HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

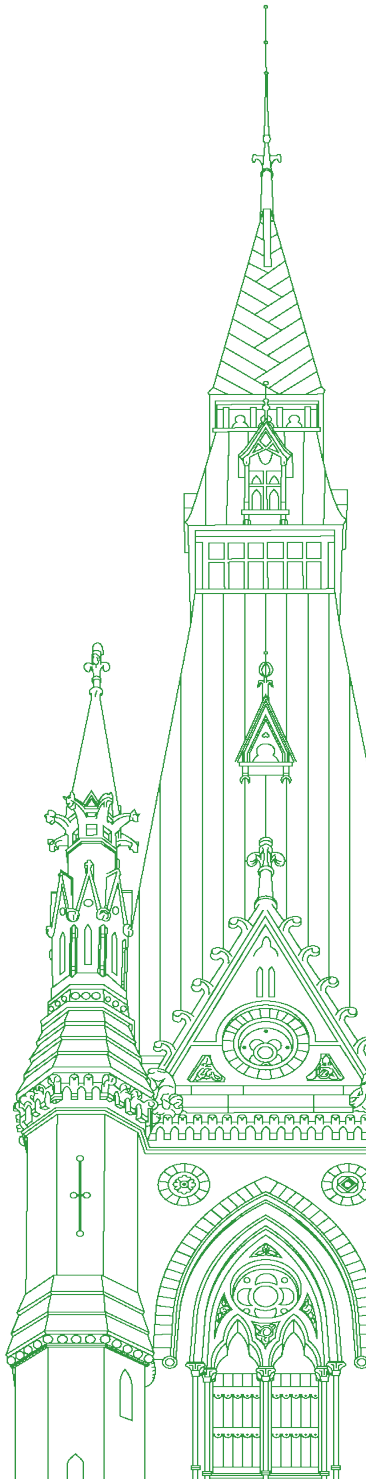
44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

# Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 065**

Monday, May 1, 2023



Chair: Mr. Ken McDonald

# Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

**Monday, May 1, 2023**

● (1105)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 65 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.

I remind you all to please address your comments through the chair. Taking screenshots or photos of your screen is not permitted. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website.

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witnesses, I am informing the committee that all witnesses have completed the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on January 18, 2022, the committee is resuming its study of the ecosystem impacts and management of pinniped populations.

I would like to welcome our first panel of witnesses.

Representing the Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia, we have Carl Walters, professor emeritus, via video conference. Representing the Institute of Marine Research, we have Tore Haug, scientist emeritus, via video conference. Representing Maritime Seal Management Inc., we have Daniel Lane, professor, via video conference.

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

We will go to Dr. Walters first, for five minutes or less.

**Dr. Carl Walters (Professor Emeritus, Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia, As an Individual):** Thank you.

I have been studying salmon populations, dynamics and ecosystem changes on the Pacific coast for about 50 years. A few years ago, I was approached by the Pacific Balance Pinniped Society—people you've had as witnesses—and asked to write a proposal for commercial seal harvesting on the west coast, with the primary purpose being to reduce seal abundance and increase salmon populations.

I would like to make a few general points, and you can raise other things during questions and answers.

The first point is that there are probably at least twice as many seals and Steller's sea lions on the B.C. coast today than there have been for the last several thousand years, because first nations people harvested them intensively before white men arrived on the coast. That kept the numbers down quite a bit. Sea lions, in particular, now consume more fish than all the commercial fisheries combined—mostly hake and herring, but also salmon. They eat over 300,000 tonnes of fish per year. Seal and sea lion increases since 1970 have been correlated with increasing mortality rates, particularly among chinook and coho salmon on the B.C. south coast and herring populations on the outside north coast.

We're not talking about a new problem associated with recent climate change. The Georgia Strait chinook and coho fishery, one of the most valuable fisheries in B.C., started to collapse during the 1980s. That collapse was not stopped or reversed by harvest rate restrictions imposed by John Fraser when he was the minister of fisheries, or even by the more severe harvest restrictions David Anderson imposed during the 1990s, when he demanded putting conservation first and made major salmon commercial fishery close along the coast.

The Pacific Balance Pinniped Society proposal is based largely on the idea of reducing pinniped populations by about 50% to the level where they are most productive to sustain harvest. Recalculating a sustainable harvest would result in an income of at least $1.5 million per year for the people who do the harvesting.

