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Chair

Mr. Rodney Weston

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•(1115)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Rodney Weston (Saint John, CPC)): I call the meeting to order.

This morning we're pleased to have with us the Honourable Gail Shea, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans.

Minister, we appreciate your coming this morning to discuss the events leading up to the European Union ban on Canadian seal products.

At this point, I'm sure you're quite familiar with the proceedings of this committee and the time constraints we are accustomed to. If you have any opening comments, I would ask you to try to confine them to about 10 minutes. We have a timer that will indicate when time is expired. The members have time constraints around asking questions, and answers are within those same constraints. If you hear the beeping sound, I would ask that you please try to wind up your comments in a timely fashion.

Minister, I turn the floor over to you for opening comments. I would also appreciate it if you would introduce those accompanying you.

Hon. Gail Shea (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's a pleasure to be here today. I want to start by introducing the people I have with me here at the table. Claire Dansereau is the deputy minister at DFO; Guy Beaupré is the director general of the international fisheries directorate; Loyola Sullivan is our Ambassador for Fisheries Conservation; and Gilles Gauthier is director general of multilateral trade policy at DFAIT.

I'd like to thank them all for attending today.

Thank you for inviting me to return today. It's always a privilege to appear before the committee on critical fisheries issues that are of importance to coastal Canadians. I must say that I do know from speaking to many of you personally that you have a vested interest in this industry and that you always look out for it.

My department, our government, has taken decisive action in defence of Canadian sealers in light of the European Union's intention to ban the placing on the market of seal products in the European Community. This has been a priority file for me, personally, since taking office as Minister of Fisheries and Oceans. The May 5 vote in favour of banning seal products from markets in the European Community struck a blow to sealers in the north and the south, their families, and our country as a whole. The European

Union's decision is purely politically motivated. The ban is without just cause, and we believe it is contrary to international trade law.

Prime Minister Harper has been clear that the Government of Canada will vigorously defend sealers' access to markets and will take whatever trade action is necessary. Our trade lawyers are carefully reviewing the legislation. However, the text will not be considered final until after the Council of Ministers has voted, which we have been told will not take place until June or this coming fall. We are committed to taking this measure to the World Trade Organization, because we believe this measure is contrary to WTO rules.

Since early 1996, our government has made repeated and unrelenting efforts to impress upon the EU and its member states the value of the Canadian seal hunt. We have voiced our commitment to responsible management of a hunt that prioritizes animal welfare and sustainability. Prime Minister Harper has made numerous interventions with his counterparts in the European Union. Leading up to the vote, our government escalated efforts to counter the proposed ban.

To help illustrate the steps taken by the government, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight the tireless advocacy work of the Ambassador for Fisheries Conservation, Loyola Sullivan, since his appointment in 2007, as well as actions taken by my department since I was appointed minister last November. He is attending with me and can expand on what he's been doing.

I think it's important to note that over the last two years, Ambassador Sullivan has led or participated in several Canadian delegations to Brussels, which is the seat of the European Union, and to all 27 EU member states. He advocated alongside key Canadian representatives, including the premier and federal, provincial, and territorial ministers, as well as other senior officials from Quebec, Nunavut, Newfoundland and Labrador, and the federal government.

These delegations also included representatives of the sealing industry, sealers and processors, and technical experts. All points of view have been included and valued. To date, Ambassador Sullivan has participated in more than 350 meetings with various European ministers and senior government officials and over 45 members of the European Parliament. Under my predecessor, Minister Hearn, and since my appointment as minister, my department has also been working very hard, on many levels, to counter this threat to this sustainable, historic, Canadian industry.

In addition to organizing delegations to Europe, my department partnered with the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade to deliver an advocacy campaign in European member states. We led a public relations campaign and negotiated bilaterally with European governments. I personally led a delegation to Prague for high-level meetings with senior government officials from the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic currently holds the rotating presidency of the European Union, so it was extremely important for us to participate in meetings there. It was one arena in which the Czech Republic could have played a moderating role in negotiations, but they chose politics.

In January, a delegation led by Conservative Senator Fabian Manning, the associate deputy minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and Ambassador Sullivan traveled to Brussels to present Canada's position to the EU Parliament's Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection. In our efforts to get the Canadian position on the record, and to ensure that EU representatives were in possession of the facts, we wrote letters to the chairs of the European parliamentary committees that were examining the proposal. We wrote to the rapporteur and to the shadow rapporteur of the lead committee to register objections to a one-sided and largely fallacious press release published on January 22, 2009.

● (1120)

We invited rapporteurs and shadow rapporteurs to visit Canada. We sent letters to all the member states' ministers of environment.

I personally called the Portuguese minister and other members of the European Parliament to impress upon them the consequences of allowing policy to be driven by the animal rights campaigns.

We visited key European countries and spoke to European parliaments. My officials quite ably responded to technical questions from various EU representatives. We prepared and presented position papers to all members of the European Parliament, and to the environment ministers of the member states.

We responded to questions from members of the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection, and we arranged to have those responses posted publicly on the parliamentary website.

We wrote an article that became the first balanced story on this issue to be published in the European parliamentary magazine, and we made very strong interventions at the North Atlantic Fisheries Ministers' Conference.

Honourable members have raised the issue with their European counterparts in face-to-face meetings, through letters, and by phone.

My esteemed colleagues, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of International Trade, have worked diligently at the

international level to advocate for Canadian sealers. Their departments have also worked extremely hard in support of our efforts.

We intensified our outreach activities this spring, and our government has advertised in various European media. Our philosophy is that we need to be involved in changing the hearts and minds of Europeans and not just European parliamentarians who are getting feedback from their constituents. With this in mind, communication efforts will continue.

As part of our ongoing commitment to adhere to the highest standards of animal welfare, DFO has made amendments to the marine mammal regulations and licence conditions governing the hunt. We consulted seal harvesters and scientists to ensure these changes would provide the best possible outcomes for the industry and the resource.

In addition to these measures, we have enhanced monitoring and enforcement of the hunt. Fishery officers and the Canadian Coast Guard continue to strengthen enforcement measures.

From every angle, my department has led the way in defending the hunt against misinformed accusations and attacks from radical animal rights groups. In all our outreach activities the information provided has been confirmed by independent experts, yet European Union decision-makers have instead favoured the misinformation propagated by radical animal rights groups. The inflammatory publicity campaigns organized by anti-sealing groups have been relentless and supported with seemingly unlimited funds.

I cautioned my European counterparts that they may yet find themselves on the very slippery slope they have begun with this emotion-based, unjustifiable ban. Their short-sighted position will result in serious consequences, notably for other similar hunting activities in the European Union and elsewhere.

Mr. Chair, I have attempted to paint a picture of commitment, of steadfast determination to defend this country's sealing industry. In the last three years we have made every effort possible to counteract destructive publicity in this senseless ban. But to our surprise we also had to counter destructive actions by a member of the Canadian Parliament. Senator Harb's actions, I would suggest, just made the EU's decision that much easier, and that's very unfortunate.

The European Parliament's proposed ban cannot become law until it has been adopted by the Council of the European Union, which represents the member states. Our government is studying the exact wording of the proposed regulation and will take appropriate action.

Our advocacy efforts will continue until we have achieved a reasonable solution that is acceptable to both the European Union and to Canada. We will continue to inform international discussions so that decisions are based on the facts, not on the emotional rhetoric that has clouded this issue for far too long.

Our government recognizes the negative impact this ban could have on sealing communities in Atlantic Canada and in the north, even with a limited exemption for Inuit. And we're going to continue to defend the rights of Canadian seal harvesters to earn a sustainable living. We will continue the dialogue, we will negotiate, and we will exercise our rights to the fullest extent of the law.

Our Conservative government is standing up in defence of Canadian sealers' right to earn a living safely and lawfully, and Mr. Chair, we will continue to do that.

Thank you.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Minister.

Mr. Byrne.

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the minister and to your guests at the table.

