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Chair: Mr. Ken McDonald



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• (1100)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 91 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans. This meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders.

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

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we will study the subject matter of supplementary estimates (B), 2023-24: votes 1b, 5b and 10b under the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

I would like to welcome our first panel of witnesses. Representing the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, we have with us Annette Gibbons, deputy minister; Richard Goodyear, assistant deputy minister and chief financial officer; and Adam Burns, assistant deputy minister, programs sector. We also have Mr. Chris Henderson, deputy commissioner of operations for the Canadian Coast Guard.

Thank you for taking the time to appear today.

Ms. Gibbons, you have up to five minutes for your opening statement, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Annette Gibbons (Deputy Minister, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to start by recognizing that we are gathered on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe people. We're happy to have the opportunity to do so.

My colleagues have already been introduced, so I will not do it again.

After my speech, we will be pleased to answer all your questions about our department's section of the supplementary estimates (B) for 2023-24.

[English]

Mr. Chair, Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the Canadian Coast Guard are seeking \$356.4 million through the supplementary esti-

mates (B), 2023-24. This consists of \$340.5 million in voted appropriations, as well as \$15.9 million in statutory appropriations. Taken together, this represents an 8% increase to our planned budget spending this fiscal year.

The \$340.5-million increase in voted authorities can be mainly attributed to the following areas: \$133.3 million "to advance reconciliation on Indigenous rights and fisheries issues"; \$49.4 million "to continue [implementing] the Fish and Fish Habitat Protection Program provisions of the Fisheries Act"; \$42.1 million for the Canadian Coast Guard's multi-purpose vessel project; and \$24.7 million "to continue...to protect species at risk".

A further \$91 million is being requested for 20 additional items with lower funding requirements, as well as technical adjustments such as transfers to and from other government departments.

In terms of the \$15.9 million in statutory appropriations, this amount is required for updated compensation and benefit forecasts for our employees.

The funding being requested through the supplementary estimates (B), 2023-24, will help Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the Canadian Coast Guard fulfill our mission while continuing to deliver the many essential services that we deliver for Canadians.

• (1105)

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, I'd like to take this opportunity to update you on the spending reductions identified across our department.

As you know, when budget 2023-24 was tabled last April, it included plans to reduce federal government spending. At the time, it was expected that the savings generated by efforts to refocus government spending would be \$15.4 billion over five years and then \$4.5 billion annually thereafter.

On November 9, the President of the Treasury Board tabled the 2023-24 supplementary estimates (B) in the House of Commons. The estimates included the first update on how the Government of Canada is reducing its planned spending. More specifically, it detailed how \$500 million in funding related to travel expenses, consulting services and professional services was refocused and withdrawn from the 2023-24 budgets of 68 departments.

[English]

Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the Canadian Coast Guard contributed to this exercise, and I can report that more than \$25.7 million in spending has been frozen across our department.

This is only the first tranche of a multi-year effort to reduce government spending, and we're already looking to the future to determine where additional savings can be found across our department over subsequent years. Ultimately, this work will help refocus our spending, so it's going to the priorities that matter most to Canadians.

A voice: We're getting French translation on the English channel.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Geneviève Dubois-Richard): We're getting the French translation on the English channel.

Thank you. It's good now.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Ultimately, this work will help refocus our spending so it's going to the priorities that matter most to Canadians. In the meantime, Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the Canadian Coast Guard remain committed to the efficient and prudent spending of taxpayer dollars and to being accountable and transparent in our ongoing reporting to Canadians and parliamentarians.

Before closing I want to briefly mention the Government of Canada's recent fall economic statement and how it impacts our department. I want to specifically highlight how four additional weeks of employment insurance regular benefits will be available to eligible seasonal workers. Claims established between September 2023 and September 2024 will be eligible for this coverage, which will cost approximately \$69.8 million over three years, and fishery workers are the primary beneficiaries of the EI seasonal regime.

Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to present the department's supplementary estimates (B). My colleagues and I are happy to answer any questions you have related to this work.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll now go to our first round of questions, with Mr. Small for six minutes or less, please.

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

Ms. Gibbons, the minister's mandate letter states, and I quote, that she's to work to "make new investments and develop a conservation strategy to restore and rebuild wild Atlantic salmon". Last year salmon anglers asked for an eight-week extension to the river guardian program. The minister provided a four-week extension, basically, to supply half the guardians. Basically, the minister provided one-quarter of what was asked for.

You just stated that you had an 8% increase in your budget, and DFO's budget has increased since 2015 by close to \$5 billion. Why was, basically, a \$2-million ask to provide protection for Atlantic salmon, in line with what was in the minister's mandate letter, not provided in Newfoundland and Labrador?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: The funding that we receive as we go through our approvals at Treasury Board is all dedicated to particu-

lar activities. We have some flex in our budgets, but we have a certain amount for each activity, and that's the amount we have.

Mr. Clifford Small: It has been reported that guardians were observing illegal nets, and when they came to the end of their shift they were told to go home because there was no budget for overtime. If the budget's not going to provide for these C and P workers, these individuals, to carry out their duties and have successful outcomes, what's the point of it all?

• (1110)

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We have all of our activities planned out over a year, and as we see the need to make changes within a year, we'll make changes. At any given point in time, each program activity has its budget, and they work within the budget they have. That's how the money gets allocated to us.

As I said, we have some flexibility, but we can't take money from a program that's meeting another commitment or another mandate of the department to put it in another area. We have to progress on all of the different activities we're mandated to do.

Mr. Clifford Small: You're telling me that, with an 8% increase in your budget, you couldn't find \$2 million to protect these precious Atlantic salmon stocks in Newfoundland and Labrador?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Mr. Chair, there are lots of different priorities that we try to meet with the resources we have. The increase would have been for specific activities. As I said, we have to keep moving the money on the things we're allocated to do to with it.

Mr. Clifford Small: Wouldn't you think that the money would be spent in line with what's laid out in a mandate letter?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Well, there are lots of different things that have funding requirements associated with them in the mandate letter, as well as in the standing mandate of the department—all of the ongoing things that are not new commitments. We have to make sure we have the budget to do those things, as well as the things that are new commitments.

Mr. Clifford Small: Last week, here in committee, it was laid out that product-of-Canada mackerel produced in 2023 are on the market. Did DFO see that testimony?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I did not see that testimony. I'm sure that there are people in my department who did.

Mr. Clifford Small: Fisheries and Oceans Canada is requesting over \$10 million to renew the marine spacial planning program, as outlined in budget 2023. How much of that money is being spent to identify wind energy sites?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I don't think that funding is.... It's about different regions. Some of those regions are places that would be good sites for wind energy and that are being considered for that, but it is about planning over the region for all of the activities in a region. The objective there is to have a better understanding of where the very sensitive ecosystem areas are and where the fishing grounds are, and to really understand well where there is scope for different types of activities.

Mr. Clifford Small: How much of that money is being directed to prevent conflict between the fishing industry and wind energy developers?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Certainly, the discussions between those different groups of stakeholders would be captured in the funding we use. We use part of that money for engagement with all of the different stakeholders who are using a given marine area.

Mr. Clifford Small: With this program, are you more concerned with protecting the livelihoods of fishers or with justifying their displacement from their traditional fishing grounds in favour of renewable energy projects?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We're trying to find a way forward that uses the ocean in a sustainable way for all the people who are interested in the use of the ocean in a particular area.

Mr. Clifford Small: Have you committed any of that \$10 million to groups like the FFAW, to enable them to represent their stakeholders in these discussions?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I'm not sure if there is money that has flowed in that way. I think the money is to set up planning processes, but whether or not it has gone to individual organizations like that for them to participate in the process, I'm not sure. We can come back with an answer on that.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you, Ms. Gibbons.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Small.

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

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

Ms. Gibbons, could you provide to the committee, at a later date, what branches of the department benefited from the budgetary increases since 2015? There was a number given. I believe you said that the budget to DFO increased by \$8 billion. Could you provide, in general terms, to the committee, those areas of the ministry that the majority of those funds went to?

• (1115)

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Absolutely. It would have been distributed all across, but in certain areas more than others, for sure.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: There were two specific areas that received significant expenditure reductions, cutbacks, under the previous government—protection and science. I'd like to know how the department has moved forward on bringing those to the levels required, because everybody knows when they appear before this committee that protection comes at the top, and conservation. There will be no fishery on either coast without effective conservation, so I would like to know that.

If you didn't receive the \$346 million, what would give?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: What would give?

Mr. Robert Morrissey: A lot of essential services come under your minister. I'm thinking coast guard, search and rescue.... Yes, what would give?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: The biggest item in the supplementary estimates is funding for various treaties and reconciliation agreements that we have. Those are on the east coast, on the west coast and in different parts of the country. Certainly, being able to make good on the commitments in those areas this fiscal year would be a big challenge for us.