That proposal has banged around in DFO over the last several years. Their main excuse for not proceeding was a lack of demonstration that the fishery would be economically viable, but they won't allow any harvesting to try to sell the animals in order to see how to develop markets for them. DFO has consistently ignored seal and sea lion impacts in their policy planning and failed to even approve test commercial harvests. First nations people can now get permits to kill seals, but only for food and ceremonial purposes. Just removing that food and ceremonial restriction on the sale from their permits would lead to the needed harvesting and marketing tests.

Pinniped reduction is not certain to result in salmon stock increases, because of issues such as whether the salmon killed by seals and sea lions are largely ones that would have died anyway due to diseases and other factors.

The seal reduction policy or harvest development policy is what we call an “adaptive management” experiment. It has reasonably good odds of success. Andrew Trites told you the odds are only 30%. I don't know where he got that number. There's no science to back that up. My personal assessment would be that the odds of a successful outcome, on the salmon side, is at least 50%.

That concludes my opening comments.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now go to Dr. Haug for five minutes or less, please.

**Dr. Tore Haug (Scientist Emeritus, Institute of Marine Research):** Thank you.

It is a main principle in Norwegian management of seals and whales that no stock can be hunted without updated information about abundance.

The walrus has been protected in our area since 1952, while ringed seals, bearded seals, harbour seals and grey seals are hunted in a very small game hunt. Norwegian commercial sealing has always been based on harp seals in the Greenland Sea and the southeastern Barents Sea and on hooded seals in the Greenland Sea.

Results from the most recent pup survey in 2022 suggest that current Greenland Sea hooded seal pup production remains at a very low level, which is now less than 10% of the level in 1946. Following the implemented precautionary harvest strategy, the advice suggests that no harvest be allowed. This stock has been protected since 2007.

The 2022 pup production estimate for Greenland Sea harp seals is similar to previous survey estimates from 1991 to 2018, and the stock probably counts some 500,000 to 600,000 animals. It is still harvested commercially at a very low scale. From numbers taken in 2022, there were only 1,400 animals.

Recent Russian aerial surveys of the White Sea and Barents Sea harp seal stock suggest that there may have been a sudden reduction in pup production after 2003. Nevertheless, the stock still counts around 1.5 million animals, and there is a current small Norwegian hunt. The Russians haven't hunted in this area since 2008.

It is well known that the population dynamics of harp seals have been influenced by commercial hunts, which resulted in significant declines after World War II. However, lower catches and improved management have lessened the influence of hunting. Today, the removals in the west and east ice areas where we hunt are way below the scientific advice for sustainable harvest.

In a recent study of prey consumption by the marine mammal community in our areas—that means both seals and whales—we assessed that marine mammals remove an annual amount of 25 million tonnes of prey per year. As a comparison, the removal by fisheries is only a little over four million tonnes per year in the same areas.

Along with cod and minke whales, harp seals are the main top predators in the Barents Sea ecosystem. In the decade leading up to 2015, the abundance of cod increased to record high levels. In spite of this, the growth and condition of individual cod have remained rather stable. However, the body condition—the blubber thickness—of harp seals and minke whales has decreased. A possible hypothesis for explaining this is that cod in fact outperform marine mammal stocks in the competition for food in our area.

Finally, climate change is a challenge for several pinniped populations. With the assumed and observed reductions in ice cover, pagophilic seal species such as harp and hooded seals will experience marked breeding habitat loss in traditional breeding areas and will certainly undergo distributional changes and presumably also abundance reductions, with subsequent consequences for traditional harvest.

Thank you.

● (1110)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Haug.

We'll now go to Dr. Lane for five minutes or less, please.

**Dr. Daniel Lane (Professor, Maritime Seal Management Inc.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm in Petit-de-Grat, Cape Breton, and I acknowledge this as Unama'ki, the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq people.

Mr. Chair and committee members, I pose three questions related to your mandate. First, do seals' impacts imply that DFO inaction is complicit in our documented inability to violate their conservation and biodiversity mandates? Second, is there market potential for seal products despite closed markets in some cases? Third, why does Canada not support active management?

Committee member Mr. Perkins acknowledged the 2012 DFO recommendation to remove 73,000 grey seals from the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Committee members are also aware that there has been no such action on these seals.

Marine science is notoriously uncertain, as Dr. Walters noted, yet 15 years ago, DFO scientists declared the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence Atlantic cod stock “certain to be extirpated...within 40 years with no fishery”. In 2019, in the latest stock assessment, they declared, “this cod population is expected to continue to decline toward extinction.”

DFO scientists' descriptions of seal impacts that lead for certain to extirpation and extinction are shocking and disturbing, so I'll ask this: Does inaction violate the Fisheries Act of Canada and our international commitment to the convention on biodiversity? Can this committee effectively communicate Canadian legal obligations to the cabinet table so we can act?

