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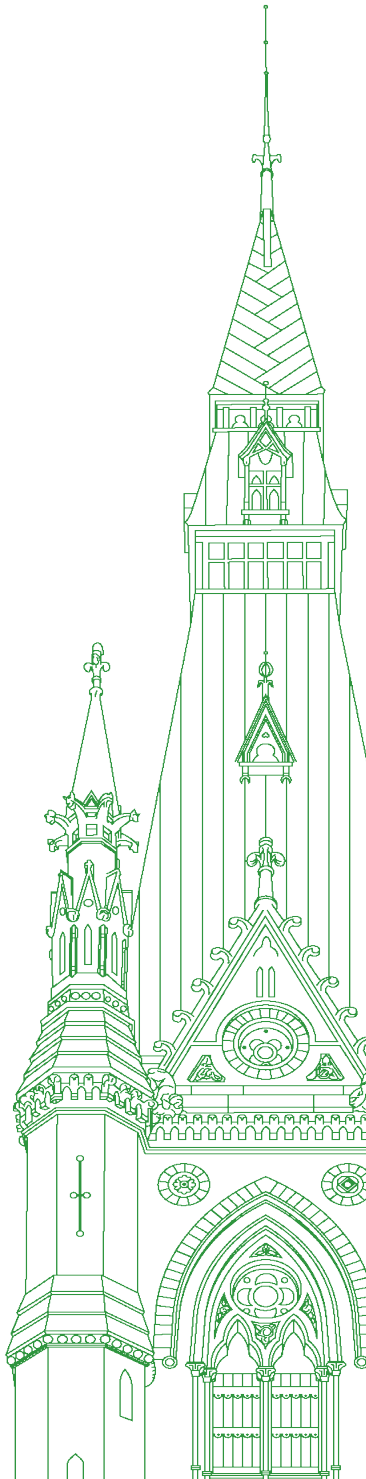

Chair: Mr. Ken McDonald

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

Friday, November 4, 2022

● (1305)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 40 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans.

This meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022.

Before we proceed, I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of witnesses and members alike.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

For interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice of at the bottom of your screen of “floor”, “English” or “French”. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

Please address all comments through the chair.

Finally, this is a reminder that screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted.

The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on September 20, 2022, the committee is commencing its study of the closure of the mackerel fishery in Atlantic Canada and the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

I would also like to advise all members that all of the sound checks have been done for all of the witnesses. They have been working fine.

I would now like to welcome our first panel of witnesses.

We have Sebastián Pardo, sustainable fisheries coordinator with the Ecology Action Centre. We are also joined by Katie Schleit, senior fisheries advisor with Oceans North. We also have Dominique Robert, professor and Canada research chair in fisheries ecology, Institut des sciences de la mer, Université du Québec à Rimouski, who is appearing as an individual,

We'll now go to opening remarks for five minutes or less.

Mr. Pardo, we'll go to you first.

Dr. Sebastián Pardo (Sustainable Fisheries Coordinator, Ecology Action Centre): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Good afternoon.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear before you. This is a very important study, as we need to think about how to help the people who are the most impacted right now by fisheries closures. We also need to think about how to rebuild fisheries for the future.

[*English*]

I have a doctorate in fisheries science and I work with the Ecology Action Centre, which is one of Atlantic Canada's oldest and largest environmental organizations. It was founded in 1971. We advocate having sustainable and resilient fisheries that support thriving coastal communities. As part of this work, we are members of the Atlantic mackerel advisory committee and have been part of the mackerel rebuilding plan working group since its inception.

Today I would like to focus on three main reasons that closing the mackerel fishery was the right decision and why it should remain closed until there are robust signs of rebuilding.

First, the best available science shows that a moratorium was the only option left to rebuild the population. Mackerel have been in the critical zone for most of the past decade. Even though a rebuilding plan was finished in 2020, none of its objectives have been met as management decisions to reduce catches prior to the moratorium have failed to encourage population growth.

Furthermore, the abundance of reproductive-aged fish in 2021 was the lowest ever recorded, and the largest and oldest fish, which produce higher numbers of eggs, have almost disappeared from the population. All these indicators are evidence of the dire state of the mackerel stock and of how the fishery closure enacted this year is the best option to encourage rebuilding.

On top of this, the Fisheries Act states that for species in the critical zone, like mackerel, conservation considerations must prevail. This closure brings management of this fishery in line with the precautionary approach, which is a cornerstone of Canada’s sustainable fisheries framework.

Second, more mackerel being seen in some regions does not mean the population is recovering. This phenomenon could be explained by reasons other than increases in mackerel numbers.

One explanation could be a behaviour well documented among many fishes, the best example being cod, in which, when fish numbers decline, some species start to school more frequently, creating the appearance of higher numbers. Another explanation is that marine species in the north Atlantic are already expanding north due to warming waters, and, for example, mackerel historically observed on the Scotian Shelf could now be seen further north in eastern Newfoundland. Preliminary research done by Fisheries and Oceans, which was presented at the last advisory committee meeting, suggests that mackerel in eastern Newfoundland, one of the regions in which they're being perceived to be in higher numbers, do not belong to a separate breeding population, as some have proposed.

All of this being said, we would welcome more resources being directed for further studies to help elucidate these unknowns.

Last, and most important is that rebuilding the fishery is the only long-term option for fishers who depend on mackerel, and they must be supported while the population rebuilds. Thousands of people across Atlantic Canada and Quebec are already undergoing financial hardship because of the closure and indeed face severe uncertainty, as it is difficult to predict when the fishery will reopen.

Unfortunately, past management decisions that have reduced catches year after year without resulting in population growth have slowly brought this hardship upon fishing communities. Rebuilding the mackerel population to a healthy level can support a thriving fishery with much higher catches than those seen over the past decade. We could have more fishers and processors making a living, and also a bait source that is more readily available.

In contrast, reopening the fishery before rebuilding would allow for limited short-term catches but would risk further depleting the population, a scenario that would prolong hardship to fishing communities.

In the meantime, it is absolutely crucial to ensure that the people directly affected, particularly small-scale fishers and plant workers who are impacted the most, have support to manage financially through these closures. It is also crucial that their coastal communities not be further impacted by lack of opportunities and that they can be ready to fish when these stocks are healthy again.

I will repeat those three reasons that the mackerel fishery should remain closed in the short-term until there are robust signs of rebuilding: One, the best available science shows that a moratorium was the only option left to rebuild the population; two, more mackerel being seen in some regions does not necessarily mean the population is recovering; and three, rebuilding the fishery is the best long-term option for fishers who depend on mackerel, and they must be supported while the population rebuilds.

In simple terms, this issue boils down to a question of values. Do we value short-term economic relief at the risk of permanent stock collapse and long-term financial hardship, or do we value the long-term sustainability of this fishery and the future of fishing communities?

Thank you very much for your time. I'm happy to take any questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Ms. Schleit for five minutes or less. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Katie Schleit (Senior Fisheries Advisor, Oceans North): Thank you.

Thank you very much for inviting me to participate today. I'm joining from Mi'kma'ki, and I'm here representing Oceans North, a Canadian charity that supports marine conservation and sustainable fisheries in partnership with coastal and indigenous communities.

I started working on mackerel in 2014 when the TAC, the total allowable catch, was set at 10 times more than DFO's scientific advice and the stock was already critically depleted. Since that time, I have been engaged in mackerel science and management alongside DFO, industry and indigenous groups in an effort to see the stock recover.

Atlantic mackerel have been critically depleted for more than a decade now, and the spawning stock biomass, or the estimate of stock abundance, is at the lowest level ever recorded. Also, while mackerel can live up to 20 years, we rarely see fish more than five years old now. This is a common feature of overfishing. Over many years, the fish that are caught get smaller and smaller. Fewer fish are also surviving long enough to reproduce.

Fisheries rebuilding is now legally required under the Fisheries Act, and mackerel are among the priority species, a move that was supported by all parties. A rebuilding plan for mackerel was released in 2020, after several years of collaboration and sincere effort from industry to recommend measures and take action to rebuild the stock. Unfortunately, a year later, we failed to achieve the lowest objective: seeing positive growth in the stock.

Oceans North is of the strong view that the minister's decision to close the commercial and bait fisheries for Atlantic mackerel in 2022 was evidence-based, difficult, but ultimately necessary.

We understand that the 2022 closure had immediate financial consequences for the industry, but while the short-term financial pain is real, it could lead to long-term gains. The benefit of a rebuilt stock is often overlooked in the economic analysis of fisheries quota reductions. In 2020, Oceans North released a cost-benefit analysis conducted by Gardner Pinfold Consulting on the economic benefit of rebuilding mackerel. It revealed that minimizing fishing could lead to benefits estimated at over $54 million. That's a 12.9% return on the investment of rebuilding the stock to healthier levels. A rebuilt stock can benefit everyone and the ecosystem.