Given the timing of supplementary estimates, being December, with four months left in the fiscal year, we would just be in a bit of a crisis mode, actually trying to figure out what we'd stop doing between now and then, because we've made commitments in various areas—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Okay, that's fair, Ms. Gibbons.

Could you elaborate on the additional money for the Canadian Coast Guard, especially as it relates to the multi-purpose vessel program? Could you inform the committee how that is going and why it's extremely important? If you're a fisher in distress, you really want to see the Coast Guard, so it's important to have adequate vessels properly crewed.

Could you give us a general overview to depict what stage we are at in that ambitious project?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Sure, and of course, the supplementary estimates number for the multi-purpose vessels project is just a very small piece of what we're doing under the national shipbuilding strategy to replace the Coast Guard fleet, so we're at different stages with all sorts of different types of vessels fit for different purposes at the three shipyards that are building the vessels.

We've already had several vessels delivered under the strategy, fishery research vessels, a lot of vessels for the Coast Guard to effectively support fishers in distress and other Canadians on the water. With the multipurpose vehicle, in particular, we are at the stage of designing the vessel. These are very long, detailed processes that require a lot of back-and-forth, so it's really critical that we continue that process.

Of course, for each ship project and each vessel within a given type of ship, it takes a certain amount of time to do all of the planning and all of the design, to buy the construction materials from different suppliers, wherever they may be, and then to actually start the work in the shipyard. Doing all of the outfitting takes a tremendous amount of time and lots of phasing with the other vessels.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Sure. Thank you.

Based on your answer, how has the department been impacted by change, by the changing dynamics of search and rescue at the Coast Guard? Can you give a bit of an overview to the committee? Are those demands increasing what the Coast Guard has to prepare for?

How have the demands that you're experiencing in the areas of conservation and protection changed? We're in the technological age, and I take it the whole issue of illegal fishing is having an impact. The days of the traditional conservation officer coming out in uniform and visiting may have changed.

Could you just brief the committee on how your department is reacting to those changes?

• (1120)

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Sure. I'll give you a couple of examples on the Coast Guard.

Certainly, we're trying to spend more time in the Arctic, both as an expression of sovereignty and also as engagement with the communities in the Arctic and the economic interests of the people who live in the Arctic, so having the capacity to break ice, be present in the Arctic and do our research in DFO more months of the year is one change.

Also, we're just really making sure that we have vehicles that are fit for different purposes. Hence the multi-purpose vehicle, which is able to do a variety of different things, including breaking ice.

In terms of change and technology with our conservation protection function, one of the things we've had great success with—and I believe the committee heard about it recently—is our dark vessel detection platform, a piece of technology that we developed and are deploying with other countries around the world to be able to monitor illegal fishing on the high seas and close to different countries' shores. We recently signed an agreement with the Philippines to that effect, for them to deploy the dark vessel platform.

That's one example of how we're using that, and the department, like all departments these days, is looking at, as an example, how to deploy AI effectively in terms of our various functions, in terms of our corporate functions, HR, finance. That's something that we're of course at the beginning of but doing work on as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Morrissey.

We'll go now to Madame Desbiens for six minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us. I very much appreciate their presence.

I understand that the exercise is never simple, because their department is big and complicated. I take note of that every day.

I want to talk to you about the shrimp harvesters who are eagerly—I would now say “desperately”—waiting to hear from your department with respect to the moratorium, the closure, or possible sad news.

First of all, we'd like the answer to come quickly. Having said that, have you included in your appropriations any support for these fishers, aside from employment insurance? Not everyone is eligible for employment insurance.

Will your decision, which could be dramatic for these fishers, be supported in any way?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We're studying the shrimp fishery. This year, we've intensified our scientific discussions with shrimp harvesters to be able to make a decision more quickly for the 2024 season. We will also be meeting with the fishers later this week.

As you know, Fisheries and Oceans Canada offers a lot of programs for various fishing groups. We're working with Quebec and our colleagues in other federal departments to find the best ways to support fishers. Fisheries and Oceans Canada is studying the measures that could be used to support fishers once the decision on the 2024 fishing season has been made.

If the situation makes it difficult to pay for the usual expenses related to this fishery, such as gas, we will put measures in place to provide a little more flexibility. We're also looking at how fishers can work together. One thing we've done is introduce a buddy system.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: When the cod fishery closed, support was provided to fishers. I think that the shrimp industry is a similar disaster, but it mainly affects Quebec.

I am the spokesperson for Quebec fishers, and it's a world I truly love. I was born on an island and I understand what it's like to make a living fishing.

Are you considering a specific measure for Quebec's fisheries? It's not that the fishers in other regions aren't fine people, but this specifically affects the fishers in Quebec. I know there are other options. I know, for example, that there's an application for a redfish licence.

Is there a way to tell the fishers who follow our work that there is hope and that we're going to do what we can to ensure predictability? As we know, we can't turn on a dime and change shrimp to redfish. It's not done on the corner of a desk; it's more complicated than that.

Can you tell them anything about that?

• (1125)

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I can't say anything this morning, but the department is assessing possible measures to support those fishers.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: I thank you for that, and I hope the fishers heard you.

I will now talk about the Coast Guard. Last year, we talked about the fact that a lot of litigation has been pending for a number of years.

Have you heard of any cases being resolved? Are there any in the process of being resolved? In other cases, there is no sound and no picture. Will they finally be able to get an answer?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Do you mean litigation specifically involving the Coast Guard?

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: I'm talking about the Coast Guard, yes. Some people have been waiting for six or seven years.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Are you talking about employees?

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Yes, that's correct.

I wasn't very clear, and I apologize for that.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Okay.

There has been progress in terms of employee disputes or grievances that were filed several years ago, but I can't speak to specific cases. One of the priorities is to resolve these cases. I think progress has been made in that regard.

Mr. Henderson, do you want to add anything?

Mr. Chris Henderson (Deputy Commissioner, Operations, Canadian Coast Guard): Yes, thank you.

It's true that a number of cases have been resolved. In the department, approximately 1,800 such cases are underway. In terms of the Coast Guard, there are about 650. We are working closely with the unions to negotiate timelines and to put systems in place to improve processes.

It is true that some cases go further back, but we have established priorities. We prioritize issues related to pay, harassment and violence. We're working hard, in close cooperation with the unions, to improve the overall situation.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Desbiens.

We'll now go to Ms. Barron for six minutes or less.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Welcome to our witnesses.

Mr. Chair, if I am able to do so, I will most certainly take a moment to acknowledge that we have some others here. I would acknowledge that we have with us Chief Murphy Abraham from the Lake Babine First Nation, as well as Dominique Nouvet, legal counsel. Also, from the Kitselas First Nation, we have Chief Councillor Glenn Bennett and Dr. David Try. That's just to mention that if I were able to acknowledge their presence, I would most certainly do so.

With that, I have some questions today, Deputy Minister Gibbons. As you know, Ms. Gibbons, first nations in northwest B.C. are stewards of the land and water, and have been for millennia. They are experts on sockeye salmon migration in the waters. They know the importance of ensuring that the keystone species is protected for future generations.

Today I wanted to ask some questions about where we currently are with treaty negotiations, with working alongside first nations on this necessary work to protect sockeye salmon. I understand that first nations in northwest B.C. are nearing the completion of treaties

with British Columbia and Canada, including chapters related to fisheries.

I'm wondering, Ms. Gibbons, if you could provide the committee with an update on how the fisheries-related provisions in those treaties are progressing.

• (1130)

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Thank you very much.

As you know, these are very long negotiation processes. We want to make sure that we take the time to really understand what the communities want. Of course, in fisheries, in most cases stocks are not in increasing abundance, right? There are some, but in general we have declines in many of the stocks on the coast, so it's very challenging to be able to meet all the requests and requirements of communities.

There's a requirement for money to offset the cost of acquiring allocations to meet obligations and quotas. There is a huge financial component to what we do, and we're taking the time to identify what all those amounts are and go through our approval process—

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Yes. Thank you, Ms. Gibbons. Just because I have such limited time, I want to make sure I get to more specifics.

What is the status of the treaty specific to the Kitselas First Nation around fisheries-related work that's required to happen?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I think that we are largely there. I think there is just a little bit of final work to do on our part.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Ms. Gibbons, last year you met with those from the Lake Babine Nation around the term sheet, which was prepared jointly and co-operatively by the nation and DFO. They were told that it would be going to cabinet in the spring of 2023 for approval, so that they can partner with the federal government to do the vital work to protect species in the fisheries. What happened between the time when you sat and had that discussion and made those commitments and now, and where are we currently?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: As I explained to the chief yesterday, we are working through our approval processes still, unfortunately. These things do take time.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Ms. Gibbons.

We're seeing a lot of movement, and what I'm hearing from many first nations is that we are seeing a lot of movement happening by the British Columbia government to work alongside first nations, to see positive movement through reconciliation in working with first nations on this important work, but we're seeing what I'm hearing described as “stalling”, as “hitting a wall”, on the federal end. Can you explain why we're seeing such deferred action? Why are we not seeing the action that's necessary?