Minister, you've raised more often than any anti-sealing activist organization the situation of Senator Mac Harb. In all your presentation you never once mentioned the fact that this Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans unanimously endorsed the seal hunt. You've never acknowledged that we've had a take-note debate where every political party in Canada endorses the seal hunt. You did not acknowledge that just last night we had a motion of concurrence on the standing committee's report, where every political party and every parliamentarian in the House unanimously concurred with our support for the seal hunt. It seems to me that when you say this decision is about pure politics, you're part of the politics.

But sealers in sealing communities are often very frustrated and angered by the hypocrisy of the activists against the hunt, and that seems to be what you suggest drives the politics. Listening to those who promote the misinformation about the hunt for their own financial gain, it's really kind of tough for us to be able to walk in their leather shoes. And we all agree with that. This hypocrisy is nothing new. But we're here to talk about what your government is doing today.

Hypocrisy seems to be part of the strategy, because we've just had a process whereby we've had Canada and the European Union engaged in a basis for discussion on free trade talks at the very point in time when the European Union basically started those talks with an illegal trade activity, the banning of Canadian seal products. It's illegal under the WTO.

What do we do? We walk into those discussions and say we will not let that illegal trade ban pollute or confuse our trade discussions with the EU. It's been pointed out that would be a very serious offence to what would be a big market for Canada, that we'd lose a lot of jobs as a result, and that we shouldn't do that. Why did the EU do it? Why did the EU try to pollute those talks with an illegal trade ban?

Why is it that when you say we've been very vigorous in defence of the seal hunt, the Canadian Sealers Association, the Fur Institute of Canada, and other people involved in this industry, like Dion Dakins, said Canada wasn't even present the day of the vote in the

EU Parliament? They were very, very vocal. Were they politically motivated to do that? Was the Canadian Sealers Association politically motivated to make that criticism of the federal government's presence, or lack thereof, at the EU Parliament?

Minister, what do you have to say about that?

Hon. Gail Shea: I want to thank you very much.

You made a number of comments in there and I will try to answer some of them. This has been a longstanding dispute with Europe, as you know. The sealing issue did not just come up this year, and it's something that has long been a revenue generator, I guess, for the special interest groups who have made it their issue.

When you talked about whether or not we should jeopardize free trade talks or if this should become part of the talks, one of the reasons the WTO exists is to help resolve disputes such as this, and that's where we would go with our complaint. When you talked about a free trade deal with the European Union, I do believe there are many opportunities for Canada, and many opportunities for Newfoundland for a lot of your products to enter the European Union without the high tariffs they currently experience. So I think there are a lot of benefits to both sides, aside from this dispute. That's why the WTO exists, to take care of disputes such as this.

I just want to go back a minute and talk about.... And I don't want to be political about this. I know it was a senator who took it upon himself to, I guess, have his moment of glory and to get his name in the paper, because he didn't support the Canadian seal hunt. But what he did was to have a very aggressive campaign against the Canadian seal hunt. If he had stood up and said, "I don't agree with the Canadian seal hunt", that would have been fine. But he set out specifically to damage the work we had done in support of the Canadian seal hunt. He sent letters to every parliamentarian in Europe. So this was not any help. If I were a European parliamentarian, my reaction would be, well, I guess not everybody in Canada supports the seal hunt; I guess not everybody in the Parliament of Canada supports the seal hunt. So this made it easier for them to do this.

My answer to you is that we weren't there on voting day. As you heard in my opening remarks, we were there many other days. We talked to as many people as we could. The people will tell you privately: this is a political issue, and you guys are absolutely right that you do have a humane seal hunt. Because of the work that was done by the special interest groups in etching that picture of the baby white seal in their mind and somebody clubbing it, their constituents are calling for a ban on the Canadian seal hunt. So the politicians are going to do what their constituents want. Usually that's a good idea. Sometimes it's a good idea to make a decision based on facts, and this is very unfortunate.

•(1130)

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Mr. Chair, while I have the minister here, I will say that the Canadian fishing industry is in absolute crisis. Just last week a call went out to this minister asking her to convene a federal-provincial ministers meeting with fishing stakeholders from Atlantic Canada and Quebec.

Will the minister be conducting that federal-provincial meeting soon? Has she called her counterparts? Can we expect this minister to show the leadership that's required this week to have that meeting?

Hon. Gail Shea: Yes, we did get a copy of the press release and the invitation on Friday, I believe.

I have spoken several times to my counterparts. I have spoken to the minister from Quebec and to the minister from P.E.I. on several occasions. I've spoken to the minister from New Brunswick on a couple of occasions. So we have been in contact.

We will be responding to the letter. And I agree with you 100% that we do have a crisis on our hands, and people are having a very tough time in the fishing industry. It's hit a lot of other industries across the country, and the fishing industry is no different.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Do you believe, as you said in the House, that the European Union-Canada free trade talks are poisoned now as a result of the seal ban by Europe? That's a statement you made in the House of Commons recently, that the seal ban has created a very serious cloud, and I believe the specific word you used was "poisoned".

Do you still believe this today based on your comments at committee today?

Hon. Gail Shea: I don't believe I've ever said that. What I have said is that the government was looking at the seal issue as a separate issue from the free trade agreement.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: I wish you would raise the issue more strongly and forcefully on behalf of Canadian sealers. This seems like a wonderful opportunity to be able to do so.

Mr. Chair, I'll pass the questions over to my colleague, Mr. MacAulay.

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Cardigan, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and welcome, Madam Minister.

I'm certainly fully aware of the problems that are involved in the fishing industry. As far as the seal hunt is concerned, Minister, would you please, on behalf of the sealers, ask the Prime Minister to make this part of the talks? It does not have to destroy them. You indicated in the House that this has to be two different issues. Well, we're talking trade, and the fact of the matter is that the Europeans have started this trade deal with an illegal trade ban.

All I would ask you to do is to please ask the Prime Minister to make sure that he addresses forcefully the issue of the illegal trade ban in his discussions. It seems to me a very strange way to start a trade deal by starting off with a trade ban that is illegal.

Will you, Madam Minister, please ask your Prime Minister to make this a very important issue as far as the trade deal is concerned?

Hon. Gail Shea: Yes, Mr. Chair, I'm sure the Prime Minister understands how very important this issue is to Canada. He has stood up in the House of Commons and defended the Canadian sealing industry. I don't think I need to tell the Prime Minister that this is an important issue.

•(1135)

The Chair: Mr. Andrews.

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for you about going to the World Trade Organization. Two years ago, in 2007, Belgium and the Netherlands also put a ban on Canada's seal products. If the World Trade Organization is such a successful and good organization to go to, why did your government not proceed with World Trade Organization sanctions at that particular time? Now you're saying that the World Trade Organization is going to solve our problems. If that were the case, why wouldn't we have started the process two years ago? This could take five years; we would have been two years into setting some precedents in the EU on trade talks.

Hon. Gail Shea: I want to clarify. I didn't say that the WTO was going to solve our problems, because we know it's not going to solve all our problems.

Since I wasn't around at that time, I want to ask my deputy minister to comment on the reason for not going to the WTO at the time.

Ms. Claire Dansereau (Deputy Minister, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): At the time of those two bans, there was a serious talk about an EU-wide approach to the issue of seals. It was very clear where we had to put our energies; it was in fighting the EU-wide ban. It was also very clear, once that process started, that there was no point in taking the two countries to the WTO, because on the one hand, if you remember, the commission had drafted a directive that included a derogation clause. We would have been forcing the commission then to fight against the derogation clause in order to fight for the full ban, to be on the side of the member state countries. We didn't want that to happen. We needed to wait until there was something actually to fight EU-wide, which is where we are now.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Why couldn't you deal with two of them at the same time, though?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: We would have been forcing the commission to take a position that would have been counter to our benefit. It would not have made any sense to us, because we would have been hardening the road towards a full ban, and there is no point.

I must admit, WTO actions are extremely expensive, and we knew that if something were going to happen at the EU, that's where our energies and our moneys had to be focused, because that would take care of the entire 27 member states, rather than just one or two.