The reliance on the critically depleted mackerel stock as bait for many in the lobster industry has been a topic of discussion between industry and DFO, the NGOs and the Marine Stewardship Council since at least 2015. One study estimates that up to two pounds of bait could be used for every pound of lobster caught. The problem isn't mackerel per se; it's the sheer volume of raw fish used.

Luckily, several companies and research institutions have been working on alternative bait products over the last several years. One study has found that an alternative bait fished just as well as traditional bait but had the added benefit of lasting longer.

We applaud the researchers and companies trialing baits that use less fish and the harvesters who are experimenting with these products. This needs to continue through increased investment in trials.

We often hear that the science isn't taking fishermen's views into account. However, industry is present for, and contributes meaningfully to, DFO's peer-reviewed assessments. DFO also established an industry-science working group for mackerel in 2020 to address gaps in science needs and observations. There were also many indigenous colleagues around the rebuilding table who strongly believed in the science and supported rebuilding actions.

It's not just DFO that's reporting similar declines. The United States, with whom we share this population, has been seeing similar negative trends. In 2020, the U.S. enacted an emergency action to drastically reduce their quota after their rebuilding plan also failed. The two countries need to continue to work together to rebuild the stock. Here at home, surveys of recreational fishers have found they have also noticed declines in fish abundance and size over time, corresponding to the scientific assessments.

The closure of the mackerel fishery was based on strong scientific evidence, fisheries observations, and DFO law and policy. Previous efforts to rebuild the stock through management measures and quota declines have failed. Closing the fishery was necessary to rebuild the stock for the future of both the industry and the ecosystem.

Thank you for your time.

● (1310)

The Chair: Thank you.

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

[*Translation*]

Dr. Dominique Robert (Professor and Canada Research Chair in Fisheries Ecology, Institut des sciences de la mer, Université du Québec à Rimouski, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I am a professor and Canada Research Chair in Fisheries Ecology at the Université du Québec à Rimouski. In 2008, I defended a doctoral thesis on the ecology of the larval stage of mackerel in the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence, with particular emphasis on the environmental factors that regulate the survival of larvae and that are therefore responsible for the replenishment of adult stocks.

I then worked regularly on this species and participated in Fisheries and Oceans Canada’s stock assessments. I therefore believe that I have the knowledge required to comment on the ecology of the species in the context of fisheries management.

Contrary to the assessment of a number of forage species stocks in Canada, mackerel stock assessment is based on a reliable survey of adult abundance, derived from egg abundance in the egg-laying area in the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence. Because mackerel may alter its migration based on temperature, it is important to periodically check whether a substantial proportion of egg-laying is occurring outside of the survey area. Over the past few years, the survey has been extended on an ad-hoc basis to a number of areas such as the west coast of Newfoundland and the Scotian shelf, but the amount of egg-laying outside the Gulf has always been considered negligible in calculating abundance, which has always been considered reliable.

The critical state of the stock can be attributed to two key factors: one is very high mortality in adults and the other is a low survival rate for the larvae.

Regarding mortality in adults, we estimate that, despite the substantial reduction in commercial catches in the past 20 years, when the quota went from 75,000 tonnes to just 4,000 tonnes, mortality remained too high to promote stock growth. In addition to high fishing pressure, natural mortality due to predatory fish such as bluefin tuna increased in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. There is also an indication that the stock in the Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence is suffering from other predators, such as grey seals, of which there are 16 times more now than there were in the 1960s. Predation has therefore increased a great deal since the early 2000s.

Finally, recent studies looking at the origin of mackerel caught during the winter fishery in the U.S. showed that a significant proportion of the fish caught in the U.S. are originally from the Gulf of St. Lawrence stock. This is therefore another source of mortality that is difficult to estimate at this time.

In addition to the high mortality in adults, the decline in mackerel abundance can be explained by a decline in recruitment since the 2010s. This decline in recruitment has been traced back to environmental conditions that have become unfavourable for larvae. During the first weeks of life, the survival of the larvae depends directly on their ability to successfully feed on their main prey: zooplankton.

With the rapid increase in temperature in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, there has been a change in the development period of the mackerel's main prey, as they now develop earlier in the season, while the mackerel's egg-laying period has not changed. As a result, the emergence of larvae and prey production are no longer at the same time and place, leading to recruitment failure in the past few years. The stock recovery rate will depend largely on the return to colder conditions that would promote the survival of larvae and recruitment. However, short-term climate projections unfortunately do not point to a return to these types of favourable conditions in the near future.

Now, here are some recommendations.

The first is to maintain fishing activity at as low a level as possible until signs of a recovery in the adult stock are observed.

The second is to establish a strategy to more accurately measure mortality resulting from fishing, including baitfishing in regions where it is not mandatory to report catches, and the winter fishery in the U.S.

The third is to establish a joint management plan with the U.S., given the presence of mackerel from the Gulf of St. Lawrence in their winter fishery.

● (1315)

The last is to use alternative baits from the highly abundant species in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, such as redfish, until the mackerel population recovers.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

● (1320)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you for that. You're right on the mark.

We'll go to our rounds of questioning.

First we'll go to Mr. Small for six minutes or less, please.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for taking time out of your busy schedules to help us out on this very important study.

My first question is for Ms. Schleit.

In making your recommendations in the mackerel assessment this year, which stakeholders were you representing?

Ms. Katie Schleit: Thank you for the question.

Oceans North is a Canadian charity. We work closely with harvesters and indigenous communities. We don't represent fishermen; we are an environmental charity.

As I mentioned in my statement, we work alongside fishermen. I've been at the table with harvesters since at least 2015, talking about the difficult issue of the mackerel declines and trying to come up with solutions.

Mr. Clifford Small: All right. I wanted to clarify your stakeholder attachment here.

If there's no mackerel bycatch in cod nets happening, few recreational catches and little or no visual encounters with mackerel, what would you say your first take would be on the state of the mackerel stock?

Ms. Katie Schleit: I'm sorry. Are you asking, if we can't find any mackerel, what would be the assessment of the state of the stock?

Mr. Clifford Small: Yes. Would you say there are no mackerel, some mackerel or plenty of mackerel? How would you describe it, if there's no indication of any mackerel anywhere?

Ms. Katie Schleit: We base our decisions on consultation with DFO as well as harvesters.

Over the last decade, we've been involved in the science process alongside industry. Those discussions and assessments have taken into account many indicators of mackerel health, including egg surveys and information from the fisheries such as size, length and catches. Those have all indicated decline over the last 10 years.

That's what I'm basing my information on.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you. I'm aware of that. What I'm not aware of are any changes that science has made in their stock assessments due to shifts in ocean temperatures. I know we have leatherback turtles as far north as Labrador and sharks moving into our northern waters. Species are adapting and moving.

Has DFO changed its approach at all on how it carries out its surveys, to your knowledge?

Ms. Katie Schleit: Our organization has been advocating that DFO take climate change into account. We definitely agree on that fact.

That question has been put to DFO a lot over the last several years in terms of whether or not they need to change the timing of the egg survey. From the extensive analysis they've done, my understanding is that at the moment the egg survey is timed more specifically to day length and to a suitable range of temperatures in the gulf.

However, as Dr. Robert noted, we are seeing environmental changes that are impacting the stock.

Mr. Clifford Small: Okay.

You know that there have been numerous accounts of mackerel, from the Bay of Fundy up to Pictou County and the north shore of Quebec, and on the south coast, west coast, east coast and northeast coast of Newfoundland as far north as Groswater Bay, and everyone who's been on the water this year has caught mackerel. They're all saying that mackerel are more plentiful than they've ever seen in their entire lives. Are you saying that these people are all wrong?

Ms. Katie Schleit: No, not at all. I think that fishermen's observations and accounts are very important. That's why, again, we've sat at the table with them, specifically working on objectives in the rebuilding plan and specifically working on different management measures that we could take into account to rebuild the stock—

Mr. Clifford Small: My time's really brief here, and I have another question.

How much has your organization invested in mackerel science in the last 10 years?

Ms. Katie Schleit: We invest in a lot of science throughout the country. In particular, we're looking at—

Mr. Clifford Small: Could you explain Ocean North's science program as it pertains to mackerel in Atlantic Canada?

● (1325)

Ms. Katie Schleit: As it relates to mackerel in Atlantic Canada, I would say at the moment we've invested a lot in the impacts of climate change in Atlantic Canadian fisheries—

Mr. Clifford Small: Could we put a dollar value on your investment? Could we put a dollar value on that?

Ms. Katie Schleit: I'm not sure that's relevant, but I'd be happy to have you look through our financial records.