The committee has heard resounding evidence that markets are clearly not a deterrent to action. Socio-economic benefits and human health products oblige Canada to develop an industry and supply markets for worldwide consumption.

You've heard about the online education and outreach in the impressive work of the Seals and Sealing Network. Dion Dakins, a previous witness, commented on the global demand for omega-3 seal oil. I also mentioned the ongoing work of Perennia in Nova Scotia around analysis of seal meat for the valuable raw foods for pets market and their interest in acquiring available capacity to do this work in Nova Scotia.

Engaging Export Development Canada and extending CMAPS to support nationwide sealing and worldwide market access are required.

Dr. Walters—I'm happy he's here with us today—said this in response to west coast impacts and science uncertainties at the December Senate committee meetings related to seals:

> Maybe the question you need to ask is how to proceed. What is the best recommendation you can make concerning the development of marine mammal harvesting systems, given the information you have now, in terms of the potential value of those marine mammal harvests as fisheries in their own right and also the benefits that they may have for some fish stocks?

Important evidence in your committee meetings spoke of action planning and action teams. I acknowledge the points of my MP, Mr. Kelloway, in this regard as well as Madam Desbiens's comment to Gil Thériault to develop seal product marketing in the Maggies. That's all good.

Action on seals must be industry-focused and supported nationally, not just by DFO, as the FRCC has recommended since 1998. This has to be done in a manner that is ecologically sustainable, economically viable, socially stable and administratively efficient.

We know how to do this. Nova Scotia's highly successful lobster sector, Canada's most valuable commercial fishery, provides the model template: local harvesting operations, centralized exporters maintaining secure markets, and a global customer base that trusts our exporters to provide timely, valued, certified and quality products.

Seals also provide an opportunity to redefine how Canada manages in marine ecosystems. We need a new DFO, not a paternal regulator managing pirates, but an auditor who sets the basic rules, oversees the industry to meet and report on stated objectives and incentivizes industry to plan for sustainability and operate strategically.

● (1115)

A local seal company should be required to compete with and conform to bids for a formal request for proposal that includes requirements to achieve prespecified objectives. Past committees have recommended all of the characteristics of a seals business or action plan: sustainable harvests over a strategic planning period; defined ethical harvesting and processing methods, including additional support to build new harvesting capacity; trained, professional seal harvesters and partners from indigenous communities; harvesters deputized as scientist observers of the marine ecosystem; and full disclosure of operations through regular consultations with the local community as shareholders, and with the ENGOs, of course, as transparency towards ecosystem sustainability, socio-economic viability and management efficiency.

We have an opportunity to take action that embraces local, sustainable, value-added consequences. I fear it is now too late for Atlantic cod, but if we continue to do nothing, then we all should consider ourselves complicit.

Thank you for your attention, and good luck with your report writing.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Dr. Lane.

We'll now go to our first round of questioning.

We'll start off with Mr. Arnold for six minutes or less, please.

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

I thank all of the witnesses for being here. I'll start off with Mr. Walters.

Mr. Walters, we've heard that some top scientific studies have provided conclusive evidence that 30% to 50% of outbound chinook, coho and steelhead smolts are consumed in the Salish Sea upon their arrival in the migration up the gulf. If the pinniped population were reduced, in your opinion, what would the impact be on small predation levels? Would they be reduced proportionately?

**Dr. Carl Walters:** We calculate that the predation rates would be reduced by about 50% if the seal numbers were reduced by 50% in the Georgia Strait. That wouldn't allow a complete recovery of the fishery to its 1970 levels. However, it would build up enough to attract a substantial increase in the sport fishing effort, which would have substantial economic benefits to small communities around the Georgia Strait.

The proposal is not to fully rebuild the salmon stocks.

● (1120)

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Are there other species that would also benefit from this management regime?

**Dr. Carl Walters:** If the harvest regime included Steller's sea lions, which are currently protected, we think it would have a substantial benefit to the herring fishery, particularly on the west coast of Vancouver Island and up in Haida Gwaii. The fisheries in those areas for herring have been closed for almost 20 years now because of very low survival rates and very high natural mortality rates in the herring, which we calculate is largely due to the Steller's sea lion. Those fisheries would be at least partially restored and made more resilient.