Mr. Scott Andrews: So it was a money issue.

Ms. Claire Dansereau: No, it wasn't a money issue; it was a common sense issue, that the EU-wide ban was where we needed to focus our energies, both in trying to prevent it, into which we put an enormous amount of effort, and now, if it does make its way through the system, to fight it at the WTO.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Dansereau.

You did very well in 50 seconds, Mr. Andrews.

Monsieur Blais.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raynald Blais (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I imagine that you are going to allow all of the political parties to indulge in this delinquency. Thank you very much.

Firstly, I would like to speak for a minute or two about the lobster fishery. I will then aim my questions at the issue that is of concern to us today.

Ms. Shea, given what is happening with the lobster industry, do you not think it would be appropriate to organize in short order — and I would imagine it would be this week — a meeting, a summit, a forum, to which all of the stakeholders in the Atlantic lobster industry could delegate one or more representatives?

As you know, the matter is grave, the situation is extremely difficult. We are talking about the future of a fleet that used to be flourishing, at least in certain areas.

Do you not think it would be appropriate to organize such a summit?

[*English*]

Hon. Gail Shea: I can tell the honourable member that we had a request from all the different fisheries organizations that deal with lobsters on the east coast of Canada. We're going to be responding to the request from the Atlantic lobster industry. They are asking for a meeting to happen as soon as possible. As soon as we can arrange it, that will happen.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raynald Blais: Do you think it would be appropriate to set up this meeting in the very near future, in other words this week?

• (1140)

[*English*]

Hon. Gail Shea: I talked to a couple of my counterparts. I need to talk to a couple more of them. We're trying to have a conference call on this very issue sometime later today. I should know more tomorrow about when we can possibly make this happen.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raynald Blais: Thank you. In the context of the earless seal hunt, I would not like to see us embark upon a witch hunt. An awful lot of people most certainly have criticisms to make with regard to what has been done these last years because, obviously, it has been a failure. But a failure is not an end in itself; one learns from failures. And what I mean by learning from failure is that one realizes that

some things worked relatively well and others not. In the end, European parliamentarians chose demagoguery; so be it, but come on!

Given what has happened, do you agree with me that we must take the time to do a post-mortem of this whole file, of the way this affair played out?

[*English*]

Hon. Gail Shea: Well, we're open to any suggestions, but we know what didn't work. I don't know how we would identify what would work. I certainly had an eye-opener when it came to how much money these special interest groups have at their disposal to carry out these media campaigns. They've been talking about banning the Canadian seal hunt for quite a while. They made it a mission and they've spent millions of dollars on this issue. We always analyze the actions of the department and take note of... What we hoped would have been effective here has not been—I'll admit that—or we wouldn't have this ban today.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raynald Blais: Allow me to point out, in part, what did work. For example, I well remember that when I got involved in this issue, in the beginning, people in Europe were saying that the resource was threatened, that the harp seal was a resource that was on the verge of disappearing. Just last year, there was talk of climate change.

However, thanks to our interventions — those of the members of this Committee —, I note that the abolitionists are no longer saying that this resource is in danger. We have done work together and, fortunately, the seal hunt file is one on which we are unanimous in our action, which is rather rare, especially these days. It has been a success, because this was part of the propaganda campaign: the resource was in danger, it was a massacre and the industry meant nothing to the communities. There is no more talk now about the resource being in danger, at least not as much, even in official statements. That helps; we have moved forward in this area. This means that everything that was done was not in vain. There have been concrete results.

However, as for the idea of a massacre and the economic viability of the communities, we unfortunately must recognize that it has been a failure. This is why I say that it would be appropriate and opportune, just as it is for the lobster fishery, to take the bull by the horns, if I may use that expression, and take the time to do a post-mortem with all of the stakeholders. An action plan might eventually flow from all of that. As you are aware, I have already put forward a few ideas in this regard and I have not finished; there will be more to come. The people who are getting in touch with me these days are providing me with very bright ideas. It is not ideas that are lacking.

What happened in Europe has, so to speak, awakened people. Do you agree with me on the idea of carrying out a post-mortem, in order for an action plan to eventually come out of this? What actions do you plan on taking, as minister of Fisheries and Oceans, in order to ensure that this take place?

• (1145)

[*English*]

Hon. Gail Shea: Thank you very much for the question.

I have to say, the honourable member always has ideas, and we certainly appreciate getting them.

We have to do a post-mortem on what has worked and what hasn't worked. You mentioned specifically the number of seals we have and that our seal population is healthy, that we've done some public media campaigning, and that the notion has disappeared.

Well, I can tell you that the notion hasn't disappeared, because it was still being sent around by personal e-mail in the European Union when I was there. The special interest groups are still spreading that kind of rumour.

One interesting story that I had heard happened back in the 1960s, and it is still being used. It was about the guy from Prince Edward Island who was asked to pay \$300 to torture a seal while the special interest groups filmed it. This issue didn't start yesterday, obviously. It has been ingrained in people's minds for a long time, and it's very unfortunate.

Anyway, what I can say is that we have a plan to go ahead. We're going to continue. There are some people now, the regulation writers, as a result of this vote.... There'll be regulation needed, and there will be the interpretation that will be used to write those regulations. We'll be looking at that to see if there's any way we can have some flexibility for the Canadian seal hunt, and then, of course, we have said we will take this action to the WTO. We know that's a long process, and we have said that to the European Union.

The other thing is the perception out there that the Canadian seals are only hunted for their pelts. More and more Canadian seals are being hunted for other reasons. There are other uses, other opportunities. That is an area that we need to pursue as a government to support the Canadian sealing industry; we need to find other uses and find new markets.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Go ahead, Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Minister, I thank you and your staff for coming today.

I'm going to preface my remarks, because you're here, with four things. I was wondering if it's possible to get briefings or letters on them later.

First, how is the coast guard replenishment of the 12 midshore vessels going along?

Then there is the halibut concern, and the allocation for the recreational and the commercial sector. I had a briefing with Mr. Bevan, which I really appreciated, but can we get something on how that process is going?

Also, once you've had your meeting with the various ministers and stakeholders on the lobsters, is it possible for the committee to get an up-to-date synopsis of where we're going forward on this?

As well, I asked the parliamentary secretary last Friday about the fact that not one fish species has ever been listed under SARA. The great basking shark off the west coast is in extreme peril right now.

I'm just wondering why that fish, for example, would not have been listed under that particular act, but that's for later.

I just wanted to show you something here. This is a beautiful, as they say *en français, chapeau de phoque*, a seal hat. Now, Minister, you're the Minister of Fisheries. Can you or the deputy minister or the ambassador, who's from Newfoundland, tell me by looking at it if it was caught by an Inuit person or a non-aboriginal person?

Hon. Gail Shea: That's a very good point.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Of course not.

They have this exemption for Inuit seal products. If you're walking down the streets of Berlin or Paris or Amsterdam wearing this, no one's going to know the difference, so this ban is going to severely restrict our first nations people. I would hope that when you argue those points, you mention that this has been a traditional way of life for literally thousands of years.

I suppose that when one door closes, another door opens. If the EU is going to shut its doors to seal products, is the government looking at other markets—China, South America, or anywhere else—to promote and enhance seal products? One of the concerns I have is that the Americans, as you know, put in their own ban through the Marine Mammal Protection Act. We negotiated free trade deals with the United States, but we still have the ban. We're negotiating the EU deal right now, and I don't think we're going to be quite successful. As you said, after the deliberate lies by these groups about the seal products, I don't think we're going to be all that successful in getting this through. I'm hopeful, of course, but if we're not, we'll have to look at other markets.

The Ambassador for Fisheries Conservation said something privately to me about wanting to mention a certain process to the committee. Madam, I was hoping you could comment and then allow the ambassador to clarify something that he wanted to bring to the committee as well regarding the seal harvest.

I thank you very much for coming.

• (1150)

Hon. Gail Shea: Thank you.