We have invested and put out publications that you can read online—everything is available to the public—on the impacts of climate change on fisheries. We've also invested in looking at how seabirds are perhaps used as indicators of forage fish status. That's another way that we can take in information from the ecosystem.

All that information is available to you.

Mr. Clifford Small: Are you familiar with the diet of mackerel? When a mackerel swims, it's eating. It's eating cod larvae, lobster larvae, capelin larvae and herring larvae—you name it—all these species that remain in Atlantic waters throughout the year, long after mackerel have migrated through the region.

With the abundance of mackerel—which we can't quantify, I guess—what do you think the impact of a bloom in the mackerel stock will be on the rest of the species in Atlantic Canada if that bloom is as big as we think it is?

Ms. Katie Schleit: Well, of course we have to take into account current information in terms of assessing the current status of the mackerel, so I'm looking forward to seeing the most recent results from DFO as well as the stakeholder observations, but again, I'm basing my testimony on a decade's worth of evidence from multiple sources that indicates a severe decline in mackerel, and we do expect to still see fish in the water. In fact, we want to see fish in the water. That's part of rebuilding.

Mr. Clifford Small: Bear in mind—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Small. You've gone a little bit over.

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

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

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

We've just heard from three witnesses who basically have all arrived at the same conclusion—that the mackerel stocks are in significant distress on the east coast—but again, Mr. Small's comments were comments that I hear from fishers as well.

My first question would be for Mr. Pardo.

Could you explain briefly the conflict between what the fishers are seeing and reporting and the scientific information whereby all three of the witnesses pretty well arrived at the same conclusion, which is that the closure is the only option to rebuild the stock?

Mr. Pardo, could you give a short answer? I have a host of questions.

Dr. Sebastián Pardo: Yes. Thank you for the question.

There are many reasons for this discrepancy. One is the spatial area, so yes, more mackerel might be seen in certain parts of Newfoundland waters, but we're not taking into account what's happening in the rest of the region. Also, we've heard anecdotally that in western Newfoundland, in the Gros Morne area, people are not finding mackerel there. The mackerel distribution can be patchy, and the stock assessment is truly the only way we have to assess the population as a whole.

Another discrepancy is what's called “hyperstability”. Basically, it's what happened with cod: that as abundance of the fish drops, they start schooling more, so they start appearing in certain areas and you see them. They are more abundant in that specific area, but it's not an accurate representation of the whole stock.

Also, there's climate change. We know already that fish are moving further north, so we could be seeing more mackerel at the northern end and fewer mackerel at the southern end.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Mr. Pardo, in your opening comments, you indicated that everybody wants to see a “sustainable” stock because it's only through sustainable stocks that we will build viable coastal communities. Then you went on to make a comment that I would like you to expand on, which was that the management plans were never achieved over the past number of years.

As an east coast parliamentarian, it concerns me that management plans were never achieved. Could you expand on that?

Dr. Sebastián Pardo: I said that the rebuilding plan objectives weren't achieved. Is that what you're referring to?

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Okay. Yes.

Dr. Sebastián Pardo: Yes, over the last decade, the management actions have not caused population growth. In fact, over the last decade, the management decisions have led to a further population decline. Because of that, the rebuilding plan was created.

The rebuilding plan objective was basically to encourage population growth, and that objective has not been achieved because the assessment from last year is that the mackerel are at their lowest spawner abundance ever recorded. That's what I meant.

● (1330)

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Could all three of you comment—a short answer—on this: Are you comfortable with the best data that's been provided on this resource, which primarily comes from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and related sources? Are you comfortable with the data that you are observing?

I'll start with you, Mr. Pardo.

Dr. Sebastián Pardo: Yes, I think fisheries science is an extremely complex science, and the models and the approach that the DFO has are robust, so I'm comfortable with it.

Ms. Katie Schleit: Yes, we're also comfortable with the science. Our role isn't always to just take everything that the DFO does as truth; obviously, we play a critical role in terms of the DFO as well.

With regard to the science, we've been watching it for a number of years. As I mentioned, it's very robust; it's based on a lot of different scientific evidence that's been confirmed year over year and also by U.S. scientists as well. Some of the science that we have now was actually adapted, based on some of the recommendations of industry. For example, we've added more natural mortality estimates to account for those observations from fishermen.

Yes, we are confident in the science.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Ms. Schleit, you said that industry advised you to adapt your reporting to take in mortality.

Ms. Katie Schleit: I'm sorry; it wasn't me, but at the last DFO assessment, where we're participants at the science advisory table, like industry and indigenous groups, one of the changes that was made was a change with regard to natural mortality to take into account some of the observations that harvesters were seeing. Unfortunately, it's not changing the outcome.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Dr. Robert, you made reference to reducing fishing as much as possible and said that the bait fishery in particular was the most unregulated area of the mackerel fishery. Would you comment?

Dr. Dominique Robert: Yes, I can comment on that.

Given that the biomass is depleted and because the data that are provided by the DFO on abundance are robust, we know that mackerel is one of the very few pelagic stocks that are managed with robust data in Canada. I'd like to highlight that.

The fishing pressure needs to be reduced. The commercial fishing has been well managed and well controlled, but the bait fishery has not been, in all parts of Atlantic Canada. However, the reduction of fishing right now should apply to all types of fisheries, including the recreational fishery.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Morrissey.

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

[*Translation*]

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

I thank the witnesses for being with us, it is always informative.

Mr. Robert, you mentioned earlier that you have been collecting data on the mackerel stock and studying it since 2010. Some of your data probably comes from Quebec fishers, who are forced to compile it.

How do you explain, as you noted in your recommendations, that only certain groups of fishers are forced to compile this data?

Dr. Dominique Robert: That's a good question.

I would like to clarify that the work I did on mackerel was aimed at understanding the larval ecology. The data I was referring to in relation to the abundance of the stock is what Fisheries and Oceans Canada collects.

As for the criteria for determining which groups of fishers are required to compile data, that is up to the department. That's a question I can't easily answer, unfortunately.

● (1335)

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: The question remains the same. Did I understand correctly that this obligation to measure the resource should apply to all groups of fishers concerned?

Dr. Dominique Robert: Ideally, in any kind of fishery, when you assess or manage a fish stock, it is important to measure the mortality caused by fishing, to know precisely how much has been caught.

In the case of mackerel, there are several uncertainties that prevent us from having an accurate estimate: the bait fishery, the recreational fishery that occurs throughout Atlantic Canada, and the winter fishery in the United States, which catches some of the fish that spawn in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and are part of our stock.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Given these circumstances, there should be a link between the U.S. and Canada.

You have been conducting studies on this resource since 2010. So it's been over 10 years since you anticipated this decline. In addition, you've surely passed on your studies to Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

How do you explain the fact that mackerel fishers were informed of the closure of the fishery with 48 hours notice? How do you explain this lack of predictability?

Dr. Dominique Robert: I don't have a specific explanation for this.

The scientific consensus had already been calling for a major reduction in quotas for a good ten years, but they were not reduced very quickly.

In my opinion, it was a good decision to close the fishery. How it was done is another story, but I don't have any particular comment to make on that.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: You are a scientist, I understand, but we still question the lack of predictability.

Are you hopeful that the resource will renew itself? How many years do you think it could take, or are we talking decades?

Dr. Dominique Robert: This is a difficult question to answer.

We need a good cohort, like the one we had in 1999. If we get a strong recruitment event, the fish that are born this year and will survive the larval stage in large numbers are going to be available for harvesting in four or five years at the earliest. On the other hand, conditions are not conducive to recruitment and have not been for some time.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Could it be said that significant action should be taken to address climate change, to help cool waters and improve resources?

Dr. Dominique Robert: It is always good to have a management plan that takes climate change into account.

However, in the case of mackerel and similar species, the variation in conditions from year to year is very difficult to predict.

Currently, the climate is tending to warm up, but there will still be years that are colder than others. These colder years will probably favour a better temporal overlap between larvae and their prey. You have to be patient and, above all, you have to leave breeders in the environment. Then, when these conditions are met, there will be sufficient egg-laying to support a large cohort.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: The measurement of resources and the development of...

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Desbiens. It's right on the mark. Thank you for that.

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

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I want to acknowledge my appreciation for being here today, and how we have an opportunity for open dialogue to hear from those who have concerns about the commercial use of mackerel and its environmental impacts. We can also hear about the concerns of commercial fishers and the long-term sustainability of their industry. I think it's important that we're not pitting one against the other and are instead talking about what the facts are and how we move together to have more sustainable fisheries and oceans.

Ms. Schleit, I appreciated your comments on the economic benefits of rebuilding mackerel and how those rebuilding efforts benefit us all in many ways, including economically. You quoted some of those numbers and the return rate of that investment. These are important things for us to consider.

Could you share a bit more, Ms. Schleit, about the working groups you were talking about, which included industry and indigenous colleagues? What is the extent of those meetings that have been happening over the years?