Steller's sea lions can exert what is called depensatory mortality. When they eat a certain amount of herring, it doesn't mean anything if the herring population is large; it's a small percentage of the population that has been eaten. However, when a herring stock gets reduced when they have poor recruitment or something, that same Steller's sea lion consumption has a much bigger impact on them. The Steller's sea lion is a continued threat driving herring populations down to low levels for long periods of time.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Are all of the pinniped species on B.C.'s west coast native or indigenous to the area, or have some of them moved into B.C.'s west coast from other areas?

**Dr. Carl Walters:** They're indigenous. They're found in the middens of first nations people up and down the coast going back as far as middens can be examined.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Is that all species of pinnipeds?

**Dr. Carl Walters:** When first nations people first invaded B.C. at the end of the Pleistocene, they did so not as fishing people but as hunting people. They never lost those hunting traditions.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Thank you.

We're going to hear from officials to wrap up this study, and we're probably going to hear that they're working to ensure that seal populations remain above a precautionary population level, not that they operate in a management system to reduce populations of any species. Should that management regime change from managing only to keep species above a minimum level? Should it also take into consideration a maximum healthy ecosystem level?

**Dr. Carl Walters:** Is that a question for me?

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Yes.

**Dr. Carl Walters:** Like other mammal populations, they produce the largest annual surplus that can be harvested on a sustained basis when they're reduced to something around half of the level they achieve when they're not harvested. If we calculate that, it means if the seal population was reduced by about 50% and then kept near that level, it would produce the largest annual surplus. The pup survival rate would improve considerably.

As the seal population built up on the B.C. coast, the survival rate of pups through their first year of life dropped from about 80% down to around 30%. Starving seal pups wash up on shore and so on, so it's not what you would call a healthy situation from that standpoint for the seal population to be as large as it is.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** I'll quickly switch to Mr. Haug, if I could.

Mr. Haug, I'm looking at a chart of cod stocks in Norway and how they've recovered after a seal invasion. It appears that something happened to that seal population where the cod stocks have now rebounded to their highest levels ever.

Can you elaborate on what has taken place there to allow those cod stocks to recover?

**Dr. Tore Haug:** It's a good question. We have seen that the cod stock increased tremendously after the year 2000 and up to 2015. Now it is reducing again. Of course, the answer for why this happens is much more complicated than relating it just to seals. It also has to do with good and bad year classes of the cod.

What we have seen primarily in our area is that there has been a severe reduction in the hunting of harp seals in the west ice and east ice, so one should expect that these populations have grown. We haven't seen very clear signs of that. We have, in fact, seen some reduction in pup production, especially in the White Sea population.

We don't see very many harp seals feeding on cod, but we think there is some sort of competition between cod and seals, and also with whales. In the Barents Sea area, cod, harp seals and minke whales are the prime top predators. I think they are more competitors than predators of each other.

● (1125)

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you. We've gone a bit over time, but we didn't want to interrupt the answer.

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

**Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for attending our session today.

We'll go back to you, Mr. Haug. Norway harvests both seals and whales; is that correct?

**Dr. Tore Haug:** That is correct, yes.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** Has that in any way damaged trade relationships with the United States in fish products or any other products?

**Dr. Tore Haug:** No, not as far as I know, because we can't export any products from seals or whales to the U.S. As far as I know, it hasn't affected our export of other seafood products to that country.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** Dr. Walters, do you think climate change may solve the problem for us? We've already heard that sea ice conditions, particularly on the east coast, are deteriorating, which of course has an impact on the seal population's ability to procreate. Is this something where, if we're considering reducing the size of the herd, we should also allow for the impact of climate change?

**Dr. Carl Walters:** It looks like the climate changes going on are actually favouring some of the main prey of the seals and sea lions on our coast. They haul out on rocks, so ice isn't an issue for them. The hake population, which is one of their main foods, is doing very well. Part of the herring decline and certainly part of the salmon decline we've seen do appear to be related to climate change factors and particularly to extreme temperature conditions and things like that.

That's the kind of thing that management can deal with by monitoring population size, by monitoring productivity and by adjusting the harvest from year to year. This is standard practice in fisheries. It's called feedback control or harvest control. They're management procedures.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** All right. Thank you.

Dr. Lane, our discussions and questions have focused on salmon on the west coast and cod on the east coast. Do you think we're missing something, though, by focusing on those two main species and not really getting a better picture of the total impact on all species, some of which, of course, complement the presence of cod in the east and salmon in the west? Do you think we really need to take an all-species approach to assessing what's going on with pinniped populations?

**Dr. Daniel Lane:** I have no doubt that there are bigger questions with respect to the impacts of seals on the ecosystem as a whole. Quite frankly, sir, we will never get to know that. The idea that we should spend our efforts trying to understand what those impacts are....