I just want to mention that when we did go to Prague, we did have a sealer from Iqaluit who came with us. He told the committee in no uncertain terms that if you impose a ban but you have an exemption for the Inuit, it's nothing but an insult to the Inuit. And he was very, very clear about that and very passionate about that.

Anyway, I'll turn the mike over to—

Mr. Peter Stoffer: I just want to let you know that that hat was made by Odette Leblanc of Îles de la Madeleine. That was a little plug for Odette there.

Mr. Loyola Sullivan (Ambassador, Office of the Ambassador for Fisheries Conservation, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I spoke with the honourable member when he raised the issue about the vote in the European Parliament. I responded and said that most people don't understand the dynamics of what's happening in Europe and how this came about, and they think it's Parliament only. That's all I've seen in the media. I've heard it from honourable members. They've raised it in the House of Commons. I've heard it in committees and in public. They have a basically wrong view.

Parliament in Europe is one entity. On September 26, 2006, the elected members of the European Parliament—785 of them who come from all countries, not representing the governments of their own countries, but elected generally—signed a declaration. The 425 members of Parliament who signed said, “We want the bureaucracy of the European Union to give us legislation banning seals.” Parliament was only one entity in this issue.

That's why our focus wasn't on Parliament only. And it wasn't a vote in Parliament that occurred in May that decided this. This was decided before the vote in Parliament. Parliament had never, in that period of time, changed its mind on this issue. They said to me, “You should have been here before September 2006. You should have been here several years ago. Parliament has made up its mind.”

So we focused not only on Parliament. We focused on the member states, because under the European Constitution, and even prior, when the Lisbon Treaty was not even in effect, they'd have more power, the parliamentarians, but the council can veto and they must agree for this to proceed.

So we focused on the 27 member states. Up until February of this year we had a blocking minority within that council. I went to 27 countries, we took scientists with us, we taught them about sustainability, and we told them how the products are marketed, from heart valves to oil capsules, you name it. We gave them all of this. The countries bought in and wanted to assist. There was a blocking minority.

In council there are 355 votes. Actually, out of 345 they must get 255 in favour. The big countries, the main four—U.K., Germany, France, and Italy—have 29 votes, Spain has 27, Poland has 27, right down to Malta, which has 3.

So we went and targeted all these countries to build a blocking minority. They needed to get over 70% of those votes. Up until March, there were 128 that they didn't have. They could only afford to lose 90, and they had 128. They only had 217 out of the 255 they needed.

So we pushed. The working group representing those countries all met. They couldn't get agreement. They met a second time with no agreement. And they still didn't get an agreement, so they passed it on to the next level and said, “We can't get an agreement among the council to get support for this issue”.

Then it went to the COREPER, which is the office of the permanent representatives, the ambassadors of those 27 countries that are stationed in Brussels that are the senior people there, and they tried to deal with it. They tried to get an agreement. There was tremendous pressure from parliamentarians and everybody else to say, “Come on” to those countries, “Let's get on side”. And there were several countries—I could name them—that stood firm, stood tall until the very end. And we needed one more country with 27

votes—there were six of them—to get a blocking minority. That fell short by one large country at the end because of the efforts to drive it through.

I knew Parliament would never save this issue. In 2006 they made up their mind. They said, “Give us the legislation.”

They have elections in June. Parliament must confirm the new commissioners after the elections. They may not be reappointed if Parliament doesn't agree. They didn't want Parliament's advice to be ignored. The commission could have pulled it off the table because the proposal they put forward on July 23 wasn't what they wanted, and therefore that's the element.

So—the final sentence—before the vote, the COREPER, the countries, had already agreed on the wording and this just went through a formality in Parliament, where Parliament all along, three years ago, would have voted the same way. We lost the country battle the week leading up to the vote in May. That's when the countries who were on the fence threw in the towel, and it put them over the hump with their 255 votes. That's the focus on this issue. It almost got there within a couple of weeks, and countries just fell off the train.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sullivan.

Mr. Allen.

Mr. Mike Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, and the officials for being here today. I appreciate that.

I'll focus my questioning on a couple of areas. Number one is where we are, based on what's happened, and maybe more importantly, where do we go? I guess this next vote on the Council of Ministers is going to happen in June or the fall, but basically the European market represents about 30% to 33% of the market.

On the impact of what's happened here, how does that impact...? I understand quite a number of the product gets shipped out and is transshipped through Europe to other markets. Has there been an impact on the product going to other markets, based on this vote?

Is it going to be a matter that nothing will be able to go into the European Union, even if it has to be shipped to another country? I'd like to understand, are there any transshipment issues on this? Based on the vote of 550 to 49 in the Parliament, it suggests to me that it's really not that close. Having run a few elections, I know what it means to be close and not close.

Having said that, I think the misinformation campaign got way out ahead of us. What did we really expect we could have gained up to this point in time, realistically?

Hon. Gail Shea: I want to respond to the transshipment question. At one point in time, we expected that the term “ban of transshipments” would be in the text, but I believe it's not there. Our trade lawyers are looking at the wording of what actually was voted on and should be able to determine that. But at this point in time, we're hopeful that transshipments are excluded.

I will ask the ambassador to respond to the second part of your question about the votes, because there were two critical votes, and I remember a vote that happened before the parliamentary vote. It was a committee vote, and in talking to some of the parliamentarians over there, they led us to believe we were going to do okay in the vote. In talking to them after the vote, to find out what happened, they said that people changed their minds half an hour before the vote. They were astonished.

Mr. Mike Allen: Before Ambassador Sullivan answers the question, is this Council of Ministers' validation simply a rubber stamp, or is there anything we can be doing and should be doing, right now, assuming that this is going to...? Let's assume it's going to happen in June. Is there something we should be doing right now?

Hon. Gail Shea: I will ask the deputy minister to answer that one.

Ms. Claire Dansereau: Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the question.

We cannot at this point determine if it's a rubber stamp. There is a school of thought that says there will be a rubber stamp approach to this and that in fact it won't even be voted on. It will be an annexed item not even up for discussion. There are others who say there is still room to move, so we are analyzing where we may go and what the next step will be. We're a little bit in the same state of mind as we were when we had the last conversation in camera in terms of strategy and how things are changing on a day-to-day basis. It may be worthwhile for us, if possible, to have another in camera discussion on negotiating strategy.

There is also a school of thought that the vote may not happen until the fall. That gives us even further room to move.

There's no simple answer to your question; both options are currently open.

• (1200)

Mr. Mike Allen: Based on the fact that Norway has now come out in support and has clearly indicated it is of the belief that this contravenes the WTO, can you say what kind of help...? It's almost like a motion that comes from the committee. What kind of help does that give us, and can we use those member states? I refer to the comments, the trade in seal products position of the Government of Canada, made by Mr. Beaupré on April 2, 2009, and one of the last things was:

Fourthly, the development of acceptable international standards should be done through dialogue among sealing nations...

What can those sealing nations do to help us make sure this doesn't happen or is in the best interests of Canada?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: We have been working with those sealing nations from the beginning on this, and we have shared information and we have shared our positions. Our position has always been that our nations should be the ones that determine how the seal hunt occurs and what happens with the product.

Norway coming out in support of a WTO action was not a surprise to us because we had been working with them on that, and it's been the position of this government that a ban would result in a WTO action. So we will continue to work with them. If it's possible that the WTO action is done together, we have a WTO person here who could speak to that question. I'm not sure if that's a route to go. It will be a matter of strategy. Again, if there is room for parliamentarians from Canada to go and work with member states between now and when the Council of Ministers votes, that's something for us to look at and for us to debate. If the decisions are signed, sealed, and delivered, and the deal has been struck between the council and the Parliament, then there would be no point in doing that. We're not sure yet where that will lie.

I can let Mr. Gauthier speak about the WTO actions.

Mr. Mike Allen: Yes, please, Mr. Gauthier.

Mr. Gilles Gauthier (Director General, Multilateral Trade Policy, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Thank you, Madame Dansereau.