● (1340)

Ms. Katie Schleit: I'll mention that I believe it was 2015 when DFO first established a rebuilding plan working group. I believe that group met at least four times a year. Then there are also the advisory committee meetings, which normally happen once a year. Then there are also biannual stock assessments.

All of these meetings have participation from DFO science, a lot of industry members, a few NGO members and some indigenous community members. I know DFO also held special meetings with indigenous communities ahead of advisory committee meetings to further hear and share views.

This was not a difficult time. These tables were large. As I said, we started in person several times a year and then moved to virtual, and there was a sincere effort from all around the table to work on solutions together on things like whether to change the net sizes or some of the seasons.

There were a lot of solutions brought to the table that were further investigated by scientists, etc. Unfortunately, where we always ended up, based on the science advice and thorough scientific analysis, was that a reduction in the TAC was what was going to rebuild the stock.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you.

My next question is for Dr. Pardo.

Dr. Pardo, thank you so much for outlining some of your thoughts on the reasons we're seeing higher numbers and for some of your suggested potential reasons we're seeing increases in certain areas and for breaking that down for us. I think it's always interesting to hear different perspectives on that.

I'm wondering if you can share with us what you feel would be robust signs of rebuilding of the mackerel.

Dr. Sebastián Pardo: Before I go into it, I would like to clarify that the explanations I gave are potential. My point is that we don't know. These things could be happening, but we don't know, and it links to what would be a robust sign of rebuilding.

What we really need to see is the outcome of a stock assessment that shows the abundance of spawning fish above the critical zone, above a certain threshold that's been established by the advisory committee. That would be a sign of rebuilding.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you for clarifying the points I was trying to clarify.

Dr. Sebastián Pardo: We have a lot of evidence from people on the water, and it's very useful and optimistic, but the stock assessment is truly the best tool we have to assess the overall abundance of mackerel in Atlantic Canada and Quebec.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you.

Perhaps I can ask you, Dr. Pardo, and Ms. Schleit—perhaps first—a two-part question. What would you expect to happen to the stock if it didn't shut down? What would it look like to you when there were signs of a reopening of the mackerel fishery?

Dr. Sebastián Pardo: It's hard to say what would happen in the future in a hypothetical scenario, but what we've been seeing over the last years is that if we kept fishing even at these very low rates, we would keep seeing the stock decline further and further, so I would imagine—and it's not far-fetched to imagine—that if we were to reopen the fishery too early, we would see a population that either is not recovering or is getting even lower. That's what I would perhaps expect to see, but you never know.

What was the second part of your question?

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: What would you expect to happen if the stock didn't shut down, and what would it look like to you when the mackerel fisheries are ready to reopen?

● (1345)

Dr. Sebastián Pardo: We would see much more mackerel everywhere when the fishery is ready to reopen, if it has rebuilt to the point where it's above the critical zone. It's a place it hasn't been over the last decade. The mackerel people would be seeing it at a level all around the region higher than they'd seen in a long time. That's what it would look like. It would be, I would say, bountiful.

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

Ms. Schleit, do you have any comments on the questions I asked?

Ms. Katie Schleit: Yes. Thank you.

Similar to Dr. Pardo, I think we were seeing these signs for years that the stock was going to continue to decline at current harvest levels. That is what we saw year after year, until finally the latest science showed that it was at the lowest level ever recorded, with very few larger fish and also very little of the necessary recruitment.

There was a blip in 2015, when we had what's called a larger-year class, but that was essentially fished out within a few years due to the high TAC levels. I guess we'd expect to see many indicators showing signs of decline if we were looking at a healthier stock.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

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

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

My questions are primarily for Dr. Robert.

Dr. Robert, you participate in the annual spawning mass bioscience studies that are done by DFO on mackerel. Is that correct?

Dr. Dominique Robert: I'm usually a participant, yes, but not on all of them.

Mr. Rick Perkins: When was the last time it was done?

Dr. Dominique Robert: The last time it was done I was there online.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Was that last year, in 2021?

Dr. Dominique Robert: Yes.

Mr. Rick Perkins: The water temperature needs to be between 10°C to 13°C for mackerel to spawn. Is that correct?

Dr. Dominique Robert: Yes, we say at least 7°C, and that the maximum is about 14°C. That's about the maximum range. I think perhaps the values that you gave are probably peak optimal temperatures.

Mr. Rick Perkins: That's the peak time.

In the last 10 years the average temperature in which DFO has gone out, from the study and work that my team has done, is about 8°C. Sometimes they go out as early as June 6 when the water is even colder than that.

I understand DFO goes to the same spot in the gulf every year when they do sampling, on slightly different days. If you're sampling spawning biomass when the water is much colder, if you're going out too early, what's the result of the study?

Dr. Dominique Robert: Exactly. Yes, timing is important. The reason the survey goes on from mid-June to late June—it's about a two-week survey—is that this is the time when, on average, most of the spawners are in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence. In some years, because of an anomaly with the survey—for example, the vessel is not able to get there on time because of a breakdown or something like that—it is not considered in the time series as an abundance survey, so it is discarded.

The way that we are able to correct for the interannual differences in the timing is by sampling the females all over the gulf with the help of harvesters and also the scientific samplers of DFO. Those samplers are able to know through the season the proportion, the ratio, of females that have spawned versus those that have not spawned yet.

Plus—

Mr. Rick Perkins: I'm sorry, but I appreciate it. I'm just short on time.

We had testimony already today that the migration patterns are changing because of climate change and water change, yet DFO goes to the same spot every time. Is it possible that they are spawning in different areas other than where DFO is searching?

Dr. Dominique Robert: Yes, exactly. We know the mackerel are migrating and following temperature streams, as you mentioned. They are following the 7°C isotherms when they migrate into eastern Canada. In the summer—

● (1350)

Mr. Rick Perkins: Fishermen have found spawning-sized mackerel in Notre Dame Bay in the northeast of Newfoundland in August. I don't know if you can see the screen. My colleague Clifford Small is holding it up.

Dr. Dominique Robert: Yes.

Mr. Rick Perkins: When you're going out early in June into the gulf, I believe you're actually missing large parts of the spawning biomass—or I believe DFO is. Is that possible?

Dr. Dominique Robert: Well, actually, there's always a possibility. Actually, I was part of a sampling team to try to catch larvae in that part of Newfoundland a few years ago. We were not able to catch large amounts of larvae or eggs. There is spawning, and we regularly measure spawning outside the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence, but so far there are always negligible amounts.

Mr. Rick Perkins: Fishers have been able to find them quite easily in northeast Newfoundland.

I have one last question on mortality. What's the proportion of mortality of those taken by grey seals versus fishing?

Dr. Dominique Robert: We don't know that. Unfortunately, there has not been a formal study on the natural mortality of mackerel. There is on herring in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, but not on mackerel. That is a point that we could raise here. That data is needed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perkins.

We'll now go to Mr. Cormier for five minutes or less to close out this portion.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cormier (Acadie—Bathurst, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am the sixth member of the committee to speak, so obviously quite a few questions have already been answered.

Mr. Robert, I want to talk to you first about the spring herring. As you said, you've done some studies on it. Where did the statistics come from that led you to the conclusion that it's imperative to close this fishery? Did they come from Fisheries and Oceans Canada, or did you compile them yourself in collaboration with other groups?

Dr. Dominique Robert: It's the measure of abundance that's key here, and the data on that comes from Fisheries and Oceans Canada. Individual researchers like myself do more of a large-scale survey.

Once I get the data from the department, I evaluate it with a group of university researchers and government scientists, we come to a consensus on the quality of the data and that's how we move forward.

Mr. Serge Cormier: I see.

In your opinion, the imposition of a moratorium on the spring herring fishery was the right decision to make, wasn't it?

Dr. Dominique Robert: Yes, that's right. The abundance had become too low to allow a return of the stock.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Very well.

Let's compare the spring herring fishery to the fall herring fishery. Do you think the autumn one is in the same critical situation as the spring one?

Dr. Dominique Robert: No. The state of the autumn herring stock is better than the spring herring. The trend is similar for several other fall stocks compared to spring stocks in the Northwest Atlantic.

Mr. Serge Cormier: I would like you to explain to the members of the committee why you think the fall herring stock is in better shape than the spring stock.

Dr. Dominique Robert: It's a bit of the same issue as mackerel, currently. The data shows a mismatch between the stocks and their prey. In the past, prey for young fish was more concentrated in the spring, when conditions are cold. When conditions are warm, fall herring benefit most from the overlap with prey.

Mr. Serge Cormier: With regard to mackerel, you said something super interesting earlier. By the way, this is a subject I know a little bit about. According to you, the mackerel stock seems to be migrating from Canadian waters to the United States and both countries seem to be fishing the same stock.

