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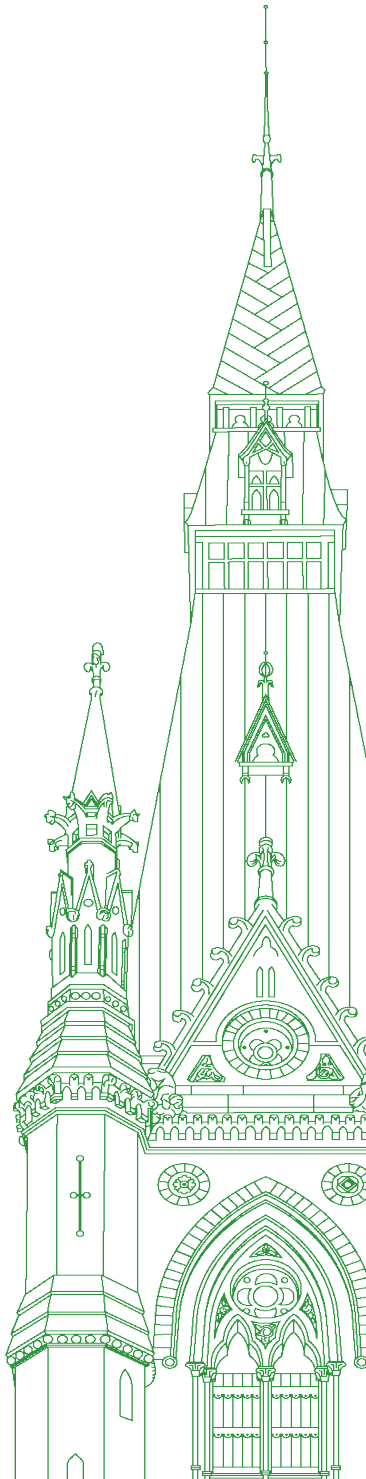

Chair: Mr. Ken McDonald

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Monday, December 7, 2020

● (1535)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Ken McDonald (Avalon, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 13 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, October 19, 2020, the committee is commencing its study of the state of the Pacific salmon for the first hour. The second hour will take place in camera for drafting instructions for a report.

Today's meeting, of course, is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of September 23, 2020. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. Just so you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee. To ensure an orderly meeting, I will outline a few rules to follow.

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of “floor”, “English”, or “French”. Members participating in person will proceed as they normally would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room. Keep in mind the directives from the Board of Internal Economy regarding masking and health protocols.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute your mike. Those of you in the room, your microphone will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer.

I will remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. When you are not speaking, your mike must be on mute.

With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members whether they are participating virtually or in person.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses.

From the BC Salmon Farmers Association, we have Mr. John Paul Fraser, executive director. From the Canadian Fishing Company, we have Phil Young, vice-president, fisheries and corporate affairs. From the Sport Fishing Institute of British Columbia, we have Mr. Owen Bird, executive director.

We will now proceed with opening remarks.

Mr. Fraser, we'll go to you for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. John Paul Fraser (Executive Director, BC Salmon Farmers Association): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to address your committee today.

I want to make three points. The first is that B.C. salmon farmers are a significant economic driver to the agrifood sector in Canada. We are B.C.'s number one seafood and agrifood exporter with a total economic output of $1.6 billion. We produce 87,000 metric tons of farmed salmon annually, and that creates about 353 million healthy, carbon-friendly meals.

Salmon farming currently supports over 6,500 full-time jobs in B.C., which typically pay about 30% higher than the median wage. Many of these jobs are in rural, coastal indigenous and non-indigenous communities on northern Vancouver Island.

Over 80% of the salmon in B.C. is harvested in agreement with B.C. first nations. Twenty first nations now hold an official partnership agreement with B.C. salmon farming companies. Over the next 30 years, our members project that more than 50 additional agreements will be established.

The second point I want to make is that salmon farming represents a significant component of Canada's food security. Being designated as an essential service in the early days of the pandemic has allowed B.C. salmon farmers to help many local businesses ride out the adverse economic impacts. Companies have been able to keep much, not all, of their existing staff and in some cases have even hired additional staff to help manage through the crisis. By continuing their operations, B.C. salmon farmers have helped to cushion the negative impacts of the pandemic for about 1,700 local vendors in services like fish processing, transportation, technology, boat operations, restaurants, hotels, and other businesses.

Since the pandemic, donations of canned farmed salmon to local, regional and national food banks have exceeded 112,000 pounds of fish. We've been able to provide over 500,000 meals to Canadians in this time of need.

We're ready to do more. Our plan is to support B.C.'s economic recovery, which we have detailed in great detail on our website, so I encourage everyone, if they have the time, to check that out.

The third point is that the salmon farming industry is doing our part for wild salmon through improved management and innovation. We operate in one of the most stringently regulated and transparent food processing industries right now in the world. We adhere to a complex set of regulatory standards administered through the federal and provincial governments.

We've been recognized for environmental responsibility. Our industry operates in a manner that's fully compatible with federal and provincial commitments to environmental sustainability. In fact, B.C. salmon farming has a smaller carbon footprint than any other animal protein producing industry. The largest potential carbon reduction gains for food production lie in the sustainable expansion of marine aquaculture.