Essentially, any WTO member can file a complaint against one of its members. In this case it would probably be two separate complaints, one from Canada and one from Norway. Typically the process is merged and one WTO dispute settlement process deals with the two complaints together, but technically they are two separate complaints. The process is merged, so we have one decision affecting the ban, because the ban is the defendant party. The European Union is the only defendant in this particular case. We'll have one decision against the European Union from two separate complaints.

Mr. Mike Allen: Is the market for seal products in Europe primarily Canadian? What constitutes the other market in Europe? Are there other countries that ship seal products into Europe that would have a vested interest in lining up with us to really hammer these guys on these WTO challenges?

A voice: Good question.

Ms. Claire Dansereau: The products are primarily Canadian. The second largest would be Greenland. There's also Namibia, but that's a different story. The people most affected by this, without a shadow of a doubt, are Canadians.

Mr. Mike Allen: Minister, you made a remark in your opening statement about reciprocal actions. You said “seemingly unlimited funds”, and then there could be reciprocal action. Is there a worry—I think I picked that up—from our lobbying and our work that we've done in Europe? Is there any concern by some of the member states that there will be reciprocal action and it will be severe?

Hon. Gail Shea: You're referring to my slippery slope remark. The slippery slope is allowing for special interest groups to dictate what we can and can't do in our own countries, and other countries trying to dictate what Canada can do when it comes to a perfectly legal profession that seal hunters carry out and the impact it could have on other wild hunts. Comments have been made by the same special interest group that is involved in this issue that they are against hunting of all wildlife. That's what I referred to as the slippery slope.

• (1205)

Mr. Mike Allen: The last question is on tradition. This hunt has been a tradition for hundreds and hundreds of years here. The Inuit are going to get an exemption on tradition, and the same methods are used in the hunt. It just seems asinine to me that they're taking this process when it is tradition in all of our communities, whether it be Newfoundland or wherever it happens to be. I just don't understand the logic.

Has there been any discussion on that weird logic?

Hon. Gail Shea: The discussion has been that there is no logic to it. As I said earlier, we did take a sealer with us from Iqaluit to Prague, and he was very clear in his statement that as an Inuit seal hunter he was insulted by these actions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I know the minister has to leave. We'll take a....

Mr. Byrne.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Mr. Chair, I do believe the committee was afforded a gracious opportunity to have the minister here for an hour. We did indeed start late. Could I ask, through you, the minister if she could indeed afford the committee some extra time?

There are some really important issues that need to be dealt with. One, in particular, I'd really like to hear about is some level of commitment from the minister that she will indeed meet with stakeholders from eastern Canada—from Newfoundland and Labrador, from Nova Scotia, from P.E.I., from New Brunswick, and from Quebec—who've asked to meet with the minister on the fisheries crisis.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I'd ask the minister if she could indeed afford the full one hour that she did commit to us. That would be very helpful.

The Chair: I appreciate that, Mr. Byrne. I was just looking at the time. We're about five minutes shy of that full hour, according to my watch, from when we started until this point in time. The minister did inform the committee that she was available for one hour. In the interest of fairness, five minutes does not allow for a full round of questioning around the table here this morning.

I was fairly generous in the amount of time afforded to each party as we went around the table with the minister this morning. Certainly it's entirely up to the minister, but with all due respect, Mr. Byrne, the minister did inform this committee that she would be here for one hour; we're fairly close to that one hour, and we've had the opportunity.

The officials will be here for the second hour for further rounds as we proceed throughout the committee.

Minister, would you like to comment?

Hon. Gail Shea: Yes, if I can just comment, I do have a meeting at 12:15 that I have to attend. I will be talking about the situation in Atlantic Canada, so I'm sure you can appreciate the importance of me being there.

I have said that, yes, I would meet with the stakeholders. I have been meeting with stakeholders since last November, at every opportunity that I have received, and will be meeting with my counterparts. If the member is concerned that this meeting won't happen, we'll do everything we can to make sure it does happen.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will take a short break while the minister leaves and then we'll resume questioning.

• _____ (Pause) _____

•

• (1215)

The Chair: Would members please take their seats? We're ready to resume.

We're ready to begin the second round of questioning, and there will be five minutes allotted per party.

We will start off with Mr. Andrews.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Here are a couple of questions, one for the departmental official and one for the ambassador.

We all know politics and emotion run this debate throughout the world, and in particular in the EU. Leading up to this particular vote in Parliament, the animal rights groups upped the ante in a lot of their advertising campaign through different media outlets—news-papers, etc.

How much paid advertising did the department do in the weeks leading up to the vote?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: We are currently putting all the numbers together, so we can provide you with that information at some point later. There will be paid advertisements, but there's also a significant amount of work that would need to be calculated as well, not simply what we would have paid for the ads. Many articles were written by our scientists, and presentations were made, so our work as a government is not necessarily.... We are not a lobby group, so we did some advertisement, but we did an awful lot of other types of work.

• (1220)

Mr. Scott Andrews: I understand there are two types; there's the earned media you get, but to counteract some of this stuff, you need to put money and resources into paid advertising.

So did you do any at all?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: Yes, we did. We targeted specifically the magazines that are read by parliamentarians, and we ensured that the ads were in at the time of critical votes. We were very strategic in utilizing the funds we had.

Mr. Scott Andrews: So you're getting all that information for the committee?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: Yes.

Mr. Scott Andrews: Okay.

This is a question to the ambassador. He explained to us that we shouldn't have focused on the Parliament vote—or not “focused on”, but that it wasn't as important as this other vote, for which we had, I think you said, up until the beginning of this year enough blocking votes on that body. Was it this year?

If we had them until a certain point, what happened? Why did we lose them? I'm just trying to get my head around the issue you brought up a little earlier.

Mr. Loyola Sullivan: Sure.

Mr. Chairman, what I indicated is not that we shouldn't focus on Parliament only...we still focused on Parliament, and we carried out active engagement there with a whole host of meetings. But Parliament made up their mind and voted, basically signed the declaration of 2006 and said to the bureaucrats, “We've made up our minds; give us the legislation.” They only wanted the legislation to approve it. They had already gone so far down the road that, as one guy said in meetings, “You needed to be here before 2006.”

We saw that. When I got involved in this file in March 2007, about six months after the declaration, we had to look at whom to focus on and where to go. We saw there was going to be a tough slog with parliamentarians. They're up for re-election; they're driven by these groups. We had to look at how we could stop this process.

There were two avenues. One was via the commission that put forth the proposal on July 23, 2008. They had the power to pull it off the table if it was not satisfactory to them. Parliament went way beyond what they had put forward. They said there should be a derogation, based on their WTO, their opinions, and because Food Safety Authority experts said seals can be killed humanely. They didn't really like their moving that far on the proposal, but they didn't pull it off the table.

Why wouldn't the commission pull it off the table? They had the power to do it; it was unlikely, maybe because Parliament stamps the president of the commission—they have to approve the commissioners, and so on. There are ways to get back. If they disregarded the advice of Parliament, there are avenues by which they can get back at the commission.

And the third group is the council, the group I referenced with those numbers. All of those countries have 345 votes. You need 255, what's called a “qualified majority”, for them to approve it. Three things constitute that qualified majority: they must have 14 out of 27 countries supporting it; the countries supporting it must represent 62% of the population of the European Union; and they must have 255 votes.

Mr. Scott Andrews: You said we had enough of those votes to block that?

Mr. Loyola Sullivan: No. What I said is that up until February... they go into their own private meetings, just like a cabinet. They go into their private meetings, the 27 countries in a working group, and they meet behind closed doors. There's no public record of what goes on, except what we hear from various sources. But we do know that after it met a number of times, the working group said, “We cannot

get an agreement. We can't get the numbers we want”. So they basically passed it on to the next highest level, the highest level of those countries in Europe, at the COREPER level. That's their council of permanent representatives there, generally represented by an ambassador. They then meet, and they met on this issue, and they tried to get an agreement among themselves, the 27 countries.

