for this particular \$33-million program. From a main estimates process, I had no choice but to seek the reduction of our main estimates authorities by that amount until that program was renewed.

In supplementary estimates (A) or (B), in the coming term, we'll come back and seek the renewal of this from this committee support.

Next on the list is the reduction of offshore oceanographic science vessel funding. This is not a reduction to the program. This is, as you'll remember I just mentioned on the previous page, three copies of the fisheries science vessel. This one, as I would call it for short, the OOSV, is due to come off the line after those first three. That particular production line, and the sequencing of when those will arrive to us, is more clearly known. We're now taking this funding of \$23.3 million, and we're pushing it out to the future years where we know we'll need it when this particular vessel goes into production.

•(1605)

Next is small craft harbours, just below. If you were following along with what I was saying about the federal infrastructure, there is a tremendous amount of investment being made from federal infrastructure in the small craft harbours program, in this particular instance, \$22.2 million. I think it was in budget 2014 there was a \$40-million incremental investment made in small craft harbours over two years. The end of that two years was 2015-16, and so I have to reduce the authorities available to us by this \$22.2 million. We successfully delivered on the initiatives for that funding, but we're just reducing how much we're allowed to spend. What we have in 2016-17 and beyond ties itself to the base program, plus the two rounds of federal infrastructure funding that I spoke of in my remarks.

Last, vessel life extensions and mid-life modernizations. These are the two major service investments that we use to keep existing Coast Guard fleets in service and operating. Again, tied to the timing of when our fleet replacements occur, we move the vessel life money forward when know that vessels will be available for their refit work and/or when we know that a new vessel is coming in to replace the ones we have in service. This is not a take-away, it's just simply a timing issue, moving to the right.

Now the last slide, slide 9. As I mentioned on the timeline slide, we received on March 24 the royal assent for interim supply. We have three-twelfths of our operating funding from the main estimates. As a result of the process here today, and ultimately the decision of government, we'll hope that the rest of the main estimates are released to us, and that would represent the other nine-twelfths of the year.

Just before I sign off, Mr. Chair, and thank the committee for this opportunity, I'll only just reference that there is a series of slides that follow in the annex section. What they are is another way for this committee to look at how our funding is divided. There are very complicated budgets in the main estimates, but what this does is it breaks it down for you by strategic outcome and shows you how the \$2.2 billion that we're referring to in the main estimates is partitioned by the four big strategic outcomes the organization has set out to achieve. It breaks it down even more granularly in the pie charts by the types of programming so you can see how much goes into, say, economic prosperity, and how much does the Coast Guard contribute to that, for an example. So I'll leave you with those.

We're pleased to answer any questions, and look forward to the dialogue over the remainder of our time in this appearance.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

•(1610)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Muldoon, and thank you, Minister Tootoo, and the rest of your staff with you here today.

We're starting with our first round of questioning, seven minutes each. Our first question goes to the government side. Mr. Ken McDonald will be the first.

Mr. Ken McDonald (Avalon, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and, again, welcome, Minister.

The first question deals with the Fisheries Act.

In your mandate letter, one of the department's priorities is reform to the Fisheries Act. In 2012 some changes were made to the act in regard to habitat protection, but still these changes were minor. The act as it is today is out of date and does not align with the needs of those involved in the fisheries across Canada. When can we expect the modernization of the act, and what steps do you see taking to meet the modern-day needs of today's fisheries?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: The Fisheries Act, I think we all know, is an essential tool to support conservation and the protection of fish and fish habitat and the sustainability of our fisheries. I take very seriously my mandate to restore the Fisheries Act protections that were lost, and look forward to consulting with scientists, environmentalists, indigenous peoples, and all stakeholders in finding the best path forward to safeguard our oceans and waterways. For now, I intend to focus the Fisheries Act review on these lost protections.

Since my appointment as minister, I've travelled across the country and listened to a whole range of Canadians on their views of this review. They were constructive discussions and very informative for me and my departmental officials. I felt that it was important for me to go out and hear first-hand from stakeholders what their concerns and their issues were, to help me better understand the file. I will continue to engage with indigenous people and other Canadians throughout the review process, to hear what they like and what needs to be changed in the act to restore those strong protections for our fisheries.

Currently my officials are reviewing options to undertake this review. I can say at this time, though, that we will hold consultations with indigenous peoples, other Canadians, and all stakeholders. The specific processes and timelines will be announced before the summer commences. That's something I know is important. I've heard it from everybody from coast to coast to coast. I look forward to not only bringing back these lost protections, but also modernizing. As we all know, it's quite an old act, and I've heard from all kinds of users of the act that it does need to be modernized as well.

Mr. Ken McDonald: My next question, Mr. Minister, deals with aquaculture. When you appeared before the Senate committee on fisheries and oceans, the topic of aquaculture was discussed, as was the drafting of an aquaculture act. The aquaculture sector falls under multiple departments. It falls under Fisheries and Oceans, Environment and Climate Change, and Agriculture and Agri-food.

In this light, the industry struggles to find its place in terms of regulation and legislation on the federal level. Can we look forward to a new, modern act that pertains directly to aquaculture and that will involve the co-operation of all these departments and ministries?

•(1615)

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Absolutely. Again, I think I've met with more aquaculture industry stakeholders since I've taken office, because they seem to follow me around everywhere I go, but that's fine. I totally understand the issues and concerns they have.

Like I said, look at modernizing the act. I don't think aquaculture is even mentioned in the Fisheries Act. They've made it very clear that we need to modernize it and to recognize that industry.