Since our beginnings on this coast, we have followed an ongoing orderly transition toward greater environmental stewardship by implementing cutting-edge technologies and innovations in the marine environment and on land that support the health of wild Pacific salmon.

Our sector is science-driven in every facet of our operations. Collaborative research is paramount in assessing the health of wild Pacific salmon populations in B.C. and their interaction with salmon farms.

At least 10 formal review processes and multiple scientific investigations have concluded that B.C. salmon farms pose minimal risk to wild Pacific salmon populations. This fact was confirmed once again in a Fisheries and Oceans news release in September. The release reported the results of nine recent scientific studies completed by the Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat on the impact of our operations on the health of Pacific salmon in the Discovery Islands.

Scientific integrity and transparency are important in advancing the dialogue and dispelling the uncertainties around wild and farmed salmon interactions. Strong science focused on seeking answers is essential to moving forward. Communicating that science is just as critical. We encourage you to check out several of our resources that we've developed over the last year: a performance dashboard, which is a sustainability measure; a deeper dive, which is a library dealing with often misinformation; and our own technology and innovation report, which we are currently updating.

The factors affecting wild salmon are broad and complex. This is a pan-Pacific issue. We're seeing reports of declines in commercial catches of wild salmon from all over the Pacific. Russia has forecast a catch that's down 36% from last year and half of that of 2018. Japan has also reported some of the lowest returns in decades in recent years. Closer to home, we're seeing declines of some wild salmon species in rivers nowhere near fish farms, including in the Nass region up near Alaska.

● (1540)

The Government of Canada needs to take a serious, pragmatic approach to addressing wild salmon declines.

In summary, B.C. salmon farmers are amongst the most sustainable producers of salmon right now in the world. We're supporting communities and families when there are few other opportunities, especially during this crisis. We're growing a sustainable, local food product under a robust regulatory framework that is based in science. We're actively engaged in meaningful reconciliation with indigenous peoples. We're operating with less than minimal risk to wild salmon.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

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

Mr. Phil Young (Vice-President, Fisheries and Corporate Affairs, Canadian Fishing Company): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Phil Young. I'm vice-president of fisheries and corporate affairs for Canadian Fishing Company, which is the largest processor of wild salmon in B.C.

I'd like to thank the committee for the opportunity to address you once again and to meet some of the new members, unfortunately not in person, because of the restrictions, but I look forward to the opportunity to see everyone again.

I've been in the B.C. seafood business for 35 years, the last five years with Canadian Fishing. Nearly every other company I worked for is gone. Two of these disappearances were due strictly to consolidation as the salmon and herring resources constricted because of nature and government policies.

Over the years, I've watched the implementation of policies that didn’t seem to value an industry that put food on Canadians’ tables in a sustainable and renewable manner. It really wasn't until COVID hit us in February that the government seemed to finally wake up and designate us as an essential industry.

I'm sure you're going to hear from many more qualified witnesses on the biological effects of salmon, so I want to focus my comments more on the impacts upon the people who depend on the resource.

This current decline in salmon abundance is not the first one that has happened, but this time there's a real fear it isn’t just a cyclical downturn that will rebound in a few years. Climatic changes and impacts of human activities may be more profound this time. Also, changes in government policies regarding weak stock management, indigenous reconciliation and SARA listings are going to result in a completely different salmon fishery in the future.

Salmon has been the backbone of the B.C. fishing industry, and even as the harvest levels decline it's still an important pillar for our commercial sector. Fishermen, plant workers and companies all depend upon the salmon season to round out their incomes, but it's getting harder for all involved to rely on the contribution from salmon. There has only been one year in the past six that the commercial sector would consider even remotely good.

For several years during this stretch, some of the vessels that performed the best were ones that never incurred any of the upfront cost of getting ready to fish and instead stayed tied to the dock. They still had to do minor maintenance and pay their licence fees, but at least they didn't have the cost of getting the boat ready to fish, wasting fuel and then not catching any salmon, or sometimes not even getting an opportunity to put their nets into the water.

Indigenous reconciliation is here to stay. What it will look like and how we get to a better place is still uncertain, but from the commercial sector's view, what we need is clarity. Our industry has partnered with indigenous individuals and bands, but even they are asking for clarity. How can they plan for the future without understanding where an indigenous commercial harvester is going to fit within the greater plan of treaties, rights and local management?

Greater use of traditional knowledge is now in the Fisheries Act, but many in the industry and in the scientific community don't know exactly what it is nor how it will be integrated into our current salmon science programs. Local indigenous management is great conceptually, but how will it deal with conflicts among the more than 100 individual bands from Haida Gwaii to Yale and the myriad migratory stocks that are affected?

Science is the underpinning of this whole discussion, and it's not being done to a level that it should be. Without good stock assessments, how can good harvest decisions be made? We lost our marine stewardship certification for B.C. salmon because of gaps in science. This lowered our prices this year in the market, when really we needed every penny we could get.