From the unofficial reports we get on these meetings, as there is no official public reporting on what goes on behind closed doors, we knew they had problems getting this total. We do know there are a significant number of countries, enough to block it; and it's estimated by our count they didn't have 128 votes, and they can only afford to lose 90.

In March, and as it went on into April, they came together, and there were tremendous pressures to support it. You have the Nordic countries who are against the ban. You have some others against it. We went to every one of these and spoke to them, from the deputy prime minister to the minister, and said, there are no grounds to advance this; lobby hard on this.

But when it came to the final push, what lost it? When it came to the final push, in my view, what lost it was the tremendous pressure exerted by the European public. In Germany, while their departments of economics and justice, and others, might tell you it might be contrary to EU law, the elements in Germany driving this issue—the public—and the public driving it in Italy, France, and the U.K., drove those governments to make the decision that Europeans wanted, based on their desire to do it, while forgetting the legal arguments. They forgot the principal legal arguments on sustainability, and they made a political decision then, and a few fell off the fence, because the countries there would say, “It's an issue that means nothing to us, as we don't have seals. Basically, if there's a hill to die on, it's going to be over our own issue, not over somebody else's, like Canada's.”

That, in my view, is where it fell down at the eleventh hour from tremendous pressure.

•(1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sullivan.

Monsieur Lévesque.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Lévesque (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Dansereau, gentlemen, thank you for being here with us.

Given the decision and the way in which things went, I believe it would be very difficult to get the European Union to change its position. If we challenge the decision at the WTO, how much time will it take before we get a final outcome?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: Thank you,

With regard to WTO issues, we have here an expert who will be able to provide you with a much more detailed answer than mine would be. I do however know that these processes are very lengthy at the WTO. This could take years.

It is clear that we will have to continue working in order to find new markets. Everything is dependent upon the final text and interpretation of the clause and the directive. I will let the expert, Mr. Gauthier, answer your question.

Mr. Gilles Gauthier: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The first process involves a special group. Indeed, once the measure has been officially adopted, a special group or panel will be established. Six to nine months will pass before an initial decision is made. The parties to the dispute will then be able to appeal the decision before the Appellate Body.

The rendering of a decision might take between six to nine months. This is a final decision. Then comes an implementation period. Depending upon the result, countries may ask for up to one or two years to implement the Appellate Body's recommendations.

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: In other words...

Mr. Gilles Gauthier: You can easily count on two years.

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: In other words, the Europeans seem to have been inspired by the Americans' behaviour during the softwood lumber crisis.

Is the Department considering measures to facilitate the development of the domestic market for seal products?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: It is going to be very important to work in concert with the industry. To date, however, the industry has given us no indications of what it plans on doing in terms of market development. Our role, that of the Department and of the government, is to do all we can to ensure that the doors are open in this regard. It is not up to us to develop the market ourselves.

The people in the industry must do this work, but if they suggest ideas to us, we will most certainly work with them in this area. Whatever the case, I cannot answer, given that the industry people have never put questions to me on this. Obviously, we devoted all of our attention to the European Union and to the need to keep the market open.

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: Could your department propose to the government that it use seal products in the context of certain activities? A small gift, for example a hat similar to the one Mr. Blais is wearing, might be presented to a foreign official, prime minister or minister who is here on a visit.

Ms. Claire Dansereau: We did not explore that idea.

Mr. Yvon Lévesque: If I have any time left, I would like to give it to Raynald.

• (1230)

Mr. Raynald Blais: Mr. Sullivan, I hope you will not be upset at my not putting any questions to you. We have but 60 seconds left.

Ms. Dansereau, are you aware of the death threats that some sealers received as well as of the threats that even targeted some European parliamentarians? I do not know if the latter were death threats, but they were threatened with not being reelected on June 4.

Are you aware of the tactics of our adversaries, the abolitionists, with regard to these threats?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: I have no information whatsoever with regard to death threats. As for the rest, we take all of this very seriously. I am aware that some parliamentarians received or believe they received threats with regard to their reelection. That is clear. It was a very open campaign. As for criminal threats, I have no information in that regard.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Stoffer.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Just as a little sidebar here, the other day Minister Ritz, the Minister of Agriculture, along with the pork producers had a pork day on the Hill—I thought it was extremely successful—because of the concerns about the H1N1 virus. They basically wanted to say that pork was healthy, tasty, and was very good. The problem was that they ran out.

In order to promote the lobster industry within Canada.... I asked a lot of people when the last time was that they had bought a lobster, and they don't. I just throw this out as a sidebar before I get into my question on seals: have you thought of maybe buying 2,000 lobsters from the riding of Sackville—Eastern Shore in Nova Scotia, arranging for all the lobsters and bringing them up? Cut them up and we could serve them to all those people on the Hill, just to say that maybe they could consider buying lobster in the future. That may just promote something on the Hill and promote to the city of Ottawa the quality of lobsters we have and show that it's a tasty item to choose. Maybe you could promote the industry in that way. I just leave that with you.

Here is my question for my colleague on the WTO side. We weren't successful in getting the United States to lift the ban on the Marine Mammal Protection Act, even though we negotiated trade deals with them—NAFTA, free trade, and everything else. My concern is, as the trade talks go on with the EU—and maybe this is a question more for Stockwell Day, but I want to reiterate the importance of this. My feeling is that we'll go along. The major industries, such as pharmaceuticals, forestry, agriculture, etc., want this deal with the EU. We have this little hindrance on seals...“Well, if we don't win it, no big deal.” That's about how I feel, that the government may end up being resigned to the fact that we didn't win the seal argument and we're going to proceed with these trade talks anyway.

In your experience, am I fearful over nothing, or am I correct in this? When I talked to some sealers out of Labrador the other day, they were very concerned about these EU talks and afraid that they may be left out of the equation altogether; that although Canada may pound its fists and say that what the EU has done is wrong, at the end of the day we're just blowing sand.

Ms. Claire Dansereau: As the minister said, the two issues are somewhat separate. Even in a perfect world, with a perfect free trade agreement, there will be disputes and disputes will continue. And the place to resolve the disputes is at the WTO.

The timing is a little bit strange that these things are happening at the same time, but it could have happened at any time and the result would have been the same.

The trade talks will continue. The trade talks are of benefit to Canada. This seal issue is one that we, as a department, focused a lot of our energy on, and we will take it wherever we have to take it to keep on fighting it. So we will not give up, as the minister said, nor will the government give up on its talks on the free trade agreement.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Have the EU ambassadors in Ottawa been called in to the Prime Minister's Office to explain their countries' actions?

Mr. Loyola Sullivan: I can't say if they were called in to the Prime Minister's Office, to be honest with you. But I do know an intervention was made through DFAIT. And I do know that in January I wrote every single one of the 27 representatives here in Ottawa, as well as Switzerland, which is outside the EU. I visited many of them and met with them, some on more than one occasion, over the past year, also on this issue.

•(1235)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kamp.

Mr. Randy Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me start with what I hope will be a brief answer from Ambassador Sullivan.

Mr. Loyola Sullivan: My last one was.

Mr. Randy Kamp: Yes, you're doing very well, I should say. Then I'll have a question for the deputy and/or Mr. Beaupré.

In your work, Ambassador Sullivan—and we appreciate the detail you've provided for us on all the meetings you've had, and especially as it led up to the final vote—did you notice any impact or effect that a Canadian parliamentarian who was working against the rest of us on this issue and was active on it publicly here in Canada, but we understand was also contacting European parliamentarians...? In fact, he put it in the form of wanting the European Parliament to do the work the Canadian Parliament should have done in terms of banning the seal hunt.

I hope he had no effect, but did you notice anything in the meetings you had and the people you talked to?

Mr. Loyola Sullivan: The senator came out a little late in the process. I heard, through my meetings in Europe over the past year, that the Canadian public doesn't support this and that animal rights groups have spread all that information anyway.