However, in Canada, we have closed the mackerel fishery, unlike the U.S. Don't you think it will be extremely difficult to increase the mackerel stock in the coming years if the Americans can continue to fish this fish, unlike us?

● (1355)

Dr. Dominique Robert: The mackerel that are in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and Atlantic Canada later in the summer migrate to American coastal waters to overwinter. There is a winter fishery in the United States, but the quotas have been greatly reduced, as was mentioned earlier. However, the fishery is still open there, to my knowledge.

So this is a big problem, indeed, which requires concerted action with the U.S. to ensure the return of this stock. If the United States dips into the stockpile when we stop dipping, we won't make it.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Fishers often tell us that they see a lot of mackerel and herring. That's true, but as you were saying, the size of these fish is so small that they don't have a chance to become mature enough and reproduce. Is that right?

Dr. Dominique Robert: In fact, there are two things to consider. Firstly, the fish are schooling, even when there are not many of them. So you always see them somewhere at some point, even if there are fewer than before.

Secondly, the fish today are very small. You don't see big mackerel anymore, or very few, which is really another sign that the stock is dying.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Do you think—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Cormier, but your time is up exactly.

We're going to finish off this session now, this first hour. I want to say thank you to all three witnesses, Mr. Pardo, Mr. Robert and Ms. Schleit, for sharing their knowledge with us here today.

We'll suspend for a couple of moments to switch out panels and get started on our second hour.

● (1355)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1400)

The Chair: I'd like to make a few comments for the benefit of our 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 mike, and please mute yourself when you're not speaking.

There is interpretation for those on Zoom. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of “floor”, “English” or “French”. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I remind everyone that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses. Representing the FFAW—Fish, Food and Allied Workers—Unifor is Mr. Keith Sullivan, president, on Zoom. Representing the Regroupement des pêcheurs pélagiques professionnels du sud de la Gaspésie is Ghislain Collin, president, and Lauréat Lelièvre, commercial fisherman. Representing Inverness South Fishermen's Association is Mr. Jordan MacDougall, commercial fisherman.

Thank you for taking the time to appear today. You will each have up to five minutes for an opening statement.

I will invite Mr. Sullivan to start us off for five minutes or less.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Keith Sullivan (President, Fish, Food and Allied Workers - Unifor): Thank you. I hope you're hearing me well.

On behalf of our 13,000 members in Newfoundland and Labrador, thank you for the opportunity today. It's an important topic.

The Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union represents inshore fish harvesters in our province. That's 3,000 enterprise owners and probably 7,000 crew members, and we also have those who work in fish processing.

Mackerel are a primary pelagic species harvested in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is an important commercial species with historically very extensive landings. As it is a transboundary stock with the United States, FFAW has lobbied for over half a decade with other industry members on the issue of the changing migration patterns, poor overall coverage of the science survey and the changing fishing patterns to look into science more substantially.

On March 30, 2022, DFO announced a moratorium on the commercial mackerel fishery in Newfoundland and Labrador, despite the fact that harvesters see very positive signs of growth in this stock. Harvesters did not expect this closure, especially without a commitment to increasing stock assessment surveys. For years, harvesters have suggested that DFO science is significantly underestimating the biomass of mackerel and have proposed science projects that would demonstrate what they have observed at sea, but no recommendations to work collaboratively to address this incomplete science have really been pursued.

Mismanagement of the stock has been an ongoing issue for fish harvesters in this province for years. DFO science does not have sufficient data on substantial recreational fisheries, which remain open while commercial fisheries are closed, nor on the impacts of removals of the northern contingent, or Canadian mackerel, in U.S. waters.

While the American catch was reduced in the past year, they've had a commercial fishery this year and a recreational fishery for mackerel carried on, while people were thrown out of work who depend on the resource.

FFAW has repeatedly called on DFO science to revise its approach to mackerel science so the true understanding of the size and migration of stock can be understood. Unfortunately, harvesters' experience and knowledge have been dismissed for over a decade, and as a direct result our industry has faced significant financial loss.

The closure of the mackerel fishery this year was met with widespread disappointment, as harvesters had experienced increases in catch levels compared to previous years. Since 2016, stakeholders have stated that the science is underestimating the biomass and that valuable observations from harvesters continue to be ignored in decisions. These observations indicate that mackerel are spawning in areas that are further east than current surveys that we know are in the southern gulf right now.

Expanding knowledge of Atlantic mackerel spawning behaviour is critical. The current DFO approach to assessing the size of mackerel stocks involves the survey in the southern gulf, far from other areas where people are observing signs of growth in the mackerel resource.

Mackerel harvesters have seen quite an abundance despite the declines in stock assessments. Questions regarding additional mackerel spawning sites outside the southern gulf have been repeatedly raised. Not only have harvesters seen an abundance of mackerel during the timing of the mackerel fishery, but harvesters in the southern area of Newfoundland and Labrador have seen them on the St. Pierre Bank as well.

FFAW has proposed science that would include approved sampling and data from the province, including collection over an extended time from all regions. We've had adult mackerel collected from 3Ps in June and July in 2021 by long-time fish harvester Keith Bath. Mr. Bath reported that the adult mackerel were increasingly more common in the Bank area in July, whereas in previous years they were getting mackerel in their nets in May.

Finally, harvesters all around the province, whether it's the northeast coast or southwest coast or Fortune Bay, reported seeing these very small mackerel in turr stomachs while hunting birds, for example.

Taken together, these observations suggest that mackerel are distributed in Newfoundland and Labrador waters throughout their life cycle.

● (1405)

At the advisory meeting last year, FFAW representatives presented ample evidence of a strong Atlantic mackerel stock and called on DFO science to revise its approach to mackerel science so that a true understanding of the size and migration of the stock can be understood. The department advised of a commercial closure in 2022.

Our interest and commitment to mackerel research goes beyond sample collection. FFAW has applied for funding to do otolith microchemistry research with DFO science and academic researchers to determine maturity. We've also done our own studies this year with FFAW fishermen, who are paying to do their own work because the department wouldn't commission it.

Our recommendation is that DFO immediately invest in expanding their mackerel science and consult with harvesters in developing this work.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sullivan.

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

Jordan MacDougall (Commercial Fisherman, Inverness South Fishermen's Asssociation): Good day.

I'm a commercial fisherman in Inverness South Fishermen's Association. I fish off the western coast of Cape Breton. I fish lobster, tuna, mackerel and crab.

About 15 years ago, a large body of fish would come through here and the fishers could make a partial living from this resource. Now that body of fish is no longer here. What we're finding with the biomass here is that it's small. The fishermen can't seem to get a large fish anymore, even for tuna fishing during the summer and the fall, compared to 15 years ago.

We weren't surprised to see something happen with the mackerel, but we don't know if the big body of fish has moved north—if there is a bigger body—and if it's because of water temperature. Our water is getting warmer here.

We have a large body of small mackerel here, so the future looks good.

I would like to see more science, of course, with the mackerel. The problem we worry about when they have a total closure like this is the reopening and when that will happen, what will happen and how the resource will be divided up then.

Those are our main concerns here.

Thank you.

● (1410)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to a joint statement by Mr. Collin and Mr. Lelièvre for five minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ghislain Collin (President, Regroupement des pêcheurs pélagiques professionnels du Sud de la Gaspésie): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, good afternoon.

The Regroupement des pêcheurs pélagiques professionnels du Sud de la Gaspésie represents 23 members who have been fishing for a long time and who were hit hard by the closure of the fishery in the spring, which occurred with less than 48 hours' notice. Five of them were affected even more because of their age.

The members I represent fish for mackerel by hand or with electric systems on lines that can carry a maximum of 200 hooks. It is therefore a very selective fishery, sustainable and respectful of the environment and the marine fauna.

The logbook and the call-in are imposed by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans exclusively on Quebec fishermen and seiners. Despite our representations to the Atlantic Mackerel Advisory Committee, in Halifax, where we asked that the same quick and simple controls be imposed on other provinces to provide valuable data, our requests to preserve the resource have been unsuccessful. We have heard nothing.

Given that we have followed guidelines for years and have done everything in our power to preserve the resource, we are now asking for emergency financial compensation for the costs incurred prior to the suspension of the fishery and for the loss of income that resulted from our lost fishing season. In addition, we want to be part of the discussions and meetings concerning mackerel. We also ask that access be facilitated to other abundant and lucrative species in order to overcome this crisis without asking for help and public funds for the next years.

In addition, we call for sentinel and scientific fisheries for the next few years, as well as exploratory fisheries for other emerging species, to diversify the portfolio of licences, thereby contributing to the profitability of the companies while reducing the pressure on species in need of recovery.

Finally, we call for two separate quotas upon recovery of the species, one for the hook and line fishery and one for the Atlantic dredge fishery.