I'm not sure what kind of answer we're looking for—you as a committee or committees over the last 40 years. What do you need to know that will tell you and tell your clients—and I'm thinking about the cabinet table, I guess—enough to say we should move and do something? There's no doubt that those impacts are there. It's pretty clear, even from the aggregate level and the individual level. It's all there. We need to proceed, as Dr. Walters would say.

● (1130)

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** Thank you for that.

We have heard testimony that the health of the pinnipeds population, on the east coast particularly, is declining. I'm just wondering whether, if it's left alone, we'll get to a Darwinian kind of result where all species and all stocks will be basically clinging to survival if something doesn't happen.

Dr. Walters, can you comment on that?

**Dr. Carl Walters:** As I said, as these pinniped populations have built up in B.C., we've seen the standard mammalian density dependence in the survival rates of juvenile animals. They've dropped down and so on. However, we're also seeing a recent decline in the abundance of harbour seals. That's most likely associated with the continued growth in the transient killer whale population. Mother transient killer whales train their juveniles to hunt for mammals by taking them hunting for seal pups close to the shoreline. Other times they'd feed further offshore.

We'll see these continued changes going on. As said before, we can monitor them and we can respond to them. We've tried to develop computer simulation models that look at the whole ecosystem and all the possible interactions among multiple species. There are up to 60 different species of creatures at once in these models. The models do whatever you'd like them to do. There are just too many uncertainties that we will never be able to resolve by studying things piecewise in the field. We'll have to continue to manage adaptively into the future.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** Great. Thank you for that.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Desbiens, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Mrs. Caroline Desbiens (Beauport—Côte-de-Beaupré—Île d'Orléans—Charlevoix, BQ):** Mr. Chair, I may owe you two minutes because we came in a minute and a half late. I'm going to try to make my remarks very brief.

Dr. Haug, you stated that decisions are made based on measurements's, either the amount of pinnipeds or the amount of resources, particularly in Norway. Do these measurements come from the government, the field, Indigenous people and the folks out there doing the fishing?

[*English*]

**Dr. Tore Haug:** Thank you for the question. If I understood it right, my answer is that all decisions on management are coming from the management authorities in Norway, but that's based on advice from institutes like mine, the Institute of Marine Research. We do the research and come up with advice on how the population should be managed. This is then decided by the Norwegian government, you could say.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Caroline Desbiens:** You're basically telling us that the government is taking into account scientists in the field and the various organizations that provide the measurements.

Are measurements taken often? Is it comparable to a country like Canada, for example?

Do you feel you do measurements more often than Canada?

[*English*]

**Dr. Tore Haug:** I don't know how many measurements Canada does, but yes, measurements are primarily done by scientists. However, we also get some research measurements done by whalers, for instance, about blubber thickness, which we use in our evaluation of how these whales are doing in the ecosystem.

As I told you in my introduction, we saw that blubber thickness went down in both harp seals and minke whales in the period when the cod stock increased, but after the cod stock started to decrease, after 2015, we saw the opposite, in fact. Blubber is getting thicker in minke whales, for instance. We have also seen quite substantial decreases in pup production in some years in both of the harp seal populations we have in our areas.

It seems to be the rule that when harp seals get too little to eat, their blubber becomes thinner and the fertility of the females is reduced. Our Canadian colleagues have seen that if harp seals are not building up enough energy reserves in the form of blubber, they may lose their pups in so-called late-term abortions, which is a sign, you could say, that the seal population is large enough in comparison with the food available.

● (1135)

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Caroline Desbiens:** Dr. Lane, you were quite clear in your comments and testimony about the principle of accountability, that the future of the resource, the future of the fisheries situation in Canada depends on the decisions that will be made.

You said it was too late for cod. In your view, if nothing is done right now to change things, are other species at risk?

**Dr. Daniel Lane:** Thank you for the question, Mrs. Desbiens.

Yes, I believe so. You said at a meeting last week, I believe, that four species in particular are on the brink of extinction. The evidence is there and it's attributable to seal overpopulation. That problem still exists. We must remember that seals are superpredators in the marine ecosystem, and they have very few natural predators. That's the problem.

**Mrs. Caroline Desbiens:** Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

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

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the committee for allowing me to sit in the place of my colleague.

Thank you to the witnesses for your interesting testimony.

I recognize that I'm jumping into this study rather late in the game. I am familiar with some of the issues, obviously, as I represent northwest B.C. The health of our fisheries and this debate over marine mammal populations and their potential impact on fish are something to which many people are paying attention.