I've been travelling on both the east and the west coasts, and those jurisdictions are very eager to promote growth in that industry. Finding ways to modernize the act to reflect this new industry as far as the act goes is going to be important. Whether it's creating a separate aquaculture act, or finding a way to modernize the existing act to include those concerns and those issues they have, is yet to be determined.

Mr. Ken McDonald: My next question, Mr. Minister, deals with something else. Of course, the fishery is very important to my province, but just as important, I guess, is the small craft harbours funding. In the budget, it's highlighted that an increase of \$163.2 million will be allocated to small craft harbours around the country.

I have a couple of questions on that. How will this additional funding be allocated? What are the criteria to determine the allocation? Is it a need-based allocation and will the areas of Canada with the highest volume of designated small craft harbours be taken into consideration?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: That's again something I've heard in my travels that's quite near and dear to everybody's heart, whether it be the fishing industry, the aquaculture industry, or all the stakeholders. I certainly recognize the important role that small craft harbours and commercial fishing and aquaculture play in many communities on our coasts.

The amount, in my understanding, is \$148.6 million that was recently announced in the budget for small craft harbour improvements, which I think clearly demonstrates our commitment to ensure that our harbours are safe and accessible for commercial fish harvesters across Canada. We also value the significant contributions to.... As I said, I've met with a number of these harbour authorities in my travels, and they're very dedicated. A lot of them dedicate their own personal time to ensure harbours are safe and well managed—

The Chair: Sorry, Minister, we're up on that time.

We have to go to the opposition now for seven minutes. Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Hope, CPC): Thank you, Minister. It's good to finally see you here. We were starting to get jealous. You've been to the Senate twice and we hadn't seen you yet, so I'm glad you've made some time for us today.

Mr. McDonald mentioned the Fisheries Act review, and you said in response to Senator Hubley, and again now to Mr. McDonald, and I quote, "One of the things that everyone mentioned to me is they wanted to see these lost protections restored. We're happy to...restore these lost protections, pretty much...everyone I talked to wanted to...."

I guess you haven't spoken to farmers and municipalities in my riding in British Columbia, where for years they wanted DFO to get out of their drainage ditches to allow them to farm. The only way they can farm is if they're allowed to drain their land so that they can get onto that land and maintain it, grow their crops. They were quite happy, as were the municipalities like Chilliwack, Kent, and the Village of Harrison Hot Springs, to see that drainage policy reviewed and to get DFO out of those man-made drainage ditches and allow them to farm.

Don't you think it's a bit of a waste of the resources of your department to get back into the farming ditches in British Columbia and other parts of the country, which, given the limits of resources of government and your department, will necessarily move fisheries officers away from productive fisheries like the Fraser River or others that actually need protection?

•(1620)

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Thank you for your question, and I'm glad I'm finally here as well.

I think there were some amendments that people were concerned about—the lost protections—but there were also some positive amendments that were made in there. As I said, I met with Canadians from all three coasts, and some of them I've heard say that we should just revert back to how it was before. We're looking at options to restore lost protections in the near future, and that balances with our engagement to proceed with an open and conclusive process. I don't want to just jump and say, okay, we're going to revert back to the old, because not all the changes took away some protections. There are also some positive things in there, too. I think if I just went and changed it back to what it was, it takes that away. As I said, I've committed to consult with Canadians on this, so if we're having consultations and those people in your riding want to come and make those observations and recommendations for the review panel, they'd be more than welcome to.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I hope you do hear from them.

I wanted to jump to another part of your mandate letter. You spoke about aboriginal consultation, and this is perhaps an opportunity to get you to broaden that in light of last week's Supreme Court decision on the Daniels' ruling regarding Métis and non-status Indians. While this didn't give Métis and non-status Indians section 35 rights, there are going to be significant implications for the government, and I would suggest for the department. What are your expectations as to what the impacts will be on DFO? Do you anticipate that this decision will have an impact on fisheries' allocations, allotment, by your department? Do you anticipate this happening in the short, medium, or long term? Anything you can enlighten this committee on in that regard would be appreciated.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: As I said, it was an important decision that was handed down last week. The government's going to be taking a look at it and going through it and determining exactly what our obligations are under that. It would be a little premature for me to say right now one way or the other until it's been thoroughly reviewed by the government. We will be taking a close look at and determining what their obligations are as a result of that.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you. Perhaps a future appearance will deal with that.

I wanted to talk briefly about Thompson River steelhead. It's an issue in British Columbia, again a conservation issue. There is significant concern with the Thompson River steelhead stocks. While they fall under the jurisdiction of the Province of British Columbia, there are issues with bycatch that will affect the Fraser River fisheries, the chum fishery specifically. There are some who have suggested that in order to protect the steelhead we need to close or delay the chum fishery, which obviously would have a large economic impact.

I met with some angling groups just this morning from British Columbia who are concerned about the lack of dialogue among DFO, the province, and commercial, recreational, and aboriginal fishermen on the issue. I'm not sure if you have this card in the book or if you would undertake to get back to us on what part you feel the department can play to facilitate that sort of discussion so that we can advance the conservation of the steelhead, while at the same time protecting the interests of fishermen on the Fraser River.

● (1625)

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I don't have a problem sitting down and discussing issues with other stakeholders. I know this is an issue with the province, and I've met with all stakeholders. Whether they be recreational fishers, anglers, indigenous groups, I've committed to open to dialogue with everyone.

Actually, I met with a group this morning who said they'd been trying to get in the door with a request. No one has talked to them, and I told them—just as I did when I was in New Brunswick with a first nations group over there—that our officials are here to work with them on whatever the issues are and to do anything we can to help make progress on certain issues. Basically, we're all in this together. Having that dialogue is important to being able to make progress. That's the only way it's going to happen.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Stetski, seven minutes, please.