I understand that it takes time, but it's getting to a point where there are some serious concerns. We know, to the point that you made at the beginning, that the stocks are dwindling. Now more than ever, we need to see the federal government working alongside first nations, who understand these stocks better than those who are here in Ottawa. Why the delay, and what can be done today? What commitment can be done, starting today, to assure first nations that this work is going to happen moving forward?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We've been at the tables with these communities for years. We are reaching a stage now of conclusion on many of them. There are little pieces that we need to tie up on our end. As I said, it is unfortunate. I appreciate that communities want to reach the final stages here, but we still have a little bit of work to do at the federal level to get everything right and to do this with all of the authorities that we need. That's where we are.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

We will now go to Mr. Arnold, for five minutes or less, please.

• (1135)

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all four of you from the department for being here today.

I'll start with Ms. Gibbons.

Ms. Gibbons, in 2022-23, DFO started receiving \$92 million, spread over six years, for implementation of the Impact Assessment Act, which the Supreme Court has now deemed to be largely unconstitutional. How has the Supreme Court assessment of the Impact Assessment Act affected DFO's implementation of the act?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We continue to work on the cases that we're working on. As the government has announced, there is work under way to figure out the way forward, given the reference case on the act.

At the end of the day, I think DFO's work on assessing impacts to projects that come through will continue. There will be adjustments, of course, depending on the changes to the Impact Assessment Act, but we will still have a role to play in assessments of impacts on fish and fish habitat.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Do you know what that role will be, in light of the court's decision and until the new revisions to the act come out, or are you just waiting to see?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We're working through that with our colleagues in other departments.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

Mr. Henderson, has the Coast Guard signed off on the final design of the Arctic and offshore patrol ships to be built by Irving shipyards?

Mr. Chris Henderson: Steel was cut for the seventh of the AOPS in August, and so construction of the ship is well under way. There remained a small number—like one or two—of design changes that still needed to be worked out.

I'll give you an example of one of them, just to paint the picture: Davits, for the launching and recovery of the boats, were still being

worked through. However, they weren't affecting the overall construction design, and the resolution of them wasn't going to change the final configuration.

Mr. Mel Arnold: They've finally started construction, then. Thank you.

Has the Coast Guard signed off on the final design of the two polar icebreakers being built by Seaspan and Davie?

Mr. Chris Henderson: The final designs are not under way. The design work isn't finished, no.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Is there any idea when that design work might be finished?

Mr. Chris Henderson: I'm sorry, but I don't have the specific information. We can get that for you.

Mr. Mel Arnold: If you could provide that to the committee in writing, that would be great.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We are working on the first one, at the Vancouver shipyards. We are in the middle of that. With the one that will be built at Davie, it's not yet under way.

Mr. Mel Arnold: You're not even working on the design phase yet.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We're still working through.... We just signed what we call our umbrella agreement with Davie shipyards, and we're now in the process of working on more detailed contracts.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Could you provide a timeline to the committee on the completion of these design phases?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Yes, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you very much.

Ms. Gibbons, for eight years I've been raising the alarm of the threats of aquatic invasive species, in particular zebra mussels and quagga mussels, into waters in British Columbia.

When you and the minister were here on October 26, I reiterated the need for the federal government to provide fair allocation of federal resources for AIS prevention in B.C. Last month, four fellow B.C. MPs and I sent a letter to the minister, pressing her to act and ensure fair allocation of resources. Multiple conservation organizations have also written to the minister, pressing on this matter.

Has the minister discussed actions with you for the rebalancing of allocations for aquatic invasive species prevention?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We have had discussions recently with the minister on aquatic invasive species. In terms of rebalancing the budget, it was not with that specificity, but we have had discussions with her on what our priorities are.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Why does DFO continue to ignore B.C.'s water and the threats, with only 1.75% of DFO funding for AIS activities across the Canada being allocated to the Pacific region—only 1.75%?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I'd be happy to take that number back, Mr. Chair. I have seen numbers.... Now, that's going back some time. I thought the number was higher than that. That's a bit of a surprise, but I am happy to take it back and have a look.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Chair. I think that's my time.

• (1140)

The Chair: You're right on the mark.

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

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses.

To paraphrase the late Henry Kissinger, I hope I have some questions for your answers today. You'll have to think about that for a second.

Lapsed funding: Does the DFO return money to the treasury at the end of the fiscal year?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: There are several things that happen.

First of all—

Mr. Ken Hardie: A brief answer would be fine.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: For our operating budgets, we are allowed to keep a certain percentage. If we have the money remaining, we keep up to that percentage. For other items, we have to ask for it to be re-profiled, and in many cases those are approved. In some cases, they are not approved.

Mr. Ken Hardie: On order of magnitude, how much money are we talking about at the end of fiscal year that could be either re-allocated or re-profiled, etc.?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: The operating budget carry-forward is 5%. Then, on grants and contributions, on capital, we have to request specifically from Finance to have a re-profile.

Mr. Ken Hardie: This is going back to Mr. Small's question. He was talking about a relatively small amount to improve enforcement.

Do you need some changes to get the kind of flexibility, for instance, to take some of this money that would otherwise not be used and reuse it for things that you hear from street level are priorities? Do you need the flexibility there?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: As I said, we have some flexibility, but money comes with a mandate attached to it. New money comes with a mandate attached to it, of course, and the department has its ongoing budget that we get year over year—our “A-base”, we call it—but there are various things we're required to do under our enabling statutes and so forth.

For different functions, we definitely increase the budgets where we need to. Where there's a critical gap in health and safety, for example, we will look at that, but you know, on the flexibility, we can't not do part of the mandate to put all the money in another part of the mandate—to simplify.

Mr. Ken Hardie: If you're not able to fulfill certain activities under the mandate just simply because the staff isn't there, things aren't ready, etc., it would seem that a bit of flexibility, then, to re-purpose that money to something that does need doing right now

would make some sense. This is something that we can obviously take up with the minister.

Has there been a marked shift in the DFO's major priorities over the last, say, five years?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Well, certainly we're very focused on fish and fish habitat protection, so we've had a lot of increase in budgets to be able to do more to protect fish and fish habitat. We've had a lot of money come in for the Coast Guard, for example, for the fleet renewals. For a variety of different priorities, there has been a significant increase in funding, for sure.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Where would we be in that regard on stock assessments and enforcement? Has there been a change, positive or otherwise, in funding available for those two activities?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Yes. There has been additional money come in for stock assessment, for the science work related to it, for enforcement, for sure.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Maybe, Officer Henderson, you could speak to the multi-purpose Coast Guard vessels that are coming in.

In past hearings, we've heard some questions about whether or not trying to be multi-purpose means for things like stock assessment or other investigations—research the DFO needs—that at the very least these new vessels might cause things to be done differently from before, which then kind of messes up the continuity of the data that's being produced. Do you have any comments on that?

Mr. Chris Henderson: The purpose of the multi-purpose vessel is to be as flexible as it can possibly be, and it is being designed with science very much in mind. We will be working very closely with our science colleagues to make sure the new ships are able to do the science that needs to be done.

The offshore fishery science vessels that we have now are the mechanism we're using to ensure the continuity of the scientific data on stocks through comparative trawling. That's occurring as we speak. The multi-purpose vessels in the future are going to be supporting the full range of science as articulated by science, but also will have designed into them that flexibility to do anything else that is within the mandate or is required to support other government departments.

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardie. You're right on the mark.

We'll go now to Madame Desbiens for two and a half minutes or less, please.

[Translation]

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

In the same vein, we've been talking for a long time about reopening the redfish fishery. In fact, when Minister Murray was in office, this possibility was studied, and then a new minister was appointed. We had a fisheries conference where everybody was represented.

I can tell you that, in Quebec, our fishers are downtrodden. In New Brunswick, fishermen have the right to pick algae, they have the right to catch redfish to a certain extent, as well as many species. There seems to be a bit of a dark cloud hanging over Quebec, because not much ever happens.

In the coming months, what will your priorities be for Quebec in terms of replacement fisheries and financial or other support? What are your priorities for Quebec?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I believe the minister intends to make a decision on the redfish fishery in the next few months.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: The next few months?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I can't give you an exact date, but it will be soon. It may be in the next few weeks.

As far as Quebec is concerned, it would certainly be affected by the redfish fishery, as would most of the eastern regions. However, in Quebec, people still do a lot of fishing, particularly snow crab and lobster.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Pinnipeds are eating the lobster, but that's another issue.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: They are, for sure. The minister talks a lot about pinnipeds eating fish.

Discussions are underway on fisheries strategies in Quebec. The department is holding discussions with Quebec fishers. This week, we will discuss strategies to adopt for the future with them. The dialogue is still ongoing.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Desbiens.

We'll now go to Ms. Barron for two and a half minutes or less, please.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Gibbons, again.