Perhaps I'll address my questions to Dr. Walters.

You began by stating that you feel there are twice as many seals and sea lions on the coast today as there have been in thousands of years. Because I've read elsewhere that there's a degree of uncertainty about the historical populations, I'm wondering what data this conclusion is based on.

**Dr. Carl Walters:** One of DFO's scientists, Peter Olesiuk—and I have repeated it—did a back calculation of how big the seal population had to have been back around 1880, right after the second smallpox outbreak really decimated first nations people. That's based on adding back into the population, backward over time, the known removals by commercial harvesting and culling. That calculation indicates that there were about half as many seals around in 1880—even after most of the first nations hunting had stopped—as there are today.

There's a lot of uncertainty in any back calculation like that. The data aren't that good, and we don't know exactly how productive the animals were. However, from that and from calculations based on the size of the aboriginal population in B.C., their likely consumption rates and the occurrence of bones from these animals in their middens and things like that, all indications are that they probably kept the populations down to well below half of what they are today.

● (1140)

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Dr. Walters, I came across a report from a technical workshop at UBC in May 2019. I imagine this was something you were involved in given your expertise. The summary of the workshop—the conclusions they reached in looking into this issue of pinnipeds and their impact on fish populations—was that the data are really insufficient.

We need better census data on the number of pinnipeds out there. We need better pinniped diet data. We need to know more about the potential impact of pinnipeds on salmon and about the fact that it depends on the proportion of seals and sea lions that are salmon specialists, something we're not terribly knowledgeable about. We need to do more to test the alternative hypothesis, which is that bottom-up effects of food supply and food web competition are primarily responsible for poor juvenile survival.

I'm certain that you're familiar with these conclusions from this workshop. What do you make of them and the direction they seem to be pointing in?

**Dr. Carl Walters:** That workshop mostly consisted of marine mammal researchers. The agenda was strongly biased towards people doing marine mammal studies, and they want more money to do more research. None of the studies they proposed would prove anything.

The idea of an experiment that I've promoted.... I would not have made that proposal if the data we could collect and have collected were sufficient to answer the questions or could ever be sufficient to answer the questions. The proof is in the pudding: We don't know what the responses would be.

For example, there's a hot topic in ecological research called the ecology of fear. That's studying how the presence of predators can affect the behaviour of their prey and make the prey hide, basically, more of the time, eat less and perform less well than they would if the predators weren't there. They've shown this in various experiments on a small scale. We have no idea at all how that ecology of fear is playing into the dynamics we're seeing out there, yet it certainly is a possibility.

I could list for you a dozen scientific things other than just going out to take more measurements like these clowns recommended. It wouldn't do any good at all; it wouldn't prove anything at all.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Dr. Walters, are there examples from the past of when we've tried to control predators and have gotten it wrong and have had impacts on other parts of the food web that weren't predicted at the outset? What can we learn from those examples?

**Dr. Carl Walters:** Yes, there's been a history in wolf control programs of not doing the control programs properly—not continuing to control long enough over time or killing the wrong wolves and not controlling the wolves that control the behaviour of wolves. Those have failed to produce, in some cases, reasonable results.

There's just not a lot of stuff where people have said that we need to treat what we're doing as an experiment, monitor it carefully and compare it to the alternative, as scientists would do in a control-impact comparison experiment.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Finally, Dr. Walters, one of the—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Mr. Bachrach.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Oh, I'm cut off.

**The Chair:** You have two seconds left, and that's not enough time to ask a question or get an answer.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Two seconds is just long enough to say thank you.

I'll pass it back to the chair.

**The Chair:** There you go. Thank you.

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

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

Thank you to the witnesses for appearing.

My first question is for Mr. Haug.

Mr. Haug, you started by talking about the main principle in Norwegian management of seals and whales. Does Norway have a framework for managing marine mammal populations?

**Dr. Tore Haug:** Do you mean management objectives?

**Mr. Clifford Small:** Yes.

**Dr. Tore Haug:** Yes, I think you could say the objective is to keep them at the level where you can have a sustainable harvest from the populations harvested. We have 17 whale species in Norway, but only one is hunted. We have seven seal species, but only one is hunted today on a commercial scale. We have very clear rules for the hunt of both minke whales and harp seals that secure sustainable harvests. That's it.

In Norway, we don't have a culling program. We have seen that too much sealing can reduce the seal populations—as we saw, for instance, for harp seals in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. However, when sealing became less profitable, the sealing more or less disappeared. Today, there are only one to three seal vessels going out every year, and the numbers they take are very low.