Science itself needs to be more adaptable. While scientists focus their limited efforts on salmon outmigrations and returns, they're really not doing much out on the high seas, where the salmon spend most of their lives.

There was a program during the last few years whereby independent scientists from the U.S., Russia and Canada put together programs to conduct this science, with funding from NGOs and the salmon industry in Canada and the U.S., because we see a value and we didn't see governments from all countries stepping forward.

● (1545)

Management is going to have to change as well. When there are opportunities to harvest due to unexpected higher returns, reaction has to be quicker. The salmon will be heading into the streams in short order and DFO has to be in a position to see what's happening on the water and make informed decisions in a timely way to allow the economic benefits to be realized.

Licensing is going to be the biggest issue in the short term. We pay very high fees for our salmon licences, with very little opportunity to actually fish. This year the seine sector paid over $1 million in licence fees to the government and landed 6.3 million pounds of salmon worth roughly $3.3 million. That means 30% of the total gross value of the catch, not what they took home, went straight to fees.

At the current harvest rates the entire salmon fleet is really in a precarious financial position.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Young. We've gone well over time. Hopefully anything you didn't get in will come out in the rounds of questioning, but I do know your testimony is available for the members to have.

Mr. Phil Young: It's available. You have it.

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Bird for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Owen Bird (Executive Director, Sport Fishing Institute of British Columbia): Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee once again. My name is Owen Bird and I represent the Sport Fishing Institute of B.C.

I'll take a moment to provide details about our organization, about the values of the sport fishery in British Columbia and the sector's continued interest to see Pacific salmon regain a state that allows for recovery of stocks of concern and for public fisheries to thrive.

The SFI is a non-profit association that represents the interests of 300,000 licensed tidal water anglers in B.C. and the hundreds, if not thousands, of businesses that support them. The public fishery and related business produce $1.1 billion in annual sales, directly creating more than 9,000 jobs according to the most recent provincial studies available. The public fishery is the single largest economic driver of all B.C. fisheries, even though anglers take only 15% of the annual halibut catch and less than 10% of annual salmon harvest.

A broad course of action is required to aid in the recovery of salmon stocks of concern. While the department has provided project funding and studied and explored issues, there has yet to be a comprehensive strategic plan to manage and guide those projects or recovery of stocks. While there are clearly numerous priorities to be addressed to work towards recovery, such as habitat restoration, enhancement and mitigation of impacts from pinniped predation, there has been a focus primarily on fisheries management.

While reductions to access and harvest have now reached the lowest levels possible and in some cases eliminated opportunity entirely, evidence shows that continual ratcheting down of this source of mortality alone is insufficient to positively effect change in the productivity and abundance of salmon stocks of concern. DFO science shows that a less restrictive fisheries management regime paired with aggressive action on habitat, predation and environmental change would bring about two significant effects: measurable change and improvement to salmon stock abundance; and protection of access to the values and benefits of fisheries to the citizens of British Columbia.

Given the department's reliance on fisheries management and with a goal to improve the current state of Pacific salmon, particularly chinook, it is critical that steps to implement 100% marking of all hatchery chinook produced in Canada begin as soon as possible. In combination with the 100% mark rates of much more abundant marked Washington state chinook, B.C. mass marking of chinook will provide opportunity to enhance stocks of concern, by leaving any of that production unmarked and appearing wild, and allow certainty and harvest of hatchery stocks.

The public fishery, capable of selective fishing, can have opportunity and access that is now being denied because of the uncertainty of encounters with wild versus hatchery salmon. Among other benefits, wild versus hatchery salmon interactions in streams can be minimized, leading to better hatchery performance. Access restrictions and closures now are exacerbated by a current 10% mark rate of hatchery chinook.

It has been explained that to move to 100% mass marking of chinook in Canada there will be administrative, capital, analytical and enforcement costs. Knowing the potential for mass marking to benefit enhancement projects and mark selective fishing to provide vitally important opportunities for the public fishery, where currently they are extremely limited or non-existent, the investment is more than warranted and should be made now to impact plans for the 2021 season. The public fishing community is standing by and has provided viable plans to lend a hand and contribute to efforts to restore stock abundance and access.

To properly account for and understand impacts on stocks from fisheries, adequate catch monitoring must be a component. It should be noted that the public fishery, recognizing the challenges and unprecedented effects of the pandemic on regular management activities of the department, have proposed ways to assist with and address catch monitoring gaps created as a result. Utilizing guides, avid anglers, volunteer anglers participating in sampling projects, and making the SRIF-funded Fishing B.C. app available as an interim data collection tool have all been offered, yet, to date, incorporating these additional data sources to address pandemic-caused gaps and to allow for increased understanding of catch and collection of data has not occurred.

The public fishery is dependent on a reliable and predictable opportunity that comes from access to sustainable fisheries. To allow this, the state of specific salmon stocks must be on a road to recovery and hatchery fish produced should be utilized as intended, for harvest.

● (1550)

Action and development of a comprehensive plan are urgently required for both the restoration of Pacific salmon stocks that need it and for the social and economic benefits of coastal communities, businesses and citizens of British Columbia and Canada.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bird. You were just about three seconds over the allowed five minutes, so almost perfect.