Mr. Wayne Stetski (Kootenay—Columbia, NDP): Thank you, Minister, for being here, and thank you for restoring the Kitsilano Coast Guard station. It's very important for marine and environmental safety on the coast.

I want to talk about Comox station a little bit. Will you act in good faith and postpone closing the MCTS Comox station until you are satisfied there are no outstanding workload, training, or other marine safety issues?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Thank you for that question. I was anticipating getting asked that question today.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: It's an important one.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: The closure of Comox, I've said it over and over, won't diminish the safety services of the Coast Guard. I think this is something that's been part of a project to modernize and consolidate our MCTS centres since 2007. This is the final stage in that process.

You know, it's never easy. Certainly I think by moving forward we'll give some certainty to the employees who have been

struggling. They were notified a little over two years ago, I think, around two years ago, that the centre would be closing. We're at the final stage of this project that has been going on since 2007.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: As you know, our preference would be to keep it open.

Turning to the Fisheries Act, albeit it's an old act, but it's a very important one for the environment. I was the regional manager for fish and wildlife for southeastern B.C., and it was a sad day when we saw the back of the last DFO staff leaving our region.

The act is really important. Particularly, will you restore the habitat protection provisions, HADD, that were gutted by the previous government—they were—referring specifically to the restoration of section 35 of the Fisheries Act?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Thank you. I think my mandate letter is pretty clear, to restore lost protections. I'm sure once we decide on the process of how that review will be conducted, I'm quite confident that through that review process this is something that will be mentioned over and over again. I'm committed, and I've been mandated by the Prime Minister to bring back those lost protections. We'll do that in the best way possible.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Perhaps you could keep an eye particularly on section 35 and bring it back.

Last month the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union sent the minister a letter outlining the dire situation facing west coast fishery workers. They say the bulk of the profits from west coast commercial fisheries are going to quota and licence-holders, and one large processor. As the outsourcing of nearly 500 family-supporting jobs in the Prince Rupert plant shows, corporate consolidation of licences and quotas has threatened the livelihood of small-boat independent fish harvesters. The letter asks the minister to strike an independent panel to travel to B.C. coastal communities to talk with the communities, commercial fishers, and plant workers, and develop a made-in-B.C. solution.

Do you intend to do that?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I haven't seen that letter yet, but when I do see it, I will be having a close look at it. I'm not going to commit to anything until I see what the letter actually asks.

● (1630)

Mr. Wayne Stetski: That's fair enough.

When will the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency review process be properly revised so that major energy and other projects are reviewed using a climate lens?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: We both know that this process falls under Environment and Climate Change. I am sure Minister McKenna, just like me in my mandate to review the Fisheries Act, is working.... Our officials are working together to figure out the best way forward to conduct that review and get it done. I am hoping that some road map for that will be unveiled by the summer.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: As you know, climate change certainly affects fish seriously.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I know.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Stetski.

Now we will go over to the government side.

Mrs. Jordan, you have seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan (South Shore—St. Margarets, Lib.): Thank you for being here today, Minister.

I want to focus my questions on three specific areas. I'll start with small craft harbours—as you know, that is extremely important to us, on the south shore of Nova Scotia—and the increase in funding of \$149 million.

My question is—and my colleague alluded to it earlier—how is that money going to be allocated? Are there any plans for long-term strategic planning for the development of small craft harbours? Sometimes we do things on an emergency basis, and I think long-term planning might be a better way to go. I am wondering if there is any thought given to how that money is going to be allocated in the future.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I know my officials are currently finalizing a small craft harbour project list for the 2016-17 fiscal year. Thanks to the additional \$148.6 million in new funding received under our budget this year, for the next two years, we will be able to make a lot more people happy and do more of the much-needed projects this coming year. Funding priority is given to safety-related projects at the core fishing harbours, to address things like rust-out and improving the operations and conditions of the harbour. Projects at core fishing harbours are selected based on the following criteria: safety or risk management, functional need, harbour activity and—here we go—long-term plans, economic benefit, and the state of preparedness of the project.

These projects are carried out across the country, with the majority in the Atlantic provinces, where there are more of them. I think about 70% of the harbours are located out there.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: You mentioned the shipwreck off Newfoundland. Abandoned and derelict vessels are a huge concern for coastal communities. Currently, the only recourse the government has to deal with them is if they are an environmental hazard or block navigable waters. There needs to be more done in terms of what we can do with these vessels that are just being left. I wonder if you have any thoughts on further action by DFO with regard to the problem we have with over 600 derelict and abandoned vessels in Canada right now.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I have been asked a few times in the House about the St. Catharines piers, for example. We know that there is an issue out there. The Coast Guard will deal with wrecks and derelict or abandoned vessels where there is a pollution risk coming from it. Transport Canada will deal with it if it is posing a hazard to safe navigation. The system we have here in Canada is based on the “pollutor pay” principle. To be able to deal with it, we work in collaboration with our federal and local partners to hold these negligent vessel owners accountable to the full extent of the law. Having said that, I think our officials are sitting down and looking at how we can improve on that process or things that may be missing. These are things that we are discussing at an officials level right now between the Coast Guard and Transport Canada.

• (1635)

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: My final question is on MPAs and your mandate letter on marine protected areas. When the staff were in

earlier for meetings, I believe it was suggested that it was both “exciting and terrifying”—I think those were the words they used—because of the mandate to get to the 10% in the next couple of years.