My first question is this. People are asking me when the federal government will be coming to the table with money for B.C.'s watershed security fund for restoring secure watersheds for the health of B.C.'s people, its salmon and its economy.

What does that look like? What is the timeline? When will we see the proper investment in B.C.'s watershed security fund?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We'll have to come back to you with a written answer on that.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you.

Ms. Gibbons, recently, along the west coast of Vancouver Island, we saw that a boat.... I don't actually know exactly what happened. Whether it overturned, I think, is still being investigated. However, there were two people, mariners, in distress. One of the mariners has since been found passed away, and the other one is still missing.

Unfortunately, in the aftermath of that incident, it was discovered that the Coast Guard's radio direction-finding capability, which of course is based on well-established technology, has been allowed to fall into such a state of disrepair that it is no longer functional.

Can you speak to this? How could we have let this technology fail mariners at sea? How could we ensure their safety?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I'm going to ask Chris to provide more information, but my understanding is that this technology is perhaps not as effective as it once was.

• (1150)

Mr. Chris Henderson: The direction-finding technology is one of many tools used in search and rescue. As a result of reductions in the past, yes, the direction-finding capability had basically degraded to the point where it was not functioning.

We now have a project in place, a \$42.5-million project, which has been initiated and will continue over the next six years, to replace the 48 direction-finding antennas and to add a 49th. The system is in training to replace it. As I mentioned at the beginning, direction-finding is one thing in a fairly deep tool kit that we use to help locate people in distress at sea.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

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

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

Maybe you could table a document on this at a further time with the committee. It's on the recently announced roughly 5,200 traps awarded for the third year in a row, which I think is temporary—I don't know how long it is for temporary to become permanent—for moderate livelihood licences. Could you table with this committee the banked licences that came from the control numbers and the LFAs that were used for that, please?

As well, could you also table with this committee, on the licence buyback program in the east coast, how much has been spent, how many licences have been bought and for what species, please?

Now, my first question is for the deputy commissioner.

In 2008, the polar class 1 icebreaker was announced at a cost of \$720 million. Now we're up to, I believe, three that we're going to build. Three years ago, the estimate by the Parliamentary Budget Officer was that this was at a cost of \$7.2 billion or \$2.4 billion per ship. That's going from \$720 million to \$2.4 billion, I think it was, per ship. That's times three.

In that report, he estimated that if there was a one-year delay, that would add another \$235 million to the construction of it, and if it was a two-year delay, which we're almost up to, it would add almost another half a billion dollars. Have you updated the financial numbers to know how much over budget these icebreakers are, since they haven't started construction?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Do you want me to start?

Mr. Rick Perkins: On the icebreakers.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Yes. I would say that we're still working on the numbers, for sure, of what the cost will be on all of these projects.

It's important to note, and I know the committee is aware of this, that we're building an industry in this country—a shipbuilding industry. The numbers we used to estimate in the past were based on the sort of run rate of established shipyards.

Obviously your cost structure is going to be different when you're regularly building a class of ship. You're going to have an efficiency rate, which we are now seeing, for example, at Irving on the AOPS. Each ship is costing less than the one before, because they are achieving that efficiency.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Certainly I understand that. However, having these in two shipyards was one of the reasons the PBO identified for the cost overrun.

It sounds like you don't know what the costs are yet. It's change orders and change orders and delay and delay. This was 2008. We're now almost in 2024 and we still don't have an agreed design, so we can estimate that to go up.

I'll move on to my next question.

Last week, here, the Canada Border Services Agency said they don't believe any elver have left this country across the border. Do you agree with that?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We think that elvers do leave, in general. They are best positioned to comment on that, but certainly there is.... I don't know if....

Mr. Rick Perkins: In their testimony, they didn't even know that the elver season is over now.

Does DFO actually communicate with CBSA when there is poaching going on, to tell them to secure the borders?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: We do.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Then why haven't they?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I can't answer that for them, sir.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Okay.

The recent report by the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development indicated that DFO was failing to monitor the fishery harvests and collect the catch data required for fisheries, and that DFO hasn't delivered the corrective measures that it committed to seven years ago when these issues were first brought forward by the Auditor General of Canada.

We're currently studying IUU fishery. This has exposed DFO's failure in this area. What is the department doing, now that it's been exposed yet again by the Auditor General and the environment commissioner, to fix these issues?

• (1155)

Ms. Annette Gibbons: It's a multi-year plan of different activities. We do different things each year to try to improve our ability in this area. One of the things we're working on—

Mr. Rick Perkins: What things would you be doing, since it's been seven years of failure so far?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Well, some work has been done. We've received funding to do that. We've done some already, and we continue to do work.

We're working on e-logs, for example. We're trying to make sure we're able to introduce a system that actually works for fish harvesters.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Mr. Chair, could we request that the PBO update his report from 2021 on the polar class 1 icebreakers and provide us with an updated estimate of the cost?

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Kelloway for five minutes or less.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. Thanks to everyone in attendance today.

I have a couple of questions. I'll start off with the \$24.7 million to continue efforts to protect species at risk. I wonder if officials can go into detail as to how that money's going to be used. That's question one.

Question two is on the \$133 million allocated for reconciliation. I wonder if we can unpack that too, in terms of how the money will be used with respect to that.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I'm sorry, Mr. Kelloway, but you were referring to the funding in the fall economic statement?

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Supplementary estimates (B) contain about \$24.7 million to protect species at risk. I was looking to see how that money's going to be used.

Then you referenced in your opening statement, I believe, \$133 million for reconciliation. I'm looking to unpack that as well.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I'm sorry. Yes, the money for species at risk is the money that was in the fall economic statement of 2022.

Go ahead, Adam.

Mr. Adam Burns (Assistant Deputy Minister, Programs Sector, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): That money will support the department in taking on the development of recovery plans and assessing the very species identified by COSEWIC in order to provide advice to the minister to inform decisions around listing. In the case where a decision is made to not list a species, that money would also support the department in developing alternative-measure plans under the Fisheries Act. Those are things like rebuilding plans under our precautionary approach framework, and so on.

This funding really does support the overall administration of both the Species at Risk Act and the alternative measures that flow in cases in which decisions are made to not list a species under the act.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Thank you for that.

Can you go to reconciliation next, if it's possible?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: Sure. The reconciliation funding is for a variety of different agreements that we have in place across the country. In particular, we signed four new reconciliation agreements on the Atlantic this year. A lot of that money will be flowing under those agreements.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Supplementary estimates (B) contains close to \$5 million—maybe \$4.7 million—to renew and advance clean technology measures. I'm curious as to what sort of clean technology is captured by this particular funding allotment.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: That funding is for aquaculture clean technologies. There are a variety of different activities and different types of aquaculture. You may have an aquaculture site that is running on diesel, for example, so moving that to a cleaner source of energy would be the kind of project we would work on. That's one of the examples.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Does anybody else want to elaborate on that last one?

Ms. Annette Gibbons: No, I think that covers it, Mr. Chair.

• (1200)

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Okay. I'm going to stick to the aquatic side of things.

I'm curious as to how many projects under the nature fund for aquatic species at risk have been funded to date as a result of some pretty historic and multi-year investments.

Ms. Annette Gibbons: I don't have the exact number. It would be a very significant number at this point. We're doing projects all across the country under that fund. I'm certainly happy to give the committee a more detailed response.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Okay. Thank you very much. If that could be brought back in written format, that would be fantastic.

I appreciate the time. That's all I have for now, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kelloway. We're on the mark of 12 o'clock, anyway, so I'm glad you ended it when you did. I think you had 45 seconds left, and it's very gracious of you to give that up.

We'll now thank, of course, our first panel here this morning: Annette Gibbons, deputy minister; Richard Goodyear, assistant deputy minister and chief financial officer; Adam Burns, assistant deputy minister, programs sector; and Chris Henderson, deputy commissioner of operations for the Canadian Coast Guard.

You've always been quite receptive when we invite you to come before committee. Again, thank you for your time today.

We'll suspend for a moment while we switch out the panels.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Chair: Welcome back.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on January 18, 2022, the committee is resuming its study on illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the new witnesses.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For interpretation on Zoom, you have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French audio. Those in the room can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

All comments should be addressed through the chair.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses. Representing the B.C. Commercial Fishing Caucus, we have Jim McIsaac, coordinator, via Zoom. From the Unified Fisheries Conservation Alliance, we have Colin Sproul, president.

We'll start off now, for five minutes or less, with Mr. McIsaac.

Mr. Jim McIsaac (Coordinator, BC Commercial Fishing Caucus): Good morning, everybody, or good afternoon.

I'd really like to thank the committee for the invitation to speak today on IUU fishing. I'm here as a coordinator for the BC Commercial Fishing Caucus, a group formed 13 years ago by 14 commercial fishing organizations to support the common interests of small-scale fisheries along the B.C. coast.