Mr. Owen Bird: That's better than the last time.

The Chair: We'll now go to our questioning.

I will remind members who are asking questions that it would be easier to identify who you want to answer the question versus just asking the question and waiting for someone to answer.

We'll go to Mr. Arnold for six minutes or less, please.

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here.

I'll start with Mr. Young.

Mr. Young, over the past few years this committee has heard testimony from various classes of harvesters from all regions of Canada. One common theme that the committee has heard is the factor of access, stable or predictable access, to the shared resources of our fisheries.

Does DFO provide commercial harvesters with a clear sense of what the government's long-term objectives are for their efforts to manage the salmon fishery?

Mr. Phil Young: Mr. Chair, they haven't, but I think it's very difficult. It's a changing dynamic at all times.

I think that we do need some certainty, whether it's an indigenous allocation or something that's split, something so that people can make investments, because no licences really have changed hands on the commercial side, on the salmon seine side, in the last three years. Nobody's buying except for PICFI.

● (1555)

Mr. Mel Arnold: The issue of secure access certainly seems to be out there.

How would you describe the investment climate of the Pacific commercial salmon fishery?

Mr. Phil Young: I just touched on that. The licences are not moving. You couldn't go to a bank and get money. We have made deals and so have other companies where we've brought in some indigenous fishermen to become partners with zero down payment. We've given them a boat and licences to become partners with us over a seven- to eight-year time frame.

We want to bring people in. We all recognize that we need young people.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Can you identify why that investment climate might be this bad?

Mr. Phil Young: I think the big thing is that there is no certainty. We've had very poor seasons. We don't know what allocations are going to be. We don't know anything about economic opportunities that are being transferred either inland or coastal to indigenous communities. There are treaty rights. We're not involved with those discussions. We just have to deal with the fallout in the end.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Okay. I guess I'll go back to my first question.

Has DFO or the minister identified what plans or what their objectives are for the fisheries on the west coast?

Mr. Phil Young: Not that I'm aware of.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

Now I'll go to Mr. Bird, with the Sport Fishing Institute.

A couple of weeks ago Minister Jordan took questions in the chamber debate and seemed to indicate that her department may have finally seen the light and may be moving toward a mark-selective fishery.

Are you aware of the status on DFO's assessment of the mark-selective fisheries proposal?

Mr. Owen Bird: I heard those remarks and frankly was encouraged to hear that progress was being made. However, the problem is one of timing. There is a fairly lengthy list of assessments of the applicability and utility of both mass marking 100% of chinook stocks and mark-selective fishing, very largely through our neighbours to the south.

There were remarks about assessments done on a river on the northern west coast of Vancouver Island, Conuma River, for example. While that will provide very interesting results, it doesn't help the situation right now and it isn't applicable to south coast fisheries especially well either.

While those remarks are encouraging, we're still very much in a situation where there is a good rationale or good reason to go ahead with changes for this coming season and no reason that assessment should hold it up.

Mr. Mel Arnold: If a mark-selective fishery doesn't happen for 2021, what will the impact be on the public fishery in B.C.?

Mr. Owen Bird: I realize your question for Phil regarding access is slightly different, but this is what is all important for the public fishery. We're talking about opportunities for access in the southern British Columbia coast. Mark-selective fisheries present those opportunities because they are a way to avoid stocks of concern, which we understand we must take steps to do. Without some type of regime in place to allow for opportunity to occur for south coast public fisheries, there is a great amount of peril for communities that are trying to recover from impacts of the pandemic, but also from restrictions that were imposed in the last couple of years. It is desperately needed.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

Mr. Fraser, there were decisions to be made at the end of September 2020 regarding the Discovery Islands and fish farming operations.

Did you expect the government to make a decision at that time, and are the salmon farmers being provided a seat at the consultations that were announced on the Discovery Islands?

● (1600)

Mr. John Paul Fraser: Thank you, Mr. Arnold.

We did expect a decision in September and we were heartened with the recommendations coming through a scientific process, that after nine reviews over nine years, there was in total a less than minimal risk to the wild salmon migrating through there. That was good, and I think the government acknowledged that.

We knew that those particular licences in the Discovery Islands were up for renewal by the end of the year. We know that process is under way. It's a government-to-government process between the federal government and the Discovery Islands area nations, and we fully respect that process.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arnold.

We'll now go to Mr. Hardie for six minutes or less, please.

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I thank everybody for being here.

Mr. Fraser, the studies you mentioned, the reviews, didn't necessarily pass everybody's sniff test in terms of what was studied, how it was studied and the conclusions that came out.

First of all, who actually did the study, the recent ones that were cited, toward the end of September when the decisions on Discovery Islands were due to be made?

Mr. John Paul Fraser: That's conducted through the Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat. It's a panel that is administered through the Government of Canada.

My understanding is that half the scientists associated with the secretariat are with government, and the other half, more or less, are outside government, in the academic community and elsewhere.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Did your group fund any of the work that was done?

Mr. John Paul Fraser: No.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Okay.