I know this is something that has to be done in co-operation with the Minister of Environment as well as your department. How do you see the MPA process going forward, particularly with regard to your department?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Well, yes, I think it is both exciting and terrifying. Again, that's something I've discussed with all stakeholders who deal with the water and our oceans, whether it be fisheries, environmental groups, oil and gas, and all the provinces and territories reps I've met with.

One thing that I was very happy to hear is that all across the board everyone is supportive of us reaching our targets, and they are committed to working with us to help us achieve those targets. To me, that was very exciting, because usually when you get all these different groups sitting around the table they disagree on certain things. It was nice to see that here's something where there is some common ground from all sides. It was nice compared to some of the other discussions I've had with them on other issues.

Together with the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, we're developing a plan on how to achieve this. I've said all along that these are very ambitious targets. We're hoping to be able to launch within the next three to four weeks how that's going to unfold, if not sooner.

The Chair: We are now into our five-minute round.

Mr. Arnold, you have the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Minister, for being here today along with your staff. It's good to see you.

I've noticed that you obviously wear your seal tie very proudly everywhere you go. I'm wondering if you support the seal harvest in your area especially. Do you support it elsewhere in the country?

Is there cabinet support for the seal hunt in other parts of the country, especially if it has a significant effect on overall fisheries management, such as salmon and cod stocks?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Absolutely. I've met with the sealing industry, the seal harvesters from Newfoundland and Quebec and the Magdalen Islands. I've committed to them that we as a government do support a sustainable, humane, and well-regulated seal harvest. You used the word “hunt”. When my staff says that, I always say no, it's not a hunt. It's a harvest.

This is an industry that's taken quite a hit over last number of decades, thanks to market blockages to the EU. We were able to negotiate an indigenous exemption, so that through our market certification program we'll be able to import those products into the EU. In my meetings, I've talked with other stakeholders in southern Canada and have said that we want to do what we can to try to maximize on that exemption.

I met with the folks from Quebec two to three weeks ago. They said that one of the things they've come to realize is that the sealing industry is not a huge industry, and that they're kind of going at each other, trying to take the other guy down and get their market. They've told me that they realize they're small enough that they need to work together to try to expand the industry and market access in different parts of the world. That's something that I've committed to work with them on.

• (1640)

Mr. Mel Arnold: I also come from a hunting background so I too have learned to switch the terminology over to a “harvest”.

I'm also wondering about the west coast. Seal predation on some of the salmon stocks has been noted as having a significant impact. There, we'd have to look more at a seal cull. Would you support that if it's sustainable, as part of the scientific management of the overall fisheries resource?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I think that before any decision is made on any species, the science would have to be done to make that determination. If the science says that there is an issue that we need to deal with then we'll look at the best way to deal with that issue. Without the science to show and tell us exactly what the problem is and what the facts are, it would be premature for me to declare myself one way or the other. But it's based on science. We've committed to reinvest in science. Hopefully we can work, not just with DFO officials, but also with the Pacific Salmon Foundation, with whom I've had discussions to look at ways we can partner on science so that we can have a broader base to draw from in order to make more sound decisions.

Mr. Mel Arnold: The marine protected areas are becoming a forefront issue. Do you have any direction so far as to what might be included or excluded as acceptable uses or activities within these marine protected areas?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: In my travels, I've heard that from just about everybody. As I said, I've been very impressed with the expertise, enthusiasm, and contributions that everyone is bringing to the table on this.

I think right now we're advancing five areas of interest for designation, including Hecate Strait, Queen Charlotte Sound, and glass sponge reefs in the Pacific. There is also one up in the Beaufort Sea, and another in Paulatuk, I believe, both of which will hopefully be established this year.

We're also looking at St. Anns Bank, the Laurentian Channel, and the American Bank, all in Atlantic Canada, which are expected to follow the following year.

We're early on in the pre-consultation stages with the different jurisdictions to look at where we go next. Again, I've committed to everybody that it's not going to be done behind closed doors or

without consultation. It's going to be done in an open and transparent manner, in consultation with stakeholders.

• (1645)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

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

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Mr. Minister, it's interesting to hear you refer to some of your transactions as exciting and terrifying. I'm sure that visits to the west coast probably fall into that category because, of course, we have a very active advocacy group out there, or rather, groups. There are many of them.

First, I have a quick question on the Kitsilano Coast Guard. We're reopening it. That was a rock-star announcement, to be sure. Will the base also have spill response capabilities?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Absolutely, it will.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Good.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: What we've done is to not only reopen the search and rescue. If you look at the English Bay incident, we had departmental officials sitting down with other stakeholders in the area, They knew we needed to find a way to enhance the services there.

We'd look at having it as a training centre. We've heard from first nations groups up and down the coast that they want to be involved. They're there asking for training and telling us they have the ability to be our first responders.

So we're not just reopening this. It's like enhancing it three times, so it's a great—

Mr. Ken Hardie: A coordination in Metro Vancouver is quite important too because you have so many different municipalities and jurisdictions there.

It didn't take long after our environment minister announced the go-ahead, or at least that a hurdle had been cleared by Woodfibre LNG, that I heard from some folks along Howe Sound who were concerned that some of the data that had been used in that decision was from DFO, from 1991. It was extremely old data, because that was simply the latest that you had. You can straighten that out if that's incorrect, but it does lead to a general question, sir. You're being asked to restore a lot here—habitat, protections, etc.—but I'm wondering if you actually have a strategy for restoring the DFO itself to an organization as it used to be, the source of accurate and objective science.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: As I said in my opening comments, our recent budget announcement of \$197 million over five years starting this coming year is the single biggest investment in ocean science in a generation, and I think that shows we are committed to ensure that we have the resources we need to be able to do adequate science and to be able to make evidence-based, science-based decisions. As I said, I don't want to just bring it back to how it was. The Prime Minister always said better is always possible. I'm looking at ways to try to partner up. Everyone else does science, so why do we have to reinvent the wheel? Someone else is doing it; maybe we can find ways where we can partner up. We can have a partner, give them \$20,000 towards a science project, and they can turn it into \$100,000 worth of science, so we get more bang for our buck, and again, a broader base of science in order to make decisions from.