I've been involved in commercial fisheries since I was a kid, about 40 years ago. Fishing paid my way through university, and when I graduated, I stayed fishing because I love the lifestyle: I love the coast; I love fishing; I love studying fishing, and I love providing good, healthy food to my family, my friends and my community. I was in Japan a few weeks at a seafood summit, learning about their fishery. It really is a different world there.

For me, IUU fishing is poaching.

I was first introduced to the term about 10 or 12 years ago in the international context, when Google announced support to create the Global Fishing Watch. They offered to provide their big data management to map international fishing efforts and to shine a light on IUU fishing intrusions into EEZs. In the very earliest stages, they asked the commercial fishing sector to help identify different types of fishing tracks, and we did that. Some states—Indonesia—have gone to extreme measures to protect their EEZs, sending navy vessels to sink foreign fishing vessels. As an aside, Indonesia has protected 80% of the TAC in its EEZ for local, small-scale fishers.

I'd say that Global Fishing Watch has been very successful in raising the profile of IUU fishing and in helping to keep foreign fleets out of EEZs.

What does IUU mean in the Canadian context?

Two months ago, there was a media article on illegal tuna fishing off the west coast of Vancouver Island. Through the chair, I've circulated links to that article. DFO calls this illegal fishing. I would not. From the news article, you'd think that DFO is doing a fantastic job of catching illegal fisheries inside our EEZs. They were patrolling our ocean estate off the west coast of Vancouver Island, found a vessel with illegal catch, confiscated 32,000 pounds of tuna worth \$130,000, dragged the fisherman to court and fined him a further \$6,000.

Some very important facts were left out of that media article. The fisherman had legally fished tuna for over a decade, had purchased a \$1,500 tuna logbook just before going out and hailed out to DFO prior to leaving for tuna fishing. He had been fishing for almost a month and was heading in to deliver when DFO approached the vessel. In the rush to go fishing, the fisherman forgot to buy a \$32 annual tuna licence tab.

You'd think the regulator would bear some responsibility for providing a hail-out number, or maybe they should have called him back when he ordered a \$1,500 logbook, but no. Here, DFO gets praised for capturing the vessel that told them they were going tuna fishing, bought and filled out a tuna logbook, used legal hooks and gear, fished in an open fishing area and spent a month on the water with their vessel identification system on, so that anyone could track the vessel, including DFO. They were not hiding anything.

The whole incident cost the fisherman over \$200,000. In court, the judge asked DFO why they sought only a \$6,000 fine; he thought \$60,000 would be more appropriate. DFO responded that the whole incident was based on a mistake. The judge laughed and upheld the \$130,000 confiscation and \$6,000 fine as submitted. This is not funny.

In 2022, sockeye salmon was available for sale all along the Fraser River. You could get it off Facebook. You could get it out of the back of pickup trucks all along the lower Fraser. Thought most fishermen, how could this be when both the commercial and FSC fisheries were closed? To me, this is IUU fishing. DFO's response was to open a commercial fishery for six hours to blur the illegal sales.

We have a couple of recommendations.

DFO enforcement needs civilian oversight. Left on their own, they appear to cherry-pick the easy—typically, licensed fishermen who report out with logbooks, VMS and electronic monitoring—and leave the real poachers alone.

If the committee is to use the term "IUU", it should define it. Does it mean the same in local settings as it does in international ones? If you are licensed to fish, report your catch and are found to have caught a fish too small or of the wrong species, is this poaching?

• (1210)

Canada needs to define small-scale, artisanal and subsistence fishing and define industrial fishing, so that a 3,000-horsepower trawler catching 100,000 pounds in one tow is not treated the same as a 40-foot lingcod fisherman catching one fish at a time.

Thanks again for the invitation.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McIsaac.

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

Mr. Colin Sproul (President, Unified Fisheries Conservation Alliance): Good afternoon, Chair and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

I speak on behalf of the Unified Fisheries Conservation Alliance. We represent more than 3,000 multispecies harvesters in the maritime provinces. Members of the UFCA, along with its partners in the fisheries sector, are responsible for supporting 25,000 jobs and contributing \$4 billion in economic activity in the Maritimes each year.

The UFCA was formed to bring together many participants in the Atlantic fishery in one reasonable and co-operative voice. The UFCA recognizes the importance of co-operation with indigenous communities and that indigenous peoples have a right to fish for food, social, ceremonial and commercial purposes.

Today, I call the committee's attention to the presence of a massive illegal fishery taking place in the coastal bays of the Maritimes under the guise of a lawful food, social, and ceremonial fishery, particularly in St. Marys Bay. After years of drawing attention to this problem, fishermen in southwest Nova Scotia are left outraged at the perceived complicity of DFO and saddened beyond measure for the destruction of a resource that has sustained all of our families for generations.

Despite many assertions by the government since 2016 that DFO would enforce existing law, they have done anything but. We have been witnesses to a full-scale commercial fishery on one of the most important lobster spawning grounds in the world.

Let me be clear: It is not now and never will be appropriate to fish on spawning grounds during the moulting and breeding seasons. This misconduct is not supported by the Sparrow or Marshall decisions or by any sense of justice or sustainability.

Throughout the recent assault on the resource, DFO has focused on communications and spin while hindering law enforcement objectives. Amidst these conflicting claims, let's concentrate on facts.

On July 11, the director of conservation and protection for the maritime region told CBC News that “[Conservation and protection] is very well equipped to enforce the lobster fishery upcoming,” in reference to the FSC fishery. He went on, “In terms of our capability to adequately monitor compliance of [FSC licences] this summer, I can assure you that [C and P] does have resources to do that effectively in areas such as St. Marys Bay.”

Yet, despite all of these assurances, on August 30, at the Nova Scotia-New Brunswick border, authorities seized more than 8,000 lobsters from St. Marys Bay. Revealingly, this was not due to investigative efforts by DFO, but because the truck carrying the lobsters broke down at the provincial border scale and suspicious officials there reported it. Also, this fall, the UFCA conducted overflights of Saulnierville harbour. On October 5, we observed approximately 25,000 pounds of lobster crated for sale and floating in the harbour and, on October 13, another 12,000 pounds.

Given these huge volumes of lobster landed illegally, how can the director's statements be accurate? Fishing communities are left with only two possible conclusions: Either the department is incredibly incompetent or it is deceiving Canadians, fishing families and the members of this committee.

It's also important to note that of the charges that have been filed across the Maritimes for out-of-season fishing by frontline C and P officers, very few have been moved forward by the Public Prosecution Service of Canada. This has left harvesters understandably suspicious that the justice process in fisheries is suffering from political interference.

If the government were serious about stopping this illegal fishery, DFO could take the simple steps of conducting enforcement patrols and surveillance at the select few harbours where a majority of the illegal fishing is taking place. They could follow the catch to market and end this fishery in a matter of weeks. Instead, they avoid reasonable law enforcement tactics and take actions designed to obscure reality and generate the appearance of enforcement. I can think of no better example of this than the department tasking an icebreaker to St. Marys Bay this summer after public outrage about the illegal fishery—a ship with no ability to enforce a lobster fishery, and surely a huge waste of taxpayer dollars.

Most importantly, we should all recognize what stands to be lost. Although DFO has made attempts to obscure its own data, it shows a sharp decline in lobster landings in St. Marys Bay after the failed policy objectives of this government. This is the first week of southwest Nova Scotia's lobster fishery, the most valuable in the

world. Alarming, reports are flooding in from across the region of extremely low landings, when fishers should expect their best catches.

Much of the prosperity of our coastal economy is predicated on a healthy lobster resource, and that prosperity now faces an existential threat. The loss of this fishery would devastate our communities, indigenous and non-indigenous alike. The continued acceptance of this activity by the government does not serve the objectives of conservation or reconciliation. If DFO does not act soon, there may be no fishery left for the UFCA's members or for rights holders. The fishing families of the Maritimes demand action now, before all is lost.

Chair and committee members, thank you. I invite your questions.

• (1215)

The Chair: Thank you, sir, for that.

We'll now go to Mr. Small for six minutes or less.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for coming out and taking part in our study today.

My first question is for Mr. Sproul, Mr. Chair.

You indicated in your opening remarks that fishery stakeholders believe the government allowed IUU lobster fishing to take place this past summer.

Why do you think they allowed that activity to take place?

Mr. Colin Sproul: I think it's one of the most important questions we should recognize here.

Since 2016, there has been a ton of effort by fishing organizations in the Maritimes to deal with this issue. Throughout, what we've gathered as an answer to this is that the government stopped enforcing the law and hopes to improve the situation at the rights reconciliation table and for the Crown-indigenous negotiators. We think it's obviously been a failed tactic and has not led to the successes that were hoped for.

Mr. Clifford Small: Is it just in St. Marys Bay that this illegal fishing activity is taking place, or have you heard talk of other areas throughout the Maritimes where it's been happening?