I understand that the studies themselves weren't agreed to unanimously. There were people who questioned some of the findings. Others supported them.

Do you know what gaps existed between the two sides of the people participating in the study?

Mr. John Paul Fraser: I'm not sure. I understand that those processes are in camera with the scientists as part of their consultation with one another. All we know is that when the review was announced, like when a pope is chosen, we all know and then there is a very detailed analysis provided. In this case, it's actually about 300 or 400 pages. There is a lot of information.

Mr. Ken Hardie: The smoke comes out of the chimney. Yes, I understand that process.

I understand, too, that the focus of these studies was on viruses and that a number of individual viruses were studied but not necessarily the cumulative impact of perhaps the presence of more than one virus in the farms themselves, the operations, and the impact on the wild salmon.

It was my understanding that what wasn't studied at all was sea lice, which is cited by people who you know well, such as Alexandra Morton, as being one of the fundamental issues that will be affecting wild salmon.

Were sea lice studied as part of this review?

Mr. John Paul Fraser: These are good questions that you should probably be asking the department. They conducted their review. However, I gather as well that sea lice was not factored as a risk assessment coming through the Cohen commission looking at migrating sockeye. However, sea lice is a condition of licence and there are exhaustive studies and reviews ongoing with sea lice. Not to paraphrase them, but I think the department was quite clear about why it wasn't part of this particular review, because it's an ongoing area of research and evaluation.

Mr. Ken Hardie: And it's an ongoing area of concern, very clearly, right?

Mr. John Paul Fraser: It's an ongoing area of concern, absolutely, which is why the companies have invested tremendous amounts of money and environmentally focused technology to help mitigate the concerns. I'm really quite impressed by the effort right now on the coast.

Mr. Ken Hardie: I have many more questions for you and hopefully will get to some of them, but I want to talk to a couple of your colleagues here as witnesses.

Mr. Young, is the situation that the processors are facing now—these poor seasons, which you mentioned have been the standard for most of the last decade or more—due to problems with access to fish, or are there simply not enough fish to go around?

Mr. Phil Young: I would have to say it's a combination; it really is. There are fewer fish returning, but even when they do return—over a million returns to the Skeena, and the commercial sector got to harvest at a 1.2% level—the catch is very tiny.

Sometimes, then, the fish are coming back and we're still not getting access.

● (1605)

Mr. Ken Hardie: Fair enough.

Mr. Bird, you have focused quite a bit on the whole issue of hatchery salmon. We have heard very clearly that British Columbia—Canada—should be doing what they do in Washington state, which is to tag or mark the hatchery salmon.

The purpose of a hatchery, though, isn't to provide fish for people to catch. I thought the purpose of a hatchery was to help rebuild stocks that have been in trouble. Is this your understanding or not?

Mr. Owen Bird: That's absolutely an element of how hatcheries can function and can aid in enhancement projects, certainly. It is actually a fairly strong argument to move towards 100% marking of hatchery production that is understood not to be related to enhancement.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Does it matter? If you catch the fish, that fish doesn't get to spawn and make more fish. Does it matter whether it's hatchery or wild?

Mr. Owen Bird: If you have marked all of the fish that you understand are eligible, so to speak, for harvest, and you have other enhancement projects that are hatchery enhanced and you don't mark those fish, then you save those ones harmless in—

Mr. Ken Hardie: —but this brings us full circle. The purpose of a hatchery is to help rebuild stocks, not necessarily to provide fish for people to catch.

Mr. Owen Bird: The purpose of a hatchery, as I understand it, is to serve a number of functions. Among them is enhancing stocks, certainly, but it's also in order to provide opportunities for harvest. That's the whole idea of Robertson Creek Hatchery, and on and on it goes.

The idea is that you're serving a number of different functions, depending on what system you're dealing with. Again, if you turn towards 100% marking, that marking provides some excellent opportunities to enhance systems that currently don't have any kind of enhancement and may desperately need it, and that do not mark those fish. They are treated in all circumstances as wild fish.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Right. I appreciate the point.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

We will now go to Madam Gill for six minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all the witnesses for being with us.

I'd like to address my first question to you, Mr. Young. When you spoke earlier, I had the impression that we were at a crossroads. In terms of salmon, you talk about one good year in the last six years. You talked about the gaps in science and the management that needs to change, and the need for a comprehensive plan in the short, medium and long term.

What steps do you think Fisheries and Oceans Canada should take to ensure the viability of the Pacific salmon fishing industry?

[*English*]

Mr. Phil Young: For the most part we need the science done, first of all. I think there are long-term matters, climatic and everything else, but in the short term I think we need the science, and we need it to be responsive so that we can harvest the excess amounts of fish and bring the economics to bear.

The other part is there is no doubt there are too many harvesters on our coast right now. We need to look at that and decide how we're going to let people retire from the industry with some sort of dignity and some sort of retirement plan such that they can sell their licences. There are no buyers right now.

I think there are some short term and medium term...and in the long term hopefully it recovers. Maybe it's by ocean ranching, as in Alaska, or maybe it's other things, but there are lots of things we can look at.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Mr. Young, the study before we were in a pandemic.