Mr. Ken Hardie: One more brief question, then. With respect to the Cohen commission, as the only Liberal on this committee west of Ontario, it is something that I'll be asked to follow fairly closely. I notice in the mandate letter you're charged with acting on the Cohen commission, which is, to me, a little different from implementing it, implementing those recommendations. Does that suggest, then, that there are doors open to varying the direction that Justice Cohen was trying to set?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Well, I don't blame you for bringing that up, and I expect you to. To me, that's your job, and we have to respect that. I think we're committed to act on the recommendations of the Cohen commission, on restoring the sockeye salmon stocks on the Fraser River. I actually had a meeting with Justice Cohen when I was in B.C. before Christmas. It was supposed to be an hour, and I think it went on for about an hour and a half. He was a very interesting individual to sit down and talk to. I'm hoping to be out there again soon, at which time I hope to be able to provide detailed information on implementation and progress to date, and to announce a way forward on outstanding recommendations.

I think, as of now, about 31 of the recommendations have been implemented in whole or in part, so I'm looking forward to more coming in the near future.

Thanks.

• (1650)

The Chair: Okay, thank you, Minister.

Mr. Barlow, for five minutes, please.

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): I want to thank my colleague Mr. Sopuck for letting me sub in today.

Minister, thanks very much for being here.

My question is in a bit of a different direction. I just want to put out a comparison here. As of now, about 740,000 barrels of oil a day are being tanked into eastern Canada, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, so about 3,800 to 3,900 tankers per year. That's about \$17 billion leaving the Canadian economy, going to foreign oil producers. That would cover about half of our federal deficit. By comparison, the west coast has about 246 tankers per year, about 1.3% of the total commercial vessels going into the west coast.

The Liberal government doesn't seem to have much of an issue with the tanker traffic off the east coast, which is 16 times higher than the tanker traffic off the west coast. I'd like to ask, why is it okay for

Atlantic Canada and Quebec to have crude oil off their waters, but you have a unilateral tanker ban that is going to be blocking the Northern Gateway, and is going to be impacting jobs in B.C., Saskatchewan, and Alberta? Why such a difference of attitude between the west coast tanker traffic and the east coast tanker traffic?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: You're talking about the tanker ban on the west coast, and that falls under the Minister of Transportation.

Mr. John Barlow: It is in your mandate letter to follow through on this.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: He's the lead minister on that. Our officials have been in ongoing discussions, and I'm sure he's going to be bringing something forward for us to have a look at.

Mr. John Barlow: If the Minister for Transport is the lead, I can understand that. It does say in your mandate letter that you will work with the Minister of Transport. What is your view, or what would be your input on this? Is this something you are supporting? Is this something you want to have a more lengthy discussion about?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: My own view on it is irrelevant, because I'm not here as an individual. I'm here as a minister of the Crown. As you're probably aware, there are diverse views on the moratorium, and I'm interested in finding a way forward with Minister Garneau that balances the need. As we heard, B.C. residents are all about the environment, but also look at ways we can grow our economy. We'll be looking at finding that balance.

Mr. John Barlow: If you don't mind, I'm going to jump in.

You talked about growing our economy. The best way to grow our economy is with jobs, and this is going to impact a significant number of jobs in three provinces. In your mandate letter it says you'll work with the Minister of Transport and Natural Resources, with this group of ministers, and you're saying you're not the lead minister. What is going to be your input in this, if anything?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: My understanding is that our officials are sitting down and looking at ways to move forward, where to go, and what we're going to do with it. When they come up with something for us to have a look at, then I'll be having a look at it.

Mr. John Barlow: My concern with this, Minister, is that Northern Gateway was approved. An arbitrary tanker ban is put in, and it's going to block that pipeline. Energy east gets approved by the NEB and goes through. Are we going to have a tanker ban off New Brunswick? Is that the next step?

I hope you will be an active part of these discussions moving forward, as we know how important these things are.

Also, in your mandate letter, you were talking about how important it was for consultation, and I agree. I think that's extremely important. There are about 25 first nations along the route of Northern Gateway that have become equity partners in the pipeline. Were they part of the consultation process when the tanker traffic ban was put in? Do you know?

• (1655)

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I was not aware if they were, but I did meet with those individuals just within the last month, or month and a half.

We've said there will be consultations that take place. Everyone who has concerns will have an opportunity to voice those concerns. I think one of the things we've heard over and over again is that we want to ensure we have a process in place that Canadians have confidence in, through consultations and input from all stakeholders. We're going to be developing a plan that Canadians will have confidence in and be able to get our resources to market.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Finnigan, you have the floor for five minutes.

[English]

Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister, for being here today and showing us the plans ahead.

As you know, I'm from the riding of Miramichi—Grand Lake, where the Miramichi River is world famous for the Atlantic salmon. Recently you accepted the recommendation from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to continue the practice of catch and release as it was implemented for Atlantic salmon recreational fisheries in 2015. Could you explain to the committee how you came to this decision, specifically the scientific research that supports it, and also if you're willing to reassess this decision in the future?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Absolutely. Thank you.