• (1220)

Mr. Colin Sproul: Certainly, it's happening all across the maritime provinces, but particularly in St. Marys Bay.

The other area of chief concern is St. Peter's Bay in Cape Breton. We've seen a huge amount of out-of-season fishing taking place there and the diversion of lobster from its rightful use for food, social and ceremonial purposes by first nations into the commercial market. In a very small area like St. Peter's Bay, it's certainly starting to be a very important conservation concern.

Mr. Clifford Small: Have these concerns been brought forward to DFO?

Mr. Colin Sproul: They have, certainly, for eight years.

Mr. Clifford Small: What has their response been?

Mr. Colin Sproul: Their response has been that they intend to enforce the law and move forward on it, but we don't see the results. We see only the statements, but those don't result in effective law enforcement in St. Peter's Bay and St. Marys Bay.

Mr. Clifford Small: If indeed this is the case, what is the end result of IUU fishing going to be for the lobster industry in the Maritimes?

Mr. Colin Sproul: I think the results are already becoming evident.

We just saw the closure of one of the largest lobster processors in southwest Nova Scotia. In the media, the owners of the company said it was due to a lack of product being processed there. We're already starting to see it. We've seen a decline in catches over the last six or seven years in St. Marys Bay and all across southwest Nova Scotia. The fishing industry is starting to draw a link between this and the incredible amount of lobster being removed out of season, as well as damage to the breeding stock resource.

The long-term consequences are.... The fact is, the lobster fishery is the economic backbone of Nova Scotia. It's by far the most important industry. It's the same in Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, too. It's incredibly important to our economies, and to coastal communities, both indigenous and non-indigenous. Anything that endangers the resource needs to be taken seriously by the department.

Conservation needs to come first, and ideology and politics after.

Mr. Clifford Small: I heard you say that DFO officials put out a press release or spoke to the media in early July, talking about their capabilities—that they're able to enforce the law.

Do you think they have the capabilities? Do you think DFO is committing the resources to C and P that it needs to, in order to enforce the law?

Mr. Colin Sproul: No, they are certainly not. We've seen a big decline in DFO's enforcement presence on the water in the Maritimes. Local DFO officers relate to us that, frequently, they can't mount patrols because of staffing and fuel budgets, or the availability of vessels.

However, in terms of what's taking place in St. Marys Bay, it's not about assets. It's about intent and willingness.

Mr. Clifford Small: Would you like to elaborate on that a little, Mr. Sproul?

Mr. Colin Sproul: Yes. Certainly, there are reasonable enforcement tactics that could end out-of-season fishing, which we've pushed for very strongly.

The year before last, we saw more C and P concentration in terms of going after the market for illegal product. If the market is removed, the fisheries will end. We think it's an easy way to deal with the problem.

I also think it revealed the ineptitude of the department in preventing the fishing from taking place in the first place. The summer before last, we saw some huge seizures of lobster by the department—hundreds of crates at the border and the airport. It revealed the magnitude of the fishery. This year, we didn't see those seizures taking place, but we know the lobsters were still coming out of the water.

Mr. Clifford Small: Why do you think there would have been a difference in the C and P effort from 2022 to this past year? What do you think went on there?

Mr. Colin Sproul: I can't speak for the department, but from the perspective of our members, it's that the enforcement activities taking place on the marketplace side of the problem were revealing the magnitude of the fishery. It's very hard for the department, on one hand, to say that an illegal fishery is not taking place and, on the other hand, to make seizures of hundreds of thousands of pounds of lobsters in Nova Scotia.

The Chair: You have only 10 seconds, Mr. Small. You'll hardly get a question out, being from Newfoundland. I'm from there, too, so we'll go on to the next questioner.

Mr. Hardie, go ahead for six minutes or less, please.

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

Mr. McIsaac, do you care to add anything to Mr. Sproul's testimony so far?

• (1225)

Mr. Jim McIsaac: I would say that you just have to look at what's going on with the salmon in British Columbia, and that's what to expect in your lobster fishery, if the same kind of approach is taken.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Complementary enforcement.... Yes, we talk about DFO and what they do or don't do out on the water. To both of you, do you see the need for, or do you see evidence of, the complementary enforcement on the buyers or the processors? Does FINTRAC start to monitor money exchanges, etc.? Is any of that going on?

We'll start with you, Mr. Sproul.

Mr. Colin Sproul: Starting back in 2016, fishery organizations in the Maritimes came together in Sambro, Nova Scotia. We tried to bring relevant government departments to bear on the issue: CFIA, CBSA, DFO—

Mr. Ken Hardie: I'll ask for a relatively short answer, because I have more questions.

Mr. Colin Sproul: Okay. I would say that there's a lot of room for the government to improve, with collaboration between the relevant agencies, to stop the movement of the product from Nova Scotia to the marketplace.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Do the processors know what they're dealing with when this stuff comes in for them to process?

Mr. Colin Sproul: I think sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't, depending on how many hands it has passed through. Certainly, when the product is being landed in massive quantities out of season, there has to be a recognition by the processors that it's unlawfully harvested.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Mr. McIsaac, out on the west coast, is the issue generally perceived to be too small a deal, and maybe, is it too dangerous to enforce?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: I don't think it's too small of a deal. The entire salmon fishery is pretty much closed here. There's very little commercial fishery left on our coast. The largest processor in North America has closed shop in Prince Rupert. There is no processing and no canning of salmon here anymore, except for one very small processor on the island.

We're a shadow of what we used to be as a salmon fishery.

Mr. Ken Hardie: For about the past year, I've been a subscriber to a community fishery that we probably all know well: Skipper Otto. Is there any aspect of the community fisheries like Skipper Otto that can either open the way for the illegal fisheries or help us do something about them? Is there any reflection there, Mr. McIsaac?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: I think it's a great example of connecting directly with legal fishing. That's a platform where independent harvesters are making a living in the face of the regulatory frame that's being put out there and the management regime that's being created here. Closing their eyes on the poaching and just focusing on legal fishing is, I would say, what C and P is doing here on our coast.

Mr. Ken Hardie: This is a final question for both of you.

What do the first nations leadership say? Obviously, there's a big, bright light shone on those communities as being engaged in illegal fisheries. What do they say? Do we have enough clarity on indigenous rights, moderate livelihood, the FSC fishery, etc.? Are we really in a position to be really conclusive, to know when a fishery is illegal versus something they're entitled to do?

We'll start with you, Mr. Sproul.

Mr. Colin Sproul: Could you pose the question one more time? It was very long. I want to make sure I get the flavour of exactly what you were asking.

Mr. Ken Hardie: We'll go to the last part. Is there enough clarity in the law around indigenous rights?

Mr. Colin Sproul: That is certainly the most important part of the question. The answer is, no, there is not enough clarity under the law. I think it was clear, after the second Marshall decision, that the court was sending that back to the government and to the House in that it required further negotiation.

I think there has been a lot of good effort since that time, by a whole bunch of successive governments, to negotiate with the nations to move forward, but there needs to be good faith between the government and first nations leadership that access supplied to first nations will allow people to fish, or else the solution will never become apparent.

• (1230)

Mr. Ken Hardie: Mr. McIsaac, could you reflect on that?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: I would say that on this coast, it's outside of nations. It's individuals. It's not just first nations individuals who are responsible for this. It's much broader than what you're implying with your question.

Mr. Ken Hardie: I think I'll end there.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

We'll now go to Madame Desbiens for six minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you to our witnesses.

Mr. Sproul, do you discuss the illegal fisheries you mentioned with your counterparts in Quebec?

[*English*]

Mr. Colin Sproul: Yes, certainly we do. We consider the RPPSG a very close ally. Our positions on the issue are very closely aligned, I would say. The issue has really important implications for the future of Quebec fisheries. We certainly co-operate fully and frequently with the RPPSG.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: What does that tell you?

You say that there are just as many problems on the Quebec side. Would an alliance, a common front or a grouping be necessary to give people a stronger voice and remedy the situation?

[*English*]

Mr. Colin Sproul: Certainly. There is a group or coalition amongst people in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the RPPSG, the MFU, the PEIFA and the gulf fleet planning board. We represent essentially the same interests in the Maritimes region. Although we're not officially both part of the same group, our positions on the issue certainly align. We work frequently together.

The leadership of the RPPSG has been a really strong voice for a respectful approach to integration of first nations into the fishery. They have also pointed out the fallacies of how the government has moved forward on that, particularly in the LMG issue, where the minister chose to abdicate a responsibility to manage the fishery and the rights reconciliation agreement, certainly not in line with the Marshall decision. It's a chief concern of the RPPSG's.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you.

My next question is for Mr. McIsaac or Mr. Sproul.

I know it's hard to gauge because it's illegal, but do you have a sense of what percentage of seafood products comes from the Gulf and what percentage comes from illegal fisheries in eastern waters?