Has the pandemic heightened the urgency of establishing an action plan?

[*English*]

Mr. Phil Young: You know, in fairness, probably not; for most of us, I think, as we've gone along, being deemed an essential service during the pandemic has been very useful. It has allowed us to have our boats out harvesting and bringing the fish back in. It was tough in the plants, keeping workers in there, but I think these are longer-term issues that we have to start on now.

● (1610)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: We need good news, too. So I'm glad you were able to tell us, in all honesty, that things went well.

My next question is for Mr. Fraser, Mr. Bird and Mr. Young. You can answer in turns.

You spoke about climate change. We often talk about the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and a management plan. The Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans represents the government. However, there are other anthropogenic factors, such as human traces in the environment and human actions that are affecting salmon. In some of the news articles that concern some of you, I've read about the oil industry affecting certain species.

Could you talk about these other anthropogenic factors that are causing the decline of Pacific salmon stocks?

[*English*]

Mr. Phil Young: I'll just take it for a second before I turn it over to Mr. Bird.

The climatic changes and the human impact changes are real. I think everybody believes that. In the river, especially with something like salmon, which have to return to a natal stream, one or two degrees in those streams can mean they won't reproduce. I think there are huge impacts on that. Maybe we don't really understand just how big that is.

Mr. Bird.

Mr. Owen Bird: I agree with you, Phil.

You know, this is where it's so important that an approach is generated that doesn't focus on just one of the priority issues—not just fisheries management, not just project-based approaches to trying to help with restoration, but a more comprehensive view. You can note the recent issues with regard to oil and the west coast here. A study that was recently published indicated that oil offshoot from roads was having an effect on coho salmon specifically.

There's a lot that we don't know. It does appear that we are learning more about some of these things. Some of them surely must be able to be tackled. Again, that reiterates the importance of an overall and comprehensive plan that tries to tackle each of the priorities.

Mr. John Paul Fraser: I would add that certainly one of the most comprehensive studies was the Cohen commission report back in 2012. Justice Cohen did conclude that there was really no smoking gun, no single stressor, responsible for declining stocks. He said multiple factors are contributing to that: climate change, non-sustainable logging practices, urban development, industrial pollution, overfishing and a variety of other factors. This is obviously an incredibly complex situation.

As Mr. Young described, you're talking about a very challenging environment through which the salmon have to migrate in order to reproduce.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Gill.

We'll now go to Mr. Johns for six minutes or less, please.

Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP): Thank you very much.

Thank you to all of you for your testimony today and for your passion for wild Pacific salmon.

Mr. Fraser, you just talked about the Cohen commission. I was going to ask you a question around Cohen commission recommendation three, where Justice Cohen talked about removing salmon aquaculture product promotion from DFO's mandate. I think the feeling in coastal B.C.—you can correct me if I'm wrong on how you feel about it—is that it would create more transparency.

Certainly we have conflicting science that we're seeing out there. It's my understanding that the industry actually supports this. Can you confirm that?

● (1615)

Mr. John Paul Fraser: I just want clarification on your question. The industry supports which recommendation?

Mr. Gord Johns: It's recommendation three, about removing salmon aquaculture products and the promotion of farmed salmon products from the mandate of DFO.

Mr. John Paul Fraser: I would probably want to draw people's attention to recommendation 19, which said that in relation to the Discovery Islands, which is the most pressing and prescient at the moment, those farms ought not to be there unless adequate science can demonstrate that they can operate with less than minimal risk. That is exactly what the CSAS process, which was set up by the Cohen commission to look at those risk factors, concluded.

Mr. Gord Johns: Again, I go back to number three on the mandate. The reason I bring it up is that there's a lot of conflicting science. Certainly we've heard that Justice Cohen recommended that the promotion of farmed salmon shouldn't be under the purview of DFO, so that DFO could play its role in protecting wild salmon and so that there is some transparency and separation from the department and the salmon-farming sector.

Do you support the Cohen commission's recommendation three?

Mr. John Paul Fraser: I think the salmon-farming community, both on the west coast and on the east coast, has talked to government for some time about perhaps not removing regulators—because we think Fisheries and Oceans is a quality regulator—but about having a champion, much like all the other food production sectors across Canada.

We produce food; we grow food, but we're technically not a fishery. I think that would actually be quite useful.

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay. I think it would be, too. I think it would help the industry and those with concerns to at least have some separation.

You know that the department's been given a mandate. The minister has been given a mandate to remove open-net pen salmon farms from coastal B.C. by 2025.

Recently we heard from the B.C. First Nations Leadership Council. They are calling for the immediate revocation of the 18 salmon farm licences from the Discovery Islands. Obviously this transition to closed containment and land-based aquaculture is coming.

What recommendations do you have to ensure that the jobs in your sector, which are important jobs, are protected and we don't lose those annual economic benefits from your industry?

I know many of the workers. I know the impact. I know they care deeply about our coastal waters. We don't talk enough about that. Some of the social responsibility companies, like Creative Salmon in my riding, are huge contributors to our community. I can't say enough about them on the corporate social responsibility side.