It hurts when anybody, particularly anybody of high profile, mentions it. They use that as ammunition. Did it impact the results? I've said that Parliament made up its mind three years ago, so I don't think you could say it would affect the parliamentarians because it

was done with them. Did it affect the countries? I don't know. I can't tell you the impact that countries might have had on this process. I really think an accumulation of factors advanced this issue, and Parliament had been pushing to get it done and pushing those countries.

Everything contrary harms the situation, but to a degree. I wouldn't be able to objectively say it affected the final result. No, I don't think it would be fair for me to draw that conclusion.

Mr. Randy Kamp: Okay, thank you for that. I appreciate that.

It doesn't seem very long ago, Deputy and Mr. Beaupré, that we were really hoping and thinking we might end up with a situation where there would be a vote, but there would be some kind of derogation or exemption with a certification scheme, whereby products that came in from countries that could demonstrate that the hunt was done in a humane and sustainable way would be exempt from any import ban. It doesn't seem very long ago that this was our hope, that we would end up there. And we didn't end up there, obviously.

Can you tell us some of the process as it went on and why we didn't end up there?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As we were saying a few months ago, we lived in hope, because we felt that with hard work we should always have hope. We also knew, though, that we had a very tough road to climb. I think I said when we had our in camera session that we had been warned we would not know the outcome of our hard work until the very last minute of the very last vote.

As you heard the ambassador say, positions changed. The world is very fluid, depending on a whole series of other interactions and exchanges that were happening between parliamentarians, exchanges and interactions over which Canada has absolutely no influence and in which it is not a player. People would be trading off the seal issue in order to get something else, so deals were struck that we know nothing about, that we're not party to.

I think I may say, and the minister has certainly said, that the election in June of all parliamentarians has had an impact on this. Had we been able to have a vote post-June, there might have been a different outcome.

I heard a few parliamentarians on the radio after the vote speaking about the very real political impact and the threats that were made to them about their political careers if they didn't take a certain position. It is because all of that was thrown into the mix, and because Canada is not a member of the EU and therefore had nothing really to trade at that point, I think, that we ended up where we are.

•(1240)

The Chair: Mr. Byrne.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It was reported in the House of Commons by the minister of unemployment that an income support program was being developed and would be announced very soon for fishers who were affected by severe ice conditions on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, the Northern Peninsula, and Labrador in particular. The minister of unemployment said they were collaborating with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans on this program, and that the support of that department was vital to this.

I've raised the matter several times in the House of Commons, and the government itself has always said: talk to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans; they're the stumbling block here.

What can you report to us, Deputy Minister, about the status of those discussions between Service Canada or HRSDC and Fisheries and Oceans? Was the minister, when she made that commitment on behalf of the government, reporting correctly to Parliament what the circumstances were? And what's the role that Fisheries and Oceans can play?

But most importantly, to support our sealers—because that's who these fishermen are who are affected by these conditions—in getting some income support quickly, what can you tell us about that particular income support program?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: I know that we had an income support program two years ago because of unusual circumstances. I know we verify ice conditions every day, and so far I can say that the ice conditions are not having a negative impact on fishers, so the ice is not a factor.

I definitely cannot speak on behalf of the minister and what she may or may not have said in the House of Commons. Where those discussions would be warranted, we will have them, but so far, the ice conditions do not warrant our having those discussions.

When we did have such a program, in 2007, the conditions were very different.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: We need to be very clear about this. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans, which was reported by the minister of unemployment as having a central role in this particular income support program.... You're indicating that there is no problem of ice on the northeast coast and there are no discussions taking place between HRSDC and Fisheries and Oceans anymore on this, because you have said you do not support an income support program—or at least you said there is no problem to resolve and therefore there is nothing for us to talk about.

Ms. Claire Dansereau: I am told at the moment that there is a price issue, but not an ice issue.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: So there is no discussion occurring between HRSDC and Fisheries and Oceans on providing an income support program, and there never has been?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: There are no discussions in the abstract, not that I know of, no.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: What you're saying is that the minister, then, who said there are discussions occurring.... Minister Diane Finley said there are discussions occurring between her department and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. She reported that in the House. Did the minister mislead the House?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: I'm sorry, but I cannot speak on behalf of the minister. I can say that there would be discussions when there are ice condition issues. There will be discussions. There have been discussions in the past and there will be discussions in the future. There may be discussions on any given day regarding the state of the ice. At the moment the ice is not a problem.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Is it the case that the ice has not been a problem for the last six weeks, according to the professional opinion of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: I will get back to you with more specifics on that, but my understanding is that the ice at the moment has not been the problem. However, the price has been a problem.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: This is quite a revelation for the fishers who are affected on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, those in the Northern Peninsula and Labrador, because it was very clearly stated to them through the minister, Diane Finley, that there was an acknowledgement by her department and her government that there was a problem and that discussions were under way with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. That was reported to the House of Commons on April 22, 2009, and it was reported that a program would be announced shortly. This is very serious, Madam Deputy Minister.

Ms. Claire Dansereau: Mr. Chair, it's possible that I don't have all the information. I'm more than happy to go back and do some further research to ensure that we provide all the information possible.

• (1245)

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay: The P.E.I. Fishermen's Association has presented the government and the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans with an EI proposal. Looking at the situation and the catches in certain areas in Prince Edward Island and Atlantic Canada, have you seen this proposal, and do you support this EI proposal, which would allow fishermen in Atlantic Canada, specifically on the south side of Prince Edward Island, to receive employment insurance?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have seen the proposal and I have had discussions myself with the PEIFA. As this committee may know, I was there last week to look at a variety of options, and we are currently analyzing all the information we have. I can't say whether or not I would support that option or another option. As you also heard the minister say, she is working very hard to determine what the right course of action will be.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Monsieur Blais.

[Translation]

Mr. Raynald Blais: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

With regard to the seal hunt, when Prime Minister Stephen Harper was in Europe, he made some statements to the effect that he was going to continue to vigorously defend this issue. He also committed himself to providing assistance to those communities affected. I was wondering if the department had already prepared a plan in order for us to be able, eventually, to assist those communities affected by the embargo or the ban on seal products.

We know full well that there will be an impact, the severity of which has yet to be determined. In that sense, these communities will be affected with regard to the markets, etc. Have you reflected upon this issue?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: Mr. Chairman, we know that there will be an impact if we are not successful in opening up any of these markets. However, the impact is really difficult to determine as long as we do not have the answer with regard to the interpretation relating to the transportation of seal products via Europe. We therefore do not know precisely what the impact will be.

We must develop other markets, other transportation routes, etc. It is therefore impossible, at present, to determine exactly what the impact will be. We therefore are unable to speak about what might be done to assist the fishers or hunters.

However, the government of Canada does have programs, within the development agencies, that might assist in these cases, and we will see what the needs are when we have more information.

Mr. Raynald Blais: My question for you and for your department is the following: what is the “game plan” as of now?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: First of all, we must obtain the precise details of the directive, its interpretation and the impact of the decision. We are also trying to determine where we might be able to find other markets, in other words which markets we could attempt to open up to our sealers. We will be able to see from year to year what we are able to do to help them.

Mr. Raynald Blais: Are you of the view that the key to success is, in the end, to convince people in general? Which leads me to my question: is there a “game plan” to reach out to the general population and to convince people that the hunt is sustainable, humane, that it has economic value and that the species is not threatened?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: Forgive me, but could I ask a question? Are you talking about the European population?

Mr. Raynald Blais: Yes.

Ms. Claire Dansereau: For the time being, that is not in our plans, because it is obvious to me that the door is quite closed. We will therefore see if there are any openings. Given the research on heart valves and omega 3s, we believe that there could be other openings, but this will happen slowly. If we develop markets elsewhere, the Europeans themselves might start demanding these products.

When we went to Europe, the minister, the ambassador and myself, we asked repeatedly why Europeans were not being allowed to choose to purchase or not purchase seal products. If the Europeans are not interested in these products, they will not buy them. The answer they gave us was that the European Union had to protect consumers against these products. That, we did not understand.