The Atlantic salmon stocks have been steadily declining. I think there has been probably close to a 70% decline since 1971. In 2014, as I'm sure you're aware, some areas, such as the Miramichi River, had the lowest returns on record. Many of the salmon stocks have been assessed as being endangered.

Rebuilding these stocks will require a concerted effort from all stakeholders. Until the science shows us anything different, we'll continue with no retention of Atlantic salmon in the Gulf region. I'm hoping that, with our investment in science in this budget, we'll be able to gather more specific information in order to be able, hopefully, to reassess that decision in the future.

Mr. Pat Finnigan: To continue that thought, some of my constituents are concerned that we don't have good, reliable data. I know that you will be investing \$197 million over five years in scientific research and that some of it will go into the Margaree and the Restigouche and the Miramichi. Can you elaborate on what approach we'll have to getting better data so that we can make better informed decisions?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Over the coming months the department will be focusing on three main areas, one looking at increasing in-

river monitoring of salmon returns on selected rivers, one doing more science on understanding survival at sea, and one working with the Atlantic salmon science community to contribute to effective salmon management and conservation.

I met with the anglers when I was out in New Brunswick. Everyone does science, and everyone wants to help to bring it back. We look forward to working with those groups to try to get the best information we can to move forward.

Mr. Pat Finnigan: Thank you.

The Atlantic salmon was assessed as a special concern. Could you elaborate as to where...? Is the next step to name it a species at risk. Where are we in that scale? What does naming it a "species at risk" mean, if ever it were done, for the anglers on the Miramichi?

• (1700)

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: You have stumped me on that one. I'll ask Trevor to respond to that, please.

Mr. Trevor Swerdfager (Assistant Deputy Minister, Ecosystems and Oceans Science, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): The Atlantic salmon, as you say, is assessed in a number of different ways, depending on where it's found. Think of the Bay of Fundy; think of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. If we see a continued decline in any of the stocks that will move—depending on the way you look at it, sir—up the classification or down, but to a worse status as you move from "special concern" to "threatened" and ultimately to "endangered"... Obviously we hope that's not the trend; the trends do not show that right now.

The reason species are designed as of "special concern" is that they require or demand or deserve special attention so that they're not just one among others. The efforts are targeted much more towards their conservation, return, and science, and so on.

We think, optimistically, that trends are holding; we do not at this point anticipate declines into threatened or endangered status. Obviously Mother Nature has her way, and we'll see, but right now the trends are fairly positive.

Mr. Pat Finnigan: I know we've been negotiating with Greenland on its harvest of salmon. Could you tell us where we are and whether there are going to be further negotiations in the coming year and whether we can get them onto this conservation trend, away from commercial harvests, as we moved to do several years ago?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: This is something that we'll continue to raise with Greenland: to work on trying to come to an agreement on this. We recognize that this is where the salmon go. We'll continue to negotiate with them to try to come up with a plan to deal with this, so that they recognize the concerns and the issue we're facing in Atlantic Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Stetski, for three minutes, please.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: I have a quick follow-up on Mr. Hardie's question about restoring DFO. In 2002 we had four DFO staff in southeastern B.C. The organization chart showed 12, and today we have none. So, absolutely, we would like to see some restoration.

When do you hope to have changes to the Fisheries Act back to Parliament?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: As I said, hopefully, before too long we'll come out with a plan on how we feel would be the best way forward to do that review. It would depend on the consultations that take place and the feedback we get to input into it.

I can't really commit to any time. There's a lot that yet has to happen before a time frame can be nailed down.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: I'd certainly encourage you to make it sooner rather than later because it is an important piece of legislation.

The Cohen recommendations were touched on. When do you hope to have those fully implemented, and will you increase the budget so they can be implemented, if necessary?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: As I stated earlier, I hope to be in B.C. soon to put a little detail on the implementation and progress to date. I think with our reinvestment in science, there'll be some additional resources to help deal with some of the outstanding recommendations as well.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: There are two aspects of the budget that have been reduced. There was a \$30-million drop in aboriginal strategies. I'm wondering how that might impact the ability of first nations to participate in fisheries management.

The second one was that the climate change adaptation program funding expired and wasn't renewed. Given the risk climate change poses to fisheries, why wasn't that funding renewed?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I think both of those programs, to my understanding, were on an annual...and they were sunset. But I think both have been announced in the budget, so they will be reinstated. Marty was saying earlier that they'll come back in supplementary estimates (A) or (B). This is where you'll see that funding getting put back in.

• (1705)

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Will you get a long-term plan in place nationally for derelict and abandoned vessels?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I answered that one earlier by saying that we're working with Transport Canada to identify this.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, I appreciate it.

You'll have a chance again, Mr. Stetski, in just a few moments.

We've exhausted round two. We're going back to round one once more, and we're going to start with Mr. Morrissey.

Go ahead, sir, seven minutes.

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

One of the issues with small craft harbours from the maintenance perspective is the inadequacy of the maintenance budget. I hear that from harbour authorities that have been highly successful in co-managing these facilities.

Could you tell us if there will be any increase—we know the capital side—in the amount of dollars allocated towards the maintenance part of the budgets by regions and zones?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: This doesn't deal with the ongoing maintenance. I know it's a challenge. I've met with many harbour authorities that do express the need to be able to find additional funding for maintenance, but this is strictly a one-time capital investment and not—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Yes, I'm aware, but on maintenance, because I understand that the maintenance allocations have decreased over the past number of years. What's the department's position on that going forward, the amount allocated towards the maintenance?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I know this is something I've had discussions with harbour authorities on.

I'll let Leslie take it from here.