Knowing this is coming, what can we do and advocate in support for your sector as you move to closed containment?

Mr. John Paul Fraser: Thank you, Mr. Johns.

I think the commitment actually is not necessarily closed containment. In fact, I don't think you'll find those words in the mandate letter as it's currently drafted. I also think there is a process in place that the minister has talked about over this five years to actually figure out how to execute a transition, which can be very different. It can even include a local ecosystem-based management.

I appreciate the comments you made about Creative Salmon. That's one of the four major salmon-producing companies that does a lot and cares a lot about the local environment and the local communities.

I would even quote a very important chief, who you represent, Mr. Johns. Hasheukmiss, the son of Tyee Hawilth Maquinna, in Ahousaht has said, “Through my leadership responsibilities, I have taken the time to educate myself on Cermaq Canada's current practices and believe salmon farming done well, has a role to play in providing economic stability, secure jobs and food security.”

You mentioned one indigenous organization that has opposition. I think we should be really focused on the title and rights holders of those nations who are actually doing it.

Mr. Gord Johns: I don't think anyone's objecting to ensuring that the sector continues. I think the mandate is to remove open-net pen salmon farms from the coastal waters.

I'll go to—

Mr. John Paul Fraser: The mandate, Mr. Johns, is to execute a transition.

Mr. Gord Johns: That's right.

Mr. John Paul Fraser: The word “removal” is not in there.

Mr. Gord Johns: Okay. Well, let's work together on that. We want to make sure you get enough supports through that transition. Certainly that's something we're advocating for.

Mr. John Paul Fraser: That would be fantastic.

Mr. Gord Johns: Absolutely.

This is a question I'll ask of Mr. Bird.

You talked about the marked fishery. I was at your presentation, where we had Washington state present about the cost of investments they made around the marked fishery. Can you talk a little about how small an investment they made compared to the return?

Mr. Owen Bird: Gord, you caught me not having the exact figures at hand. I apologize for that. However, I will say in terms of their investment relative to supporting the opportunities for the public fishery, and in some instances the commercial fishery, the benefit versus cost was inordinate.

That is a very similar situation in which we find ourselves now in B.C. and where, along the remarks that I made in my opening statement, certainly there are costs necessary to analyze and properly administer mass marking and mark-selective fisheries, but in comparison to the values for small communities in terms of economic benefits and social values, they are very minor.

I don't have a factor. I apologize for that. However, the point is that the costs are relatively minimal in comparison.

● (1620)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Johns.

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

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to start with Mr. Bird.

Would you agree with the following sentence? Salmon hatcheries successfully produce salmon for harvest, stock assessment and conservation purposes.

There are some at this committee who seem to be confused about what hatcheries do. Would you agree with that statement?

Mr. Owen Bird: Yes, I would agree with that.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: That's right off the DFO website when it comes to hatcheries.

Mark-selective fisheries, then, and the purpose of a hatchery to create fish for the purpose of catching fish seems to be consistent with producing salmon for harvest.

Would you agree?

Mr. Owen Bird: Again, yes, I would have to agree.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Tell me about the members of your industry. For the last couple of years, there have been massive closures because DFO has said at the committee numerous times that one of the only tools they have at their disposal is to shut down seasons or to regulate seasons and withdraw fishing pressure in order to conserve stocks.

Do you believe that's actually true or could we use hatcheries more for enhancement of stocks and provide more opportunities?

Mr. Owen Bird: Well, as they say, the idea behind moving towards 100% marking of hatchery production, not proposing additional production but simply marking 100% of what is produced, would provide those additional identifiable fish to be available for harvest. It could make a much clearer distinction between wild and hatchery fish than currently exists, and thereby allow opportunity for a harvest in areas where some of those stocks of concern do appear or it's very clear that those stocks of concern are not present. The idea behind having opportunity and access for the public fishery is critical.

The main areas affected by the chinook restrictions are the south coast of British Columbia. That's the main population base. It affects perception and understanding about fish in fisheries and the ability for all number of public fishery participants, whether they are guides or charter operators. Operators, those who benefit from fishing tourism, are all affected by opportunity and access. Therefore, where possible to provide that opportunity on marked fish, so much the better.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Does the department need to wait for a full cycle of marked salmon in order to open up a mark-selective fishery, or could they do it right away?

Mr. Owen Bird: Absolutely not. They do not because our neighbours to the south produce many times more marked hatchery chinook fish, with an understanding that British Columbians intercept those fish. Therefore, there is no problem to harvest those fish. In addition, there are some marked chinook in British Columbia waters.

No, there is not a necessity to wait to implement those fisheries.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Can anybody here, maybe Mr. Young and Mr. Bird, if it's appropriate, speak to some of the selective fishing techniques that we can use to make sure that we extract marked fish out of the system and leave naturally spawned fish in the system?

Mr. Owen Bird: I have my mike open, so maybe I'll just jump in and then Phil can go ahead.