In conclusion, the Regroupement does not dispute the science. We believe in the work of the scientists and we want the recovery of the resource through selective and sustainable fisheries. The Regroupement des pêcheurs pélagiques professionnels du Sud de la Gaspésie deserves to be supported by the government.

Thank you.

Mr. Lauréat Lelièvre (Commercial Fisherman, Regroupement des pêcheurs pélagiques professionnels du Sud de la Gaspésie): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, good afternoon.

As I only have a little over two minutes to paint a picture of eight months of frustration, I'll get straight to the point.

March 30, 2022, is a day that will be etched in my memory for the rest of my life, and not for the right reasons. With less than 48 hours' notice, and under the pretext that urgent action was necessary to regenerate the stocks, the mackerel and spring herring fisheries were suspended in my home region of the Gaspé Peninsula. With a snap of the fingers, about twenty fellow fishers and I found ourselves without income and without any commercial activity. Such a decision hurts. Months of work and preparation, as well as several tens of thousands of dollars of investment in our boats, have become useless.

This is where the darker part of the story begins, because what really affected us was learning that no compensation package had been prepared for us. We were left to our own devices.

Let me be clear: I am not questioning the decision to suspend fishing to regenerate the stocks, let alone the expertise of the scientists. They are doing their job and I respect that. What I am questioning is the way the federal government went about announcing it to us, when the boats were already in the water.

We are a G7 country that is supposed to provide a decent social safety net and leave no one behind. Why do we have to stand here in Ottawa eight months after the suspension of the fishery to explain to you how that sudden decision brought us to our knees? Why was there nothing ready to support us during this suspension?

We are now in November and we still have no indication, no support program, nothing at all. What we are asking for, beyond financial compensation, is predictable fisheries. To leave a whole community in uncertainty for more than eight months is inhumane.

I'm counting on you, members of the committee, to take this message to your caucuses.

Thank you for listening.

● (1415)

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll go to our round of questions.

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

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

I have a question for Mr. Sullivan.

Based on this summer's experience on all coasts of the island of Newfoundland and up the shoreline of Labrador, what have your members witnessed in terms of an abundance of mackerel? Are you aware of any bycatch that may have happened?

Mr. Keith Sullivan: The number of mackerel observations that have been confirmed has been really overwhelming. You know, people have been fishing for 40 or 50 years and have never seen anything like it. I'll kind of preface this with people who are not mackerel harvesters themselves, so it's not self-fulfilling or self-promoting; it's just that we've never seen mackerel before like this. It's broadly distributed—broad-sized distributions—so at the same time, it's off the coast of Labrador and down off the northeast coast of Newfoundland, in the bays, in the south off the southwest coast. It's everywhere at the same time. It's certainly never been seen before, and it clearly indicates that there is a disconnect between what science is showing....

You also asked about the bycatch. I should say that catching these mackerel in fisheries that are designed to catch seven-pound codfish is a regular occurrence that people are passing along and getting samples from. It's really abnormal, and it's something that people have never seen before.

Mr. Clifford Small: This is something that's kind of abnormal, too. This is a picture that was sent to me by one of your members in Notre Dame Bay, about 600 miles from the coast of Nova Scotia and in the gulf. Where should a mackerel of that size be in August?

Mr. Keith Sullivan: Well, you know, I don't claim to be a mackerel scientist or involved in that too much, but the point is that that mackerel wouldn't have been born in the gulf, for example. It's coming from the northeast coast. It wouldn't swim very far, a mackerel of that size. We're seeing more and more of that, massive amounts of what you call “pencil mackerel”, which were born somewhere in Newfoundland waters off the east coast somewhere and not in the southern gulf. That's why we're saying that we need to do more science to really get the true picture of what's happening with this stock.

● (1420)

Mr. Clifford Small: Have you impressed upon the DFO the need to engage harvesters in a more meaningful way because of accounts of the kind I just showed you right there, anomalies and things that have never been seen before? Is the DFO acknowledging that mackerel migrations can be changing, or is it in denial about that?

Mr. Keith Sullivan: Well, it's hard to be black and white about it, but it's been frustrating, and it's not just this year. As I said, we've been a decade pointing out the big disconnect, that things are not matching up with the observations, but so far there has not been a lot done. There was one study done far north off White Bay and Green Bay, but the water was probably too cold, and I think Dr. Robert mentioned that.

There was one piece of work, but I mean, you don't.... When you're talking about throwing people out of work and their livelihoods and they're not able to make any money.... I mean, I've never seen.... I think it's really shirking the responsibility that they have to people, and that's why it's so upsetting. I guess if I come across as angry about the lack of acknowledgement of the information from harvesters during this conversation, it's because I am, quite frankly, really upset that we're not doing more work to demonstrate what's going on with this fish stock.

Mr. Clifford Small: You referenced a fisherman, Keith Bath, who caught mackerel on the St. Pierre Bank in May or June when they should have been closer to the coasts of Nova Scotia and P.E.I., I guess, where they should be spawning. What kind of distance are we talking about from where the egg survey normally takes place to where those mackerel possibly could be spawning?

Mr. Keith Sullivan: Obviously that is hundreds of miles away. It's quite the distance from where you'd expect them to be spawning. The thing about it is we're seeing more of them. This was an example of a bycatch in a fishery where you wouldn't see mackerel, where you're hauling nets for larger groundfish species.

The number of them there was substantial as well. This is what really needs to be investigated further. We've been talking about this for some time and collecting these samples, repeatedly sending them to DFO, offering proposals to do microchemistry to demonstrate where the mackerel have spent their lives. Still, rather than do that, it seems the decision was made just to throw people out of work and shut things down. That's why it's disappointing.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Small. Your six minutes are up exactly, sir.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cormier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Collin and Mr. Lelièvre, greetings from my office. I know you're in Ottawa right now, but we have the Baie des Chaleurs in common.

You are talking to a fisherman's son. My father was a fisherman all his life. He fished almost every species: lobster, herring, mackerel, crab. I am very familiar with the concerns and challenges you are going through right now.

My first question for both of you is this: are you two fishermen strictly dependent on the herring and mackerel fishery, or do you do other kinds of fishing?

Mr. Lauréat Lelièvre: In 2021, I had a small crab quota of 12,000 pounds.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Was it snow crab?

Mr. Lauréat Lelièvre: Yes, it was snow crab. I sold that licence, because I wanted to do only mackerel fishing. So I applied in January and on March 30 I sold my crab licence, the same day the mackerel fishery was closed. I was left with nothing.

If I had been warned in January, three months in advance, I might still be a crabber and would have kept an income.

Mr. Serge Cormier: So you sold your licence.

Mr. Lauréat Lelièvre: I sold it the same day the mackerel fishery was closed.

Mr. Serge Cormier: As for you, Mr. Collin, what kind of fishing do you do?

Mr. Ghislain Collin: I have been fishing lobster for two years. I used to only fish for herring and mackerel. The members I represent and for whom I come to ask for compensation are herring and mackerel fishers.

● (1425)

Mr. Serge Cormier: Perfect, that's what I wanted to clarify.

Mr. Ghislain Collin: They also fish for small groundfish.

Mr. Serge Cormier: I understand you very well.

I want to make something clear, on behalf of myself, not other colleagues in my own party. I have met with several groups, including trade unions. I have also met with fishers' groups in my area who have also been affected by this measure. Since the closure of the fishery, I have been asking for some form of compensation, first of all for the fishers who are strictly dependent on this fishery. As you said, they are the ones affected, they are the ones we need to help. I too find it a bit of a shame that after several months there is still no appropriate support for these fishers.

You spoke earlier about scientific fishing. What kind of experimental fishing is that? I assume it would be to help gather some more data on mackerel and herring and to provide an income for the fishers affected. Is that correct?

Mr. Ghislain Collin: That is exactly what we want, Mr. Cormier. If the fishers are not in the water fishing, doing scientific or sentinel fishing, where are they going to get their data? They need it and this is one way to collect it.

The guys have the equipment and the expertise. They know where to find the fish. They would be the right people to help the government find data.

Mr. Serge Cormier: You said earlier that there were five fishers who were much more affected than others. You mentioned their age. Are they young fishers who have just started fishing or are they a bit older?

Mr. Ghislain Collin: They are 64 years of age and older.

Mr. Lauréat Lelièvre: We also have young people who have invested a lot of money because they believe in fishing with Belitronic machines. They have spent up to $300,000 to buy a core licence, which is just a herring and mackerel licence.

As a fisher, I'm on the water a lot. I can go out and get 150,000 pounds of fish a season, on the hook.

Mr. Serge Cormier: I understand.

Mr. Collin, what kind of compensation are you considering? Would a program like the one we talked about earlier, which would encourage exploratory and scientific fisheries, be a good solution?