● (1145)

**Mr. Clifford Small:** Thank you, Mr. Haug, for that. You have a management protocol for marine mammals.

What are the trade implications under the Marine Mammal Protection Act for Norway, Norway being the number two supplier of seafood in the U.S. market? Are there any trade implications for Norway for its harvesting of marine mammals?

**Dr. Tore Haug:** No, there aren't, as far as I know.

The biggest problem in Norway, as we see it now, is that we need to reduce bycatch. We reduce bycatch of harbour porpoises by using pingers on the gillnets. That's the only implication we've had regarding trade problems with the U.S. Our sealing and whaling have never been problematic in that respect.

**Mr. Clifford Small:** Mr. Haug, if you had the population of pinnipeds in Norway that we have in eastern Canada, which is close to 10 million pinnipeds, what do you think the effect would be on the seafood production of wild fish in Norway?

**Dr. Tore Haug:** It's a very complicated question, because, as Carl Walters just said, the ecosystem and ecosystem models are terribly complicated. We know very little about what would happen if we reduced the current populations to half of what they are today.

I think your question is impossible to answer.

**Mr. Clifford Small:** Okay.

If your grey seal population on the Norwegian coast went from 5,000 grey seals to approximately 400,000—which we have in the Gulf of St. Lawrence—what would the Norwegian approach be?

**Dr. Tore Haug:** I think the approach would be increased quotas in the hunt we already have for grey seals.

**Mr. Clifford Small:** I have a question on seals and sea lions in the estuaries and rivers that are salmon habitats.

What would happen in Norway if you had pinnipeds in your salmon rivers and estuaries? Would the Norwegian people put up with that, or would they take action?

**Dr. Tore Haug:** It is legal to shoot harbour seals that go up salmon rivers. The problem is not very large in Norway, because the numbers of what we call “coastal seals”—harbour seals and grey seals—are quite low. We have seen harbour seals going up some salmon rivers, and they can be shot.

**Mr. Clifford Small:** Mr. Haug, on seals and cod, you said they prey on the same species, so there is a relationship. I guess capelin would be the main prey that seals and cod have in common.

If the harp seal population were decreased by half, what would the effect be on capelin and subsequently on cod?

**Dr. Tore Haug:** Again, that's very difficult to answer.

Capelin is one important species, both for cod and harp seals, but as you know, capelin fluctuates tremendously both with and without harvest, and they have other options. Krill and crustaceans are probably more important for seals than capelin are in most years.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

You've gone a bit over time, Mr. Small.

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

**Mr. Brendan Hanley (Yukon, Lib.):** Thanks to all of the witnesses.

I want to ask some questions of you first, Dr. Walters.

Just to step back a bit and get a better picture from your point of view on the relationship between salmon stocks and populations of pinnipeds, what do you think are the key factors leading to salmon mortality, and how important are pinnipeds in that dynamic in the west coast ecosystem?

● (1150)

**Dr. Carl Walters:** For the majority of B.C. salmon populations in general, they're not a big factor. The key problems are localized, particularly on the south coast of B.C., where we have half of the total coastline harvest seal population in the Georgia Strait in a very small area. We also have a concentration of chinook and coho production from streams around the Georgia Strait and a very valuable fishery. There's definitely conflict in that setting.

Over the first ocean year of chinook and coho, marine mammal predation appears to account for between 30% and 50% of the total deaths of young salmon, and then for returning adult salmon, up to about 20% of the adult salmon get eaten by seals and sea lions in estuaries as they're returning to their spawning rivers. We don't think that has a large impact.

When we first saw the salmon decline starting back in the 1980s, we thought we were dealing with an overharvest problem. In fact, even when we started to look at the declining survival rates of chinook and coho in their first year in the ocean, we blamed those declining survival rates on factors other than marine mammals. It wasn't until almost 2000 that some data started to come out from Peter Olesiuk's lab and from DFO showing how much the seal and sea lion populations had grown and how much they were consuming. Then we really started to realize this was a serious issue.

**Mr. Brendan Hanley:** Thank you.

I think what you're saying is that it's more of a regional effect than an overall effect, but correct me if I'm wrong when you answer.

The other aspect I want to ask you about, which you talked about, is the encouragement for opening up the seal harvest somewhat—for instance by removing commercial restrictions for first nation seal harvesting. Sustainable seal harvesting could have regional success in reducing salmon stocks. That might be the more important direction, rather than trying to look for some overall population effect. Would that be accurate?