Ms. Leslie MacLean (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): I would just supplement the minister's comments by noting that in terms of ongoing funding, we recognize that, as you note, the fixed allocations have not been increased. We have not received increases to our departmental reference levels to enable us to do that. That is why the increased capital investment that the minister has spoken to is so critically important, because it enables us to go further down the priority list of fix-up projects.

I recognize that it doesn't go to your issue, which is the maintenance costs that harbour authorities have, but it does help us get at fundamental repair and rust-out issues earlier in the cycle, which we believe would help address the maintenance issues.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Yes, it will, because the harbour authorities have been extremely.... They were very opposed when they were introduced, but they have now become a critical part of the management resource.

About the fisheries protection program, what are your views on the adequacy of protection provided to the various species that your department manages, from an enforcement perspective? While we have made great strides in conservation in some particular areas, the fishers will say that the department's efforts in protection are not adequate or keeping pace. You can generalize. I am not looking at specifics.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Are you talking more about the conservation and protection program?

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Yes, that is what I am talking about.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I think we have about 110 or 109 locations across the country carrying out compliance and monitoring to protect fisheries, fish habitat, species at risk, and aquaculture. This work is accomplished through the use of compliance and monitoring tools, including land and sea-based patrols, and aerial surveillance in some areas. Actually, I was invited to go on a surveillance this summer where they do the [*Inaudible—Editor*] and the offshore fisheries out there, out of Iqaluit, intelligence gathering and sometimes investigations. I think we have about 525 front-line fisheries officers, including I think about another 33 officer cadets who will graduate this year. These officers are also supported by approximately 200 contract and aboriginal fisheries guardians. Those are successful programs, both on the east and the west coast.

• (1710)

Mr. Robert Morrissey: You don't have the numbers now, but could I get access to, or could you provide me with how that level compares to, let's say, five years ago or 10 years ago? I know you wouldn't have it now.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: No, but I'll give you a shout and let you know.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: One area that is always difficult to manage, and is certainly controversial—and I would like you to comment as a minister, not as an individual—is the whole area of quota allocation. What is your approach going to be, as the new Minister of Fisheries, in looking at quota allocations, particularly by district and by area? Could you comment on that as the minister?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: That was the second thing that everyone in the industry I met with had in common: they all felt that—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: They would all have an opinion, wouldn't they?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: —they didn't have their fair share of the quota. What I have told them is that we are going to look at stuff based on science and based on going through whatever species it is. There is an advisory committee of stakeholders in that area: for example, for northern shrimp. We will sit down with them and look at how it will be divided up based on the science.

The one thing I have committed to is to ensure that we have a system in place that, one, everyone agrees with—they may not all like it, but they will all agree with it—and, two, has certainty, so it is not going to change. I am not going to go in and change it tomorrow. I think there needs to be the ability for that process to determine what those quotas are, and to be strong and in place, so that it makes it more difficult for someone like me, as the minister, to go in and fiddle with it and change it. These are discussions that I am having, and have been having, with industry on how we can move forward and strengthen that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Strahl, you have the floor.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Returning to the Cohen commission—I guess we're a little British Columbia-heavy on this side, outnumbering Mr. Hardie two to one—I would like to thank your staff, I think at the

public servant level, for responding to my Order Paper question. I have another one in, again on the Cohen commission. I note that, as you've indicated, 31 of the 75 recommendations are under way.

Perhaps the previous government should have done a better job of talking about that, because I think there was the impression that nothing was being done, which obviously was not true.

After the report came out, we had two of the biggest runs of Fraser River sockeye in history. I'm not suggesting that another report is what you need, that another judicial inquiry will bring back the fish, but it certainly was interesting to see that after such a stunning collapse, to have within just a few years a stunning increase—record runs.... It certainly increases the mystery around what happens to these sockeye when they leave the river systems.

I want to go to freshwater fish marketing.

If the polls are correct—which we as politicians know not to trust until all the ballots are counted—the expectation is that there will be a change in government in Manitoba tonight. On this side of the table—perhaps on this half of this side of the table—we're excited about this.

Brian Pallister, the leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Manitoba, has indicated that he intends to withdraw from the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation regime. If he does that, will your department work to quickly wind up that operation? I believe that he would be the last one standing, essentially, as part of that organization.

Maybe you could offer a couple of comments on this.

• (1715)

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I'll have to wait until tomorrow.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Okay.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I think it's premature to respond either way, but the one thing I would say from a departmental perspective is that whatever direction this is going in, the needs of the commercial fishermen must be met, and there needs to be some stability not just in Manitoba, but in Alberta and NWT as well. I think whatever direction goes forward with whatever government, we'll need to ensure that the needs of those commercial fishermen are met.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Okay.

I want to talk about an issue about as far away from British Columbia as we can get. You touched on it—northern shrimp. Last in, first out is, as you know, a policy that came into being under a previous Liberal government and was supported by the previous Conservative government. Of course, we're now seeing that when last in, first out was used last time to reduce quota, people who had entered under those terms were very upset about it. There are now varying positions being put forward by the inshore and the offshore fleet as to who provides more economic value, who has the greater number of jobs for the region. I understand that the science—and there's been no change here, I would argue, and I think officials would back me up on this—has always determined what the total allowable catch is, and so there's no argument to even close area 6 when there are significant reductions in the biomass.