Mr. Ghislain Collin: For the moment, it is financial compensation for what has already happened and cannot be made up for. There is a need to compensate for the loss of income due to the cancellation of the season. Fishers also have dockside monitoring costs and insurance costs.

There are plenty of fees to pay before fishing. You know about that, because you're the son of a fisherman. You have a lot of expenses to cover before you go out on the water, that you continue to pay. The boat is on the dock or in storage and there are rental fees to store the boats. Next year, fishers with no income will have double fees to pay.

Mr. Serge Cormier: Perfect. Thank you.

[*English*]

Mr. Sullivan, with some past decisions regarding the fishery, do you think every time there is a decision made by DFO that it's always a last-minute decision that is presented to fishers? It seems as though most of the time we arrive at the last minute and hear that this is going to happen with 48 hours' notice.

Do you think that happens a lot or not? How do you see it?

Mr. Keith Sullivan: Was that question put out to others?

Mr. Serge Cormier: No, it was for you.

Mr. Keith Sullivan: It's for me. Okay. Thank you.

We see that quite a bit. People have to be able to plan for their seasons and invest and have some level of certainty. It's far too often. We've talked about it with a lot of our fisheries. For instance, for crab, it was right on the eve. That's a big fishery for a lot of people. In the shrimp fishery, we're into the season. The season has already begun before decisions are.... Essentially, people are delayed. It definitely does happen far too often. A decision like this to close a fishery without any notice is clearly unfair to people.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cormier. Your time is up.

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

● (1430)

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Collin and Mr. Lelièvre, I was very moved by your testimonies, which reminded me of my story of fishing capelin with weirs, subject to a spiral of universal decisions that affected fishers of all types. It took seven meetings for Fisheries and Oceans Canada to understand that the weir fishery is distinct from what is done elsewhere.

I realize that your type of fishery is very unique, because it's a bait fishery. So it's not a massive, aggressive fishery for the resource, but a very environmentally responsible fishery. That's what I understand.

We would like to hear what you have to say about this very special fishery. Also, how do you explain the fact that you are basically the one providing data to the government?

Mr. Ghislain Collin: It has been like this for several years. I've only been in the fishing business a short time and it was already in place when I arrived.

Only Quebec fishers have to fill out a logbook and make an entry call to a dockside monitoring company. We must declare our catch and fill out our logbook before arriving at the dock. Penalties are also applied when these tasks are not done.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: As far as you know, you are the only ones who are forced to do these tasks.

Mr. Ghislain Collin: Basically, about twenty fishermen from the Baie des Chaleurs and Miscou Island and the dredgers have to carry out these tasks.

We testified in Halifax to show how simple and quick it is. Fishers can apply these controls on the spot if their licence stipulates this. This requirement should be extended to New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland fishers so that they too report their catch before returning to the dock. This would provide the Department of Fisheries and Oceans with the data it lacks.

But the Department of Fisheries and Oceans has never had the courage to impose this measure on the other provinces. All the data it uses today to determine the number of catches and to compile its data and inputs comes mainly from the small hook-and-line fishers of the Baie des Chaleurs. The industrial fishers have to report their catches, so you know, for example, that a plant in New Brunswick received so many pounds of fish. However, no one knows what a fisher sells quietly at the dock or stores at home.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: That's unbelievable.

Mr. Ghislain Collin: We don't understand why this hasn't been done.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Mr. Collin and Mr. Lelièvre, you finally had a meeting in July with the honourable member for Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine.

What was your impression following that meeting?

Mr. Lauréat Lelièvre: The discussions were very vague.

In fact, Ms. Lebouthillier told us that we weren't going to get any handouts or help. Basically, she told us to go work somewhere else, that lots of places were hiring.

I told her that I had 47 years of experience in fishing, and the conversation ended there.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: How do you explain the fact that licences for mackerel were being issued when the fishery was being considered for closure?

Mr. Lauréat Lelièvre: Could you repeat the question?

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Why do you think young people were given the opportunity to purchase a mackerel licence a few weeks before the closure of the mackerel fishery? Why were you allowed to sell your crab licence when it was known that the mackerel fishery you wanted to go into would be closed?

How do you explain that this was allowed?

Mr. Lauréat Lelièvre: It's really difficult to say.

I couldn't have guessed that the fishery would close on 48 hours' notice. Before taking any steps, I spoke to the person in charge of pelagic fishers at the group of fishers and lobster fishers. He told me not to worry and that the mackerel fishery wouldn't close, since the allowable catch rates had been set for two years. He didn't guarantee that the herring fishery would remain open, but he told me that the mackerel fishery would definitely not be closed.

So I told the young person who wanted my crab licence that he could have it, and he started the process. In January or February, he asked me to sign the bill of sale. His goal was to register 80,000 pounds of mackerel for the season.

When the fishery was cancelled, I no longer had a boat or a crab licence. I had nothing left. And he ended up with 80,000 pounds less mackerel.

● (1435)

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: It's a very unpleasant scenario, but the situation isn't expected to be resolved in 2023. So how do you see the future? Are you hoping for financial compensation and a diversified fisheries portfolio? Is that what you want? Do you think the problem will be resolved in 2023?

Mr. Ghislain Collin: The members of the Regroupement des pêcheurs pélagiques professionnels du Sud de la Gaspésie have always worked with the department and always provided it with data.

In the best of all possible worlds, we would like to be given some consideration. We would also like to see some financial assistance for fishers to compensate for their losses.

We also want to be able to engage in scientific fishing, exploratory fishing and sentinel fishing, not only to give back income to fishers, but also to keep them in the system.

If the mackerel fishery starts up again in five years, some fishers may not be around anymore, which will deprive us of their expertise. Others may not have a crew. It's a different trade than lobster and crab fishing.

This way, we'll be able to keep the businesses. The fisher helpers will continue to work with the captains, rather than leaving the sinking ship.

In the St. Lawrence, there is also scientific fishing of other emerging species. The members of the group could fish for beautiful, emerging species of fish of very good quality, which would be lucrative and would reduce the pressure on mackerel stocks for a few years.

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Gentlemen, thank you for coming here.

Mr. Ghislain Collin: Thank you for listening to us.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Desbiens.

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

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

[*Translation*]

Of course, I'd also like to thank the fishers for being here and taking the time share their experience with us.

It's very important, and I thank them.

[*English*]

My first question is for Mr. Sullivan.

In the newest fall edition of your FFAW magazine, there was an article written by Dr. Erin Carruthers. I apologize if I'm not pronouncing her last name accurately. You mentioned the importance of expanding mackerel science. I want to quote something that she said. I believe it's a she; I apologize if not. She said that:

> ...a long-term commitment to document the abundance, distribution, extent, timing, and age of mackerel in NL waters is needed. Until we bring more observations and data from NL into the mackerel stock assessment, I do not see how we can reconcile these widely different assessments of the health of the mackerel stocks.

Is this also your stance? Can you share a bit about how DFO can best support fish harvesters to participate in the necessary research?

Mr. Keith Sullivan: Dr. Erin Carruthers is the scientist with the FFAW who works very closely with harvesters. I think the quote was very accurate. I don't know if I could have found a better way to say it myself, so I think that's very clear and well put.

I think that the science is incomplete, not necessarily wrong. I want to interject that out of respect for the scientists who do the work. I don't mean to be really critical of their work. We just need more.

It's like you're doing a woodland caribou survey within a five-mile radius around the Eaton Centre in Dundas Square. You do the work, and you don't find caribou. There's nothing wrong with the methods; it's just that we have to look somewhere else as well if we're going to get the population of the caribou. I think that's kind of the case. I'm oversimplifying, of course, but I'm trying to point out that we're not looking at where the fish really are.

I think we really owe it to the people who depend on this fishery to understand our resource and ecosystem better in order to expand where we're doing work, particularly when we see water temperatures change and climate change documented. There are all kinds of reasons, but none better than a vast abundance of mackerel that harvesters have seen and in many ways documented.

We'll present more to DFO when we can compile all the information. Talk to harvesters and look at the methods that they can use, including acoustic work, which can be done now and, I believe, is done in other jurisdictions in the world.

● (1440)

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

I have another question for you. Can you share what reasoning or data DFO has provided for allowing the recreational mackerel fishery in Newfoundland and Labrador as well as the commercial U.S. mackerel fishery to continue into 2022? Can you build on some of the ways you've touched on this?

Mr. Keith Sullivan: There are two real concerns and irritants.

It is a transboundary stock. They are catching the same stock of mackerel in the U.S. and in Canada. Canada has traditionally harvested and depended upon this stock much more, I'd say. More of the stock resides in the area, but now, because of Canadian management, harvesters in the U.S. are building up a history of catching more, I think, just from a long-term perspective. That's problematic, and if we really believe that the stock is in that much trouble, then obviously we have to work with the U.S. to stop their fishery, I would think. That's disappointing from a Canadian perspective.