Therefore, perhaps by demonstrating that these products are of great value in other markets, the Europeans will start demanding them themselves.

• (1250)

Mr. Raynald Blais: Do you plan on helping the industry with regard to the larger remaining markets, namely the Asian market?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: Allow me to put a question to you: you talk about helping, but in what way?

Mr. Raynald Blais: Given what is happening, the abolitionists will clearly not stop there. They will pursue their action and plan new stunts. If they were unable to carry them out in Europe, they will do so in Asia.

Ms. Claire Dansereau: Mr. Chairman, yes, absolutely, we intend to protect these markets and to keep them open. We will do everything we are able to to this end.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Van Kesteren.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren (Chatham-Kent—Essex, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for appearing with us this morning.

As is often the case, we've heard excellent testimony, and you must be somewhat frustrated when we're looking for answers and asking what you have done and what you could have done that wasn't possibly done. I suppose we all sometimes are guilty of being armchair quarterback. As I'm listening to testimony—and I think it's very evident that this is a very complicated file, and it must have been very difficult for you to move through, especially when you don't know what's going on behind the scenes—my question would be: do you see a helpful role that this committee could play, possibly within the next few weeks, whereby we might be able to move this file forward?

I guess I'm opening it up and giving you an opportunity to come back and say, here's what you can do to help us. If either one of you could answer that question, I'd be appreciative.

Ms. Claire Dansereau: Thank you for the question and thank you for the offer. It's a kind offer, and I know the minister has an interest in working with the committee and making sure that the committee has a role to play in this file.

We don't know exactly at the moment where the Council of Ministers will land on this, and we don't know how rapidly they intend to move. If in fact they've already made up their minds, and this will simply be an annex to an agenda, which they won't even speak to, then there will be very little role for anyone to play, even us.

If that is not the case, and if it's a longer period of consultation, then I could certainly see a role for members of this committee to participate in the discussion, either through letter writing or through interactions with member states. As the ambassador said, this would not be interventions with the European Parliament, because that work is done, but there might be a role—and I say this without knowing definitely—for interactions with some of the member states. But we would have to work through whether or not that would be a good expenditure of funds and time and resources and everything else.

If their mind is not made up, then, yes, I would say that there's... and the minister would certainly be supportive of that.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: Mr. Sullivan.

Mr. Loyola Sullivan: I agree with the comments by the deputy. I would also add that I think, and I've said it to the committee before, that we all have a role to play in educating the Canadian public. Independent polling shows that the majority of Canadians in recent polls didn't support this issue. It's difficult to sell it to Europeans in 23 languages in 27 different countries. How do you reach out to people in their living rooms in 23 languages? It would cost hundreds of millions of dollars in advertising for an industry that imports, most recently, two to three million dollars' worth into Europe.

I think we need to keep getting the message out that it's sustainable and humane. We need to be pushing those messages continuously. And we need to be doing that with Canadians, because I've often heard abroad—and they cite polls and statistics—that Canadians don't support this issue either. Why do you expect Europeans to keep the doors open when Canadians don't support it? It's tough to hear that in another country. Anything we can do on a broader scale to educate.... It's a tough sell.

• (1255)

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: Finally, my riding is in southwestern Ontario. You might be asking what a southwestern Ontario boy is doing in a fisheries committee. Well, we have the largest freshwater fishing port in the world. I just put that plug in for interest's sake.

However, I want to tell you that we also have the largest collection of greenhouses. What makes that unique is that these people have recognized that there is a huge population—200 million people—within 24 hours. I'm leaving that to suggest that although at this point we may have lost the European market, can we expand the Asian market?

Are we moving towards it? There could be a vast...we're talking about 1.3 billion people in China alone. Are we missing something there that we could exploit and grow, to compensate for what we've lost?

Ms. Claire Dansereau: Yes, we agree that the Asian market is very important to us now. In fact, the transshipment through Europe was tied to the Asian market in some way. We need to make sure that we keep that transshipment open.

We also know that, as the question was posed before, the animal rights activists will be working to close those markets. So we will be working to keep the markets open.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to thank the officials for taking time today to be with the committee to discuss this very important issue.

At this time, I would like to let the committee know that I haven't scheduled a meeting for Thursday. Because of the importance of the lobster report, I would like to give François time to prepare that report. We'll reconvene our committee immediately after the break week, and we'll have that report to go over at that time.

Mr. Byrne.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: In light of the escalating crisis in the fishery, I would ask that as a committee we ask the executive directors and presidents of the various fisheries organizations who have asked for meetings with the federal minister and their provincial counterparts—that would be the FFAW in Newfoundland and Labrador, the MFU in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, the P.E.I. Fishermen's Association in P.E.I., and le Regroupement des pêcheurs professionnels du sud de la Gaspésie of Quebec—to appear before the committee and to outline their concerns to us. That may help them, because it may also provide them with a grouping that could help convene a meeting with their ministerial counterparts. This would be a constructive use of our time as a fisheries and oceans committee, given the nature of the crisis of the fishery today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Byrne. I appreciate what you're saying. I'm not sure we can tap into their availability on such short notice. We'd be talking about Thursday.

I was focusing on what the committee has identified as a priority, based on our last meeting. We talked about the timeframes we're working within while trying to meet those timeframes and have a report we can all agree upon and table in the House before the House rises for the summer. That's why I was trying to give our analyst as much time as possible to do that work, and that was the interest I laid before you when we talked about this.

I have no issue with this. If it is the wish of the committee, I'll ask the clerk to contact those organizations to try to bring them in and give them the opportunity to air their concerns.

Would it be the wish of the committee to move in that direction?

Hon. Gerry Byrne: It sounds like a good use of our time.

The Chair: I appreciate your comments, Mr. Byrne. I'm asking the rest of the committee.

We'll go to Monsieur Blais.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raynald Blais: With regard to the people to get in touch with, and for the information of our Clerk, I would like us to add to the list the people we met in the Magdalen Islands, because the director general of the association is also the president of the Alliance des pêcheurs professionnels du Québec. It would therefore be worthwhile for us to also invite Mr. Léonard Poirier, as well as Mr. O'Neil Cloutier from the Regroupement des pêcheurs professionnels du Sud de la Gaspésie.

• (1300)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Monsieur Blais.

Go ahead, Mr. Byrne.

Hon. Gerry Byrne: Mr. Chair, just so we're clear, if indeed there are some organizations that cannot be represented, I don't think this should be an all-or-nothing experience if some organizations, because of the time, cannot make it to this particular meeting. I believe it's fair to say that the organizations are of common mind on this. So even if we can only get three of the five or three of the six, I still think it would be an extremely valuable thing for the committee to hear their points of view at this point in time.

The Chair: Understood. It's quite an extensive list of organizations, and for us to contact that number of organizations.... If the committee had the expectation that it was all or nothing, I wasn't taking that from the comments at all. We would like to have representation from these organizations. A lot of the concerns are going to be similar in nature. What I would do is ask the clerk to contact these organizations and try to have representation here for our meeting on Thursday. We will certainly proceed in that manner.

Is there any other further business you want to raise here today?

Go ahead, Mr. Kamp.

Mr. Randy Kamp: I didn't think we were on committee business, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Sorry, actually we weren't. We moved on Mr. Byrne's point of order, and I guess his point of order was to take us into committee business.

Go ahead, Monsieur Blais.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raynald Blais: I understand the importance of this issue, but this is not what I wish to discuss. I believe that two days will perhaps not be sufficient to have come here representatives from Newfoundland and Labrador and the Gaspé Peninsula and the Magdalen Islands. We therefore might be able to plan on holding the meeting Thursday, if possible, and if not, next Tuesday.

[*English*]

The Chair: Next week is the break of the House.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raynald Blais: You are right.

[*English*]

The Chair: We will not be here on the Tuesday.

I appreciate your comments, Monsieur Blais.

So we'll leave it with the clerk to make the necessary arrangements.

Once again, thank you, on behalf of the committee, for appearing today.

The meeting is adjourned.

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