The science can make that determination, but you have to make the determination as to who gets to fish it, if anybody does. I know you've set up a consultation mechanism, but how do you ensure that there's no political interference in that process, when both groups—both the inshore and the offshore—are making compelling cases that you should honour the agreement or that you should look at a new agreement. How are you going to ensure that there's no political interference and that you are making that decision based on the evidence, when the evidence is so contradictory?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: The evidence, as far as the science on biomass, is down. That's not a secret, and you are correct that the inshore and the offshore are polar opposites on last in, first out policy. We made a commitment to review that policy. I've met with them, but the one thing they do have in common is they both want to ensure the sustainability of the stock for the future. It's in both their interests, so they can use that as a building block. They do have something in common.

I assured them it would be set up as a minister's advisory panel. It would be independent, it would be done in an open and transparent manner, and the panel would do its consultations, do its work, and provide me with a report. I'm hoping to have that report by the end of June. No decision is going to be made on any allocation for SFA6 until after that.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you. Before I get to my last question, you mentioned you'd be going to British Columbia and providing an update or perhaps a way forward on Cohen in terms of progress on the recommendations, which had been met already, and were outside of the department's purview perhaps. I'm hoping that can be brought back and given to the clerk, so he can distribute that to us after you've done that work.

While I have you, what is the current status on another issue you have, which is to make a decision on with the Arctic surfclam allocation? I'm wondering if you can provide an update to this committee as to when you expect that review to be complete, and when the decision to proceed or not with an increase in quota will be given to stakeholders.

• (1720)

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: As you all know, I made a decision in December to leave things the way they were for this year, and to look at more science before making a decision whether to allow more entrants into that fishery. This work is under way right now in conjunction with the offshore clam advisory committee. I think

they're meeting next month, some time in May, as part of that process. A science meeting on the Arctic surfclam will be held in June to review the available science information and assess the potential approaches for a spatial management plan for that fishery. Managing fisheries based on robust scientific evidence is a priority for this government, and I won't be making any decisions on new entrants until this work is done.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Stetski, you have the floor.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Have you given the Coast Guard instructions for the date you want to have Kitsilano open and running, and will it be before the busy summer season coming up?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: It will be May 1 for search and rescue, and then the other stuff will continue on. They have to refit the building. That work is going to go on during this year, and the other enhancements will be going on over the next year, year and a half, as well. There will be people on the ground there May 1.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Thank you.

There's some interest in establishing a science public advisory panel at least for the west coast, to better inform decisions moving ahead. Is there some interest? Would you consider that, at least for the west coast, with a science advisory panel for the ministry?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Yes, I know we have a peer-reviewed science process right now where we'll get data, and that has helped us in a number of areas. Whenever we do our science it's shared around with other groups to be able to review and ensure that we got it right. Let's ask Ms. MacLean if she would like to elaborate on that.

Ms. Leslie MacLean: Sure. As the minister noted, we have a peer review challenge process for the science undertaken by the department now, particularly for stock assessments. In terms of an advisory process, the minister spoke earlier to the importance of partnership, with the additional funds that will be coming to the department this year.

I know broad consultation on the priorities for the science, and how best to accomplish them, would be helpful to our organization. We'll be reaching out, not only within DFO and the federal science family, but to academics and institutes. As the minister has also noted, traditional knowledge is an important contributor to the science that's undertaken. We'll be wanting to reach out broadly and make sure we have the best information available to provide advice to the minister.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: It's very important to move ahead with science.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Absolutely.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Can you lay out a little bit how the marine conservation strategy is going to roll out?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: As I said earlier, I'm working with my colleague Minister McKenna, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, on developing a plan to achieve this. We'll hopefully be launching in the next three to four weeks, if not sooner. I can't really say anything until then.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Potentially you'll be out consulting with Canadians, then, over the next year.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Absolutely. As I said earlier, everyone, to my surprise, wants to help us achieve these targets. I assured all the different stakeholders, all the different jurisdictions, that there will be an open, transparent, and consultative process.

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Main estimates show an increase of almost \$291 million related to federal infrastructure. Can you help me out here? What sort of infrastructure projects do you have in mind on the list?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: There will be, as I said, a small craft harbour portion of it. Our Coast Guard vessels, the offshore fishery science vessels, other smaller vessels, and search and rescue vessels are included in it, and also investments to improve our infrastructure and our assets across the country, which will help enhance our ability to achieve our mandate to ensure that we're supporting service delivery and operational requirements.

The Coast Guard over the last number of years has had to make some pretty tough decisions, and I think some of that maintenance has fallen behind. Here, we're looking at doing this investment to make up for some lost time. We have some catching up to do.

• (1725)

Mr. Wayne Stetski: Is it primarily upgrading existing infrastructure?

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: Yes.

The Chair: Well, we have about four minutes left in this meeting and we have four votes to do, so Minister, thank you for joining us today; we appreciate it. To your officials as well—Mr. Muldoon, Mr. Rosser, Ms. MacLean, Ms. Thomas, and Mr. Morel—thank you very much for joining us here today.

We'll quickly move on to our votes—votes concerning, of course, the main estimates, which are mandatory.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4)—

My sincere apologies, Minister, did you want to wrap something up? I overlooked you, I apologize; it's shameful, I know.

Hon. Hunter Tootoo: I just want to say thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members, for your questions. I'd also like to thank my officials, who helped get me ready for this, and my parliamentary secretary Mr. Cormier, who keeps me up to date with what you are doing. I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again; I look forward to it.

Again, thank you for your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Tootoo.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the main estimates 2016-17, votes 1, 5, and 10 under Fisheries and Oceans were referred to this committee on February 23, 2016.

I am now going to proceed with the votes.

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$1,238,519,588

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$809,655,097

Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$65,510,981

(Votes 1, 5, and 10 agreed to on division)

The Chair: Shall I report these main estimates 2016-17 to the House?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: I will do so.

Thank you, committee.

The meeting is adjourned.

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