We just closed the fishery, as I said. We threw people out of work, people who have depended on this mackerel in many areas in Newfoundland and Labrador. That was the case. Obviously the counterparts we heard from today don't have an opportunity to fish, but people can go out and recreationally harvest. I understand that's important, but still, putting recreational needs ahead of people who are depending on it for their livelihoods is not the right priority listing for giving the resource to people. That has to be revisited.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, harvesters collect scientific information, much like those in Quebec, with logs. Every mackerel that comes in is documented and fully weighed and contributes to the science. People who have the privilege to recreationally fish have no requirements to do that, which is also a problem.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you. I know we've had you here for a few other studies, and it's always nice to see you here.

I know we have talked briefly about alternative bait in previous times. I believe it's come up. I don't recall if we've had your perspective on it. What are your thoughts on the use of alternative bait? Are you seeing it being used? What's the success with it? What are some of your thoughts around that?

Mr. Keith Sullivan: People are, for all kinds of reasons, interested in looking at different bait options, but I don't think they are widely used. I think people generally like traditional baits that they can trust and source themselves, but I think there are opportunities for having less impact on some of our fish stocks, so I think it's good to explore.

The other thing, just straight up, for fish harvesters is the increasing cost of some of our bait. Trying to find alternatives can solve a lot of problems for people. I think there's more interest now than ever in exploring alternative and new innovative baits.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

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

Mr. Rick Perkins: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you again, witnesses, for attending.

Mr. Sullivan, there's a scientific study or paper on DFO's website that says that mackerel spawn at between 9° and 12°. Earlier today, we heard testimony from one of the DFO scientists about how they will do the spawning mass bioscience in water of 8°, 6° and even up to 14°, outside of the spawning biomass time, and it's all done at the same location in the gulf. I wonder if you could comment on that issue about doing science when the spawning biomass is not in the water temperature that's ideal for spawning.

Mr. Keith Sullivan: Yes, it's absolutely a concern, and we've seen in the past when they went out to do that survey. As we all know, the date on the calendar doesn't tell mackerel when to spawn; it's the environmental conditions, and those can change.

I understand that it's difficult to manage, but there have been concerns expressed that they're not surveying when the mackerel are most likely to be spawning, and that's been highlighted. That's one issue, I think, one gap in science that we should look to expand upon, and we should do more to make sure that doesn't happen.

I think, as I pointed out before, that we really have to look at where more of these mackerel are spawning to get a complete picture, which I think would eventually explain the massive abundance of mackerel that we're seeing off Newfoundland and Labrador as well, so I think there are a combination of things to improve the science.

● (1445)

Mr. Rick Perkins: They go to the same place every year and have been doing that for 10 or 20 years as part of their scientific study, but the temperatures are...and the mackerel are moving, and they no longer have catch data, which was about half of their science. How are they going to tell where the mackerel are without any catch data, when in the U.S. they're still catching mackerel?

Mr. Keith Sullivan: Well, I'm not sure. We've offered a lot of suggestions, and so far I don't think we've been listened to very much. I think it is probably important to work with harvesters in the regions to get more information on what the makeup of the mackerel stock has been.

DFO put out a call to get samples this year, and I think they were probably surprised by just how many samples they did get—they were very easy to catch, obviously—and they just ran out of freezer space to collect those samples.

I don't know if they're prepared to do that. They're going to have to do, at the very least, something that is more robust, more dependable and more organized and invest in it, rather than just depending on the goodwill of people to collect these samples. It needs an investment and it needs to work with fish harvesters in all regions to bulk up this science.

Mr. Rick Perkins: I have a couple of quick questions because my time's short. I think I have about a minute and a half.

DFO officials have said that they can't use acoustic sounding to explore and find the size of mackerel because they don't have bladders. Are fishermen able to find mackerel using acoustic sounding?

Mr. Keith Sullivan: Oh, absolutely they are, and that's how they catch them. They're not going out on the water and setting nets based on random thoughts. They can actually judge on biomass, and part of the work that fishermen have done, that FFAW has done this year, is to do that and demonstrate that. We hope to have that worked up really soon. The timeline here is quick, but I think something can be done. The short answer is yes, I think we can do that.

Mr. Rick Perkins: I have one more question regarding the U.S. side of things.

The U.S. is still fishing the mackerel commercially, and I tell you, from Peggy's Cove to Prospect in my riding where the mackerel fishermen are—the big mackerel—they're finding lots of mackerel out there; they're not allowed to catch them now, because they're lobster fishermen. The U.S. is still catching them, and they set their TAC usually by making an assumption about what Canada's TAC is. If Canada ends fishing, as they did this year, do you expect the U.S. to catch more mackerel next year and set a higher TAC?

Mr. Keith Sullivan: I would not be surprised. I mean, the combination of things.... I think the observations show that there is a significant amount of mackerel. I don't know if they'll see it in the U.S. or it's more north, but I wouldn't be surprised if they took advantage of the lack of harvest here.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Perkins. 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, Mr. Chair.

As a west coaster, I might ask a few dumb questions, but bear with me, okay?

In our past studies of Atlantic cod, one of the things that has been noticed is the size of fish: The big cod are not there anymore. Mr. MacDougall, I think I heard you say that you had not been seeing large fish. Is that correct, sir?

Jordan MacDougall: Yes, that's correct. We've seen a decrease in our area. What we're seeing now is similar schools, but it's a pencil mackerel that we're seeing in this area, and we're not having the big mackerel coming through in the abundance we had before.

Mr. Ken Hardie: The scientists will say that you need the big fish to really help sustain the stock.

Monsieur Collin and Monsieur Lelièvre, have you noticed the same lack of larger mackerel?

● (1450)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lauréat Lelièvre: Personally, I had the chance to do scientific fishing with the Maurice Lamontagne Institute.

I was fishing once a week, and I was allowed to catch 300 kilos of fish before bringing my catch back to the wharf, where someone would measure it and collect two of each size. Usually, we'd get four or five small mackerel that were 27 centimetres or smaller. I caught some very large ones that were 39 centimetres, not in large quantities, but there were some. With half of my staff, I could get my 300 kilos in 25 minutes, and I didn't have to go far.

[*English*]

Mr. Ken Hardie: I have one more question here while I have the time, but what you're saying is that there is a presence of larger fish. You'll say that, yes? Okay.

The scientists are saying that the mackerel stocks have been in decline for decades, and I would have liked to ask this question of them, but perhaps all of you will be able to speculate: Do you think this decline is somehow connected in time with the reduction in the harvest of pinnipeds?

Go ahead, Mr. Sullivan.

Mr. Keith Sullivan: Offhand, on the relationship of pinnipeds and mackerel, I'll first say that I don't have clear science on that—mackerel swim relatively fast—but I do know that there are more grey seals in the gulf. There's a massive population of seals off the northeast coast of Newfoundland and Labrador, and obviously they are feeding very heavily. It may certainly have something to do with it, and I think that's an area that's certainly got to be explored more—absolutely.

Mr. Ken Hardie: I'll stick with you, Mr. Sullivan.

In a nutshell, there's obviously a clear difference between what you're seeing and what the scientists are telling us. How do we square that? How do we actually pull it together? Just encapsulate that for us.

Mr. Keith Sullivan: I absolutely recognize that, and I think everyone should probably review Dr. Carruthers' article that's available online on our union forum in more detail so we can send more information. The idea is to expand the surveys and the science we're doing. I believe that we can look at the biomass with acoustic surveys, but we're certainly willing to sit down with harvesters and explore how we measure this stock accurately, because it has become clearer this year that there is a major disconnect.

Harvesters, like everybody who's on the water, are seeing way more mackerel than we have in the past. I find it disappointing that before the cod moratorium, harvesters were talking about the declines and were dismissed. We don't seem to have learned much. They don't get the respect that they certainly deserve. This one on mackerel has been particularly frustrating for people.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hardie. That closes out our second panel for today.

I want to say a big thank you, of course, to Monsieur Lelièvre, Monsieur Collin and Mr. MacDougall. As well, Mr. Sullivan, of course, has been here so often lately that he could probably have his own access card to get in the room. Thank you to all four of you for sharing your knowledge with the committee members today. I'm sure it will help in writing a report on this very important issue.

Just for the information of committee members, I'd like to remind them that there won't be any committee meetings next week. It is a constituency week, and if you show up, you're going to be lonely.

When we reconvene on Tuesday, November 15, we will finish up the closure of the mackerel fishing study.

Again, enjoy your constituency week, and we'll see you all back here on the 15th.

As well, try to be on time for the meetings when they start, because it cuts into our time. If we're late starting, we still have a drop-dead time for ending, so we don't get as many questions in as we would like if we don't start the committee meeting on time.

Again, enjoy your week. The meeting is adjourned.

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