It is a bit unique to the public fishery in that we can readily identify fish at the side of the boat and determine whether that fish has an adipose fin missing or not. As far as fishing goes, public fisheries are based on one hook, one line, so it is quite a selective and slow process. Therefore, you can make that determination, having little effect on a fish that should be released.

That, in combination with data-supported fisheries, by which I mean understanding where these stocks of concern are present or not and allowing for fisheries to take place there, will present those opportunities that are desperately needed and reasonable.

● (1625)

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Mr. Young, do you have a comment?

Mr. Phil Young: Yes. From my standpoint, the big thing is that we do have some fisheries that can be very selective. The one that comes to mind, of course, is the seine fishery, because you're bringing them beside the boat in a net, and you're brailing all the fish onto a sorting table. It's not specifically to take a run out, but you can take species, so if there's a steelhead issue or a coho issue, you can release those back into the ocean with hardly any impact at all.

There are some selective and some not so much.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Okay.

Mr. Chair, do I have some time left?

The Chair: You're right at the five-minute mark, Mr. Calkins. You're absolutely perfect in your timing today.

We'll now finish off by going to Mr. Hardie for five minutes or less, please.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The situation that we're looking at here, folks, is not how to share the fish that are in the water. This is not an argument over who gets to catch the last fish. This is all about trying to expand the number of fish so that there are more fish to do everything that we want those fish to do, which is to procreate and to be caught for food, sport and recreation.

When we look at the health of the stocks and the factors that affect the health of those stocks, we have fishing effort, predation, climate change, water temperature, etc., and habitat. Is there anything else that we need to look at in terms of a 360-degree view of all of the factors that are possibly behind the fact that a lot of our salmon runs particularly are in dreadful shape right now?

Owen, we'll start with you.

Mr. Owen Bird: Yes, I think you've characterized what are some very tall orders. Those are the factors that are impacting all of us, the fish included, of course. The more that we can also include the social element here, the social and economic considerations given to addressing fisheries issues, so much the better. By that I mean that we have to take steps to address each of those priorities but not lose sight of the fact that society—citizens of British Columbia and Canada—is a part of this ecosystem and that to take steps to eliminate that for those specific runs of stocks, when there are opportunities to harvest more abundant stocks, is something we shouldn't do.

We must try to take advantage of the harvest—

Mr. Ken Hardie: I'm sorry. I have to cut you short because I have more questions and we're rather confined. I know that you could go on and on, and we'll probably have that opportunity offline.

I have a second question for you, and then I'll pass both of those questions on to Mr. Young for the time that we have available.

Right now, if there's a critique of DFO, it is that most of its effort is in managing the fishing effort and that there's not sufficient balance with the other factors that perhaps can be actionable if the resources, etc., are there. Do you agree with that?

Mr. Owen Bird: I think that is the problem. There has been a very narrow focus on fisheries management rather than a comprehensive strategy that is more than projects.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Mr. Young, can you address both of those questions? Hopefully, you can remember the first one.

Mr. Phil Young: Honestly, Mr. Hardie, Owen really summed it up well. Those are the big issues. We all agree that those four are really the big issues. I don't think you can add too much to that.

I do agree it seems that the easy one for DFO to deal with is fish management, because you can see it right in that year. You maybe put more fish on the grounds. That's what it focuses on and maybe not enough on the overall situation of what's happening in the high seas or in the spawning grounds.

I agree with Owen.

● (1630)

Mr. Ken Hardie: Mr. Calkins and I may have slightly different views about the purpose of hatcheries, but I think we're both on the same page when it comes to predation, especially by pinnipeds.

Mr. Bird and Mr. Young, what would you have us do?

Mr. Owen Bird: That's a challenging question.

Mr. Ken Hardie: That's my answer, too.

Mr. Owen Bird: Yes, of course.

I believe it's an obvious problem. There's a lot of evidence to say that predation, by pinnipeds particularly, is an issue.

Where to start or how to tackle that challenge is difficult. I'm afraid I don't have a silver bullet, other than to say that something surely needs to be done and you need to start somewhere.

You've had Dr. Carl Walters propose that a focused approach in estuaries would not make for compelling results.

Mr. Ken Hardie: I'll call it for time and give Mr. Young about five seconds.

Mr. Owen Bird: Sure.

I'm sorry, Phil.

Mr. Phil Young: I'll say very much the same thing. It's very difficult to deal with it.

There are market implications, if we're seen in the rest of the world to be going out and somehow culling.

I think we have to be very careful. It has to be a very strategic thing. But is it an issue? Of course it is.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

Thank you to our witnesses for their insightful testimony here today.

We'll now close this session and suspend. We'll leave this meeting and come back into another one. We're moving in camera, so I would ask the members to try to get back as quickly as possible.

Mr. Gord Johns: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Johns.

Mr. Gord Johns: We started late. Are we going to have a chance for a couple of quick questions?

The Chair: No.

Mr. Gord Johns: How about one quick question?

The Chair: No. The time is up. The analysts have asked for a full hour for drafting instructions. We are a couple of minutes over now, even with the little talking that I'm doing.

Let's try to sign off and back on again as quickly as possible.

Again, thank you to our witnesses for their testimony today.

Mr. Phil Young: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]