[English]

Mr. Colin Sproul: I think from fishermen's perspective in Atlantic Canada, the whole point is that we don't know the answer to that question, because the government refuses to keep any type of accurate records about FSE fisheries. Records were kept for a while, until the records started to reveal the abuses of the fishery. At that time the government stopped keeping the records, but they wouldn't represent the entirety of what the fishery really means.

Anecdotally, we've seen maybe two to three million pounds removed from St. Marys Bay this summer, but it's really hard to pinpoint the number exactly. That's just one location where the illegal fishing is centred.

[Translation]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: That's a huge amount for that sector alone.

What is the Department of Fisheries and Oceans not doing that could solve a lot of this problem?

You said earlier that we really need to tighten up oversight.

Should the fines be higher? Does the department need to invest massively to counter illegal fishing in order to protect the resource?

• (1235)

[English]

Mr. Colin Sproul: There's a really simple answer to that question. The department needs to equally enforce the law, regardless of a fisher's identity. For the benefit of all stakeholders in the fishery, the department needs to seize the vessels that are engaged in the out-of-season fishing.

[Translation]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you, that's very interesting.

In your region, some fishers who are probably experiencing difficulties. In Quebec, many are seeing their fishing potential decrease.

As we said earlier, some people see mackerel being sold on the market.

In fisheries, are we currently seeing any social and psychological consequences as a result of this somewhat dark aspect of fishery, illegal fishing?

[English]

Mr. Colin Sproul: I was really hoping to be asked that question today.

This summer, our members and fishermen across the maritime provinces were polled by Nanos, and the poll showed some really interesting things. I think one of the most important things it revealed was that 67% of harvesters in the Maritimes said that they view current DFO management as a threat to the future of their fisheries. That's a really shocking statistic, and I think it should be

front and centre on the minister's desk—to help to overcome that problem.

The follow-on effect is that there's a lack of respect on the water for frontline DFO C and P staff, which is not their fault, and it makes their jobs really difficult. When they go aboard one of our members' boats—members who have just viewed the resource that their families depend on being fished in a totally unsustainable manner, and then they're attempting to abide by the law all the time.... It makes members not as willing to be cordial with frontline DFO staff, and I think that's really unfortunate. However, that lack of respect for the department and for conservation measures is being bred by the department, which is also evidencing a lack of respect for conservation to our members.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Desbiens.

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

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

Mr. Sproul, I know that we've already covered quite a few questions, and I feel that you've given us some good information, so perhaps I won't go on for too long, and then I'll go to Mr. McIsaac.

One thing I'm trying to understand.... I know it's a very complex issue, and I don't even want to try to pretend to understand all of the complexity and intricacies of the situation and what's happening in Nova Scotia, but we do know that we had a lot of learning—at least, that's the hope—that came from what occurred a few years ago with the Mi'kmaq in making sure there was communication around Mi'kmaq conservation principles, the knowledge that was being used by Mi'kmaq fishers. One thing that came up—at least, to my knowledge—was that there was a breakdown in communication, and that information wasn't being transferred appropriately to indigenous and non-indigenous fishers, which resulted in increased tensions.

I just want to highlight some of the things you brought up. You brought up that you're not seeing reports being collected. Could you speak a bit more about what information you're receiving from the DFO around the actual data and reports of what's happening on the water, and maybe as a follow-up to that, what you feel would be a good avenue to bring everybody to the table to have the same information, to see more collaborations? That's just a vital piece here in moving forward. Could you provide some comments on that?

Mr. Colin Sproul: I actually think it's central to resolution of the issue. It's something we have harped on to DFO for years. If we could understand what the nature of rights implementation would be so that we could relay that to our members, the integration would happen much more smoothly.

The answer to the first part of your question is nothing. We don't receive any information. We have been kept totally in the dark as the government has hidden behind the nation-to-nation process.

While we have great respect for the nation-to-nation process, there are other examples, such as that of the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization, of how the government engages in nation-to-nation processes and also has the industry represented at a table in a separate room. There's that mechanism for the government to share information with us and for us to provide our expertise to the government as well, but they refuse to do that.

More importantly, it's incumbent on the minister and on the government to create a place to bring first nations harvesters and non-indigenous harvesters back to the table again. Surely the responsibility falls to the government to find a way forward for all of us. We're eager to sit down at the table with our first nations partners. Ultimately, a lobster doesn't care who catches it. We all intend to share the ocean together profitably into the future. We really hope that the minister of the day can find a way to bring us back to the table together, because having everything happen in silos of secrecy has not been at all conducive to improving the situation.

• (1240)

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: To clarify, Mr. Sproul, there have been no communications around creating such an opportunity to date.

Mr. Colin Sproul: There certainly has been communication about it from the industry to the department, but there's been no communication back.

I think the opportunity is still there. I know that all the fishery leaders in the Maritimes are ready to sit at that table.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you very much.

It's nice to see you again, Mr. McIsaac.

In previous meetings, we often heard the term "IUU" applied to illegal high seas fishing, often by foreign actors. I'm hearing a lot, of course, about the real implications for local fisheries, more on the domestic side of what we're seeing around illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing and how that plays into the black market. I'm wondering if you could expand a little on some of the examples you're providing and whether you're seeing the accountability mechanisms and people out there holding to account those who are participating in illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing.

Mr. Jim McIsaac: The use of the term really has come from the foreign fleets fishing in EEZs. EEZs were created in the 1970s. We had foreign fishing vessels fishing within sight of our coast up until 1977, and then some encroachments on that after 1977 as well.

We have this split jurisdiction between managing fisheries and managing processing and the markets. That creates a complicated kind of milieu in which to deal with some of the issues.

In the case of salmon, if DFO is managing the fishery and the fish are all over the market, what is the province supposed to do? Is it supposed to go out there and stop the sale of that fish, when it's not the one that is regulating the actual fishery? It's a really mixed bag here.

I would put the responsibility of the harvest onto DFO. Fishermen have been talking about the illegal fishing in the Fraser River for more than 30 years. A few years ago, when they were reporting, the department was confiscating something like 1,000 nets a year in the river. They're down to confiscating 200 or 300 now. When they

reported 1,000, they said they were getting only about 10% of it. The number of fish, through legal fishing on the river, was lower than that in the days for the actual commercial fishery.

The entire system appears to be broken. We're heading to a place where we're not going to have legal commercial fisheries anymore because of the structure and the system that's been put in place.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

We'll now go to Mr. Arnold for five minutes or less.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, both, for being available today for this important study.

I'll start out with Mr. McIsaac.

Can you briefly describe what the situation was with the alleged illegal sale of Fraser River sockeye during a time when there was no commercial season? That's so we have a brief testimony of what took place.

• (1245)

Mr. Jim McIsaac: Last year, 2022, was a cycle year for sockeye. That means it's one of the larger returns expected. There was no commercial fishery anticipated on the Fraser River, but there was fishing going on, all the way up the lower part of the Fraser River. There were pickup trucks selling sockeye salmon. There were Facebook advertisements of where to purchase sockeye salmon along the Fraser. Then, unexpectedly, the department opened the commercial fishery—a six-hour opening. That gave some legitimacy to the illegal sale of fish along the river.

That's the picture I would paint of it.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

The amount of fish being advertised for sale prior to the opening... Was it a few fish? Was it totes full of fish, or truckloads of fish? Can you describe, roughly, how much fish you think might have been involved?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: I just heard reports that there was dumping of thousands of fish along different points of the Fraser River. When fish go off.... They go off fairly quickly if they're not iced.

I'm not sure how much of that illegally caught fish got into markets, but I would say it was significant.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

A six-hour opening is pretty short. Has there ever been that short of an opening, previously?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: There has been, yes.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Has it only been on a one-day basis, or has it been for hours on different days of the week, or at different times? Is it six hours for an entire season?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: It's not six hours for an entire season, no.

We've been getting gradually less and less time. Between 30 years ago and now.... It's almost nothing that we're getting, in terms of time on the river.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

I'll switch up now to Mr. Sproul.

Mr. Sproul, what is needed to address illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing for the conservation of sustainable fisheries, whether it's lobster or any fishery? What are a few key recommendations that you see are needed to address the concerns?

Mr. Colin Sproul: I think the first one centres on communications. There needs to be clear communication to the fishing communities of Atlantic Canada about what FSC rights constitute and what they don't constitute. That needs to come from the very top. It's a responsibility of the government and the minister. In the absence of that, our communities are left in this vacuum where people are exploring what they can and can't do and figuring it out on their own. That's what, certainly, has led to the conflict. That's priority one.

Priority two is for the government to put reasonable levels of resources into places like St. Peter's Bay and St. Marys Bay and directly target the problem. Board and seize vessels that are clearly fishing outside of DFO-issued food, social and ceremonial licenses. It's also important to point out that there are other losers here, too. There are many first nations operating food, social and ceremonial fisheries within the rules. They are certainly just as much a loser in this situation as our members are.

Thirdly, I think there needs to be a recognition among first nations communities that this is food intended for first nations mouths, not for diversion to profits for people. They should demand better from their own governments engaging in that type of activity.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

I want to get one more quick question in with Mr. McIsaac.

I'm recalling the prawn-tubbing issue. I think you know what I mean by that. There seemed to be an inordinate amount of effort and number of resources put into what appeared to be a very irrelevant or minor situation.

Can you elaborate a bit on that, Mr. McIsaac?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: I totally agree. Why C and P was focused on prawn tubbing never came to light. I would say it goes back to some kind of civilian oversight of C and P.

It needs to be held accountable and answerable for what it's actually focusing its limited resources on. That, I think, was a complete waste of time. It was a complete waste of the House's time, the committee's time and everybody else's time involved in it. I don't think it did anything to reduce IUU fishing. I don't think it did anything but impact legal harvesters.

● (1250)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arnold.

We'll now go to Mr. Hanley for five minutes or less.

Mr. Brendan Hanley (Yukon, Lib.): I thank you both for appearing today.

Mr. Sproul, I wanted to start with you. You talked about how the legal landings are now alarmingly low.

Can you comment on whether that's a seasonal effect, or you're seeing a cumulative effect in these areas where the landings are low?

Mr. Colin Sproul: Certainly, the lobster resource is cyclical. The catches go up and down throughout the years. Catches are affected by environmental factors and lots of other things, but we believe that there is beginning to be a cumulative effect, especially in places like southwest Nova Scotia and eastern Cape Breton, where a lot of the fishery is taking place.

I think the important thing to point out is not the amount of lobster, but the location where the fisheries are being operated. They're very important, shallow, warm fishery spawning grounds that haven't had fishing in them, by a self-imposed rule from lobster fishermen, for more than 100 years, because we've understood the importance of those places.

We believe the cumulative effect is not only related to the lobster that's coming ashore, but also to the damage to breeding females when they're in such a vulnerable stage around their moult in the summertime.

I think that's why it's so important to deal with the issue.

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Linking that back to your previous testimony, you were just talking about some of the recommendations. I think you mentioned the need for engagement with first nations, but also for first nations to be elevating this issue. Surely, when it comes to the actual conservation of the species, this is incredibly important for first nations as well.

What are you hearing so far from first nations individuals or leaders in their concerns about the impact on stocks?

Mr. Colin Sproul: Sadly, there's a huge lack of communication between fishery leadership right now and first nations leadership in the Maritimes, because of the unfortunate situation that unfolded in 2020.

What I'll say about it is this. Every fisher in Atlantic Canada recognizes that there's a direct link between people who are fishing out of season and first nations who lease their access delivered in the Marshall implementation strategy with non-indigenous fishing companies.

What I mean by that is a lot of the people who are fishing out of season in places like St. Marys Bay are citizens of nations who have been dispossessed of the entirety of their fishery access that's been delivered over the last 23 years. It's leased by first nations governments for a direct economic benefit for the nation, but it really misses the real value of the Marshall implementation, which in our view is not about lobsters on a wharf or dollars in a bank account. It's about creating a lasting legacy of prosperity for coastal first nations and creating fishing families like our members.

That is what we view as the real benefit that should be delivered to first nations, and they're continually losing that through the government's refusal to put caveats on the access that require participation by only indigenous people.

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Thank you.

Briefly, to Mr. McIsaac, in your opening comments you were referring to some international practices. You mentioned Japan. I think you were there at a meeting and you observed some practices.

Could you elaborate on what we might be able to learn from other global examples?

Mr. Jim McIsaac: That could take a couple of days.

In brief, their fishing act has one similarity to ours. It came out in 1868, the same year. That's where the similarity ends.

They download the responsibility for fisheries management onto the prefecture, which would be equivalent to our provinces or regional governments, rather than doing it centrally. All of the licensing for small-scale fisheries goes through that prefecture. The prefecture ensures that licensing is local. With local ownership and participation, all of the benefits are in that local area.

DFO was just doing a beneficial ownership study of who gets the benefit of our fishing licences. DFO was really happy to report that one in five licence-holders wouldn't even respond to that, but they thought that only 2% were foreign-owned. That is disrespectful of the question and disrespectful of our communities.

We need to know who is benefiting. It's only the local communities that are really going to care about that.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hanley.

We'll now go to Madame Desbiens for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Sproul, we don't have a lot of time.

In a school zone, certain conditions must be met. If someone speeds or doesn't behave properly, the penalty can be very severe. If they pass a school bus, it can cost them dearly, because the consequences can be dramatic. It can cost lives.

I'm comparing school zones and fishing zones so that you understand the essence of my question.

We know that there are areas where fisheries can undermine the reproduction and sustainability of the resource. In your opinion, should we consider the possibility of enhancing surveillance in those areas and increasing the penalties? Do you think that could have a beneficial effect for the future? In doing so, could we educate people and influence their behaviour?

[*English*]

Mr. Colin Sproul: I don't think it's as simple as an increase to the penalties.

I heard a member of this committee suggest two weeks ago, as the committee was meeting on IUU, that he had heard from local C and P officers in his community that they "close their eyes" for certain groups of fisherman.

I would harken back to my previous comments that it's more about the intent and the willingness of this government to equally enforce existing fisheries policy in the interim until the rights reconciliation process can move forward to a successful conclusion. I think it's incumbent on the government to do that, for two reasons: to protect the base of the economy of Atlantic Canada, but also protect the future of the resource for those very rights holders they are attempting to help while inadvertently potentially damaging the ability for them to access their rights forever.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: In short, we could conclude that a fair balance and the fact that no one feels infringed upon would improve the social climate and communications. When people don't feel infringed upon, they engage less often in prohibited behaviour. That's why you want us to make our recommendations. It's a matter of improving the relationships between the various groups so that everyone has a better understanding of the situation.

Is that what you're saying?

[*English*]

Mr. Colin Sproul: I think that's a reasonable path forward. I think it can also lead to the resolution of another key problem that I haven't mentioned. It's that Nanos polling has revealed that a majority of fishermen in the Maritimes feel that the biggest threat to their fisheries is indigenous out-of-season fishing. Ten years ago, those same people viewed their indigenous partners in the fishery as their greatest allies, especially in the fight to prevent encroachment on our important fishing grounds by other offshore developers.

I think it's really sad that there's been a fracture of the two communities. It's incumbent on the government to bring us back together in the spirit of conservation and reconciliation.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Desbiens.

We'll finish up now with Ms. Barron.

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

Thank you, Mr. Sproul, for being here today.

I'm going to direct the remainder of my questions to Mr. McIsaac.

Mr. McIsaac, I appreciate that my colleague, Mr. Arnold, brought up the prawn tubbing example that happened in British Columbia, because it's just such a good example of what happens when we have decisions being made by those who don't actually understand the fishery on the water. Perhaps they have good intentions, but I think the prawn tubbing example is just such a good example of a lack of understanding of how it actually works on the water versus high-level...theoretically how one would like to see it work.

I'm wondering if you can speak to that a bit, around the importance that this work, moving forward, include in the decision-making process those who are on the water, so that the steps forward are applicable and actually helpful on the water.

• (1300)

Mr. Jim McIsaac: Yes, that's a great question. Thank you for that.

Where do I start with that?

Tying and linking to harvesters is critical for all different components of the fisheries and for understanding what's going on in the water, understanding the science and the data that science is actually collecting, helping interpret that, and helping to ensure that the benefits of the fishery are coming through the communities.

It's something that I would say.... The whole social aspect of fisheries is one that the DFO appears to have—and has—turned a blind eye to over the last 150 years. It doesn't seem to be of interest to the department. What the department is doing with foreign beneficial ownership of our fishery is an example of that, but what it's doing with first nations and what it did in the Marshall decision by hand-

ing over licences without kind of thinking about who's going to benefit from them and about how they can actually be used to make sure they are being used in the way that's intended....

The DFO sets the frame for all of that stuff, yet it doesn't pay attention to the real, important matters of that. It's just kind of like the issue about setting a table for collaboration. The DFO can set that table so that people can come together and help decide what's best to do with the fishery, but it's not. It's not doing that. It's not setting a table that is open for those kinds of collaborative solutions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron. You're a bit over.

That concludes our committee meeting for today, I guess.

I want to say a big thank you to Mr. Sproul and Mr. McIsaac for sharing their valuable knowledge with the committee today as we work our way through this particular study.

On Thursday, we will resume the study with the appearance of witnesses. I will let the committee know that I won't be here on Thursday. I'll be out of town, and Mr. Arnold will be asked to chair, so there's a chance that we can maybe get back at some people somehow.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Oh, no!

Mr. Mel Arnold: It's an inexcusable absence of the chair.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Chair: Again, thank you to everyone: our analysts, our clerks, our translation team, and everybody who made the meeting possible and such a success today.

Thank you, everyone, and enjoy the rest of your day.

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