**Dr. Carl Walters:** Yes, that is accurate.

The main need for seal reduction is in the south coast area right off of Vancouver, but there are also requests from first nations people in the north who fear that seals and sea lions are having a serious impact on a lot of the small stream populations of, in particular, chum salmon that first nations people depend on in the north as a major food source.

Unfortunately, we don't have any data to back this up. It's people saying that fish are disappearing and that the seals and sea lions are everywhere. It's that kind of evidence, which isn't strong.

**Mr. Brendan Hanley:** We could consider proceeding with what I think you called the adaptive management of seals. There seems to be more and more consensus—certainly more opinion coming from this committee—that that's a direction we should be moving towards.

What's the best way to measure those unknown questions and the effects, if we were to take on adaptive management more strongly? I guess you'll have to be very quick, because I don't have a lot of time left.

**Dr. Carl Walters:** The main method we would use to monitor whether it is succeeding is monitoring the first ocean year survival rate—the set of stocks directly—using what is called coded wire tagging. You tag a large number of small fish and you look at how many make it back. That would be the first indicator that we are successful. It would be an improvement in those survival rates.

We also monitor spawning escapements and we monitor harvests. Those spawning grounds and harvests should improve within just a few years after reduction starts.

● (1155)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Hanley.

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

[*Translation*]

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

Dr. Lane, in your opinion, if we are to make an informed decision about pinniped management, what's our most important tool?

**Dr. Daniel Lane:** Thank you for the question, Mrs. Desbiens.

What do you mean by “decision”? Are you asking whether or not to proceed with the seal cull?

**Mrs. Caroline Desbiens:** Is the most important tool stock of the resource or its state of health?

Should we do more measurements or are the existing ones enough? Should we try something new?

**Dr. Daniel Lane:** As the other witnesses have said, we need to do measurements. It's important to see how the marine ecosystem evolves, for sure.

We have an opportunity before us. Junior scientists could be involved in the seal hunt. They could measure the resource, because they would be on the ground and could make similar observations to find out exactly what's happening. They are practically scientists. It's important that we find out what's going on.

It's also an opportunity to use this resource from a socioeconomic perspective. We could put people to work, which would be good for the economy. Some products would be good for our health. I feel we have an obligation to use this resource. We have to look at what's happening in the other—

**Mrs. Caroline Desbiens:** Thank you, Dr. Lane.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Desbiens.

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

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll continue with my questions for Dr. Walters.

I'm curious as to whether there is a correlation between areas that have a large population of pinnipeds and the recovery or decline of salmon stocks in those areas. One of the examples that has been noted is the Cowichan River chinook. There is a high abundance of pinnipeds in the area surrounding the Cowichan River, yet we're seeing chinook stocks on the rebound.

Have you looked into the correlation between particularly high densities of pinnipeds and the trend of salmon populations in those areas?

**Dr. Carl Walters:** On a general coastline basis, from Washington all the way up to Alaska, the problem areas where stocks are declining are also the areas where marine mammal densities are highest.

I'm doing an analysis of the Cowichan River, which is really interesting. We calculate that there were large and growing pinniped impacts on the Cowichan stock's first ocean year survival rate that proceeded up to the 1990s. There was then a reversal in the Cowichan stock, and it unexpectedly built up very rapidly.

The calculations we have done on that stock and the different life stages suggest that the main reason for its recovery, despite continued marine mammal predation, was the substantial improvement in freshwater survival conditions because of habitat restoration efforts.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** With the permission of the chair, I'll try to sneak in a second question.

I know that salmon hatcheries concentrate the returns and releases of salmon. I'm wondering if this makes them particularly vulnerable to pinniped predation. If so, what might be the implications for the federal government's efforts under PSSI to build new hatcheries on our coast?

● (1200)

**Dr. Carl Walters:** The pinnipeds have definitely learned about these concentrated hatchery releases. They show up the day before the hatchery releases and pound the juvenile fish coming out of the hatcheries. However, as far as we know, that takes only a relatively small percentage of the total smolts released. Hatchery juveniles in general survive at only about half the rates of natural juvenile salmon, which are better adapted to deal with predation risks of all sorts right from day one. The dumb ones get knocked out while they're rearing under natural conditions with high predation risk.

The bottom line is that it's a complicated mixture of impacts.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Bachrach. You've gone a bit over time. Ms. Barron would be proud of you.

We have about two minutes left in this hour. I don't know if Mr. Perkins wants to ask a question in those two minutes or if we'll move on, let our witnesses go and then introduce the new witnesses.

**Mr. Rick Perkins (South Shore—St. Margarets, CPC):** I have a quick question.

**The Chair:** All right. You can ask one quick one, please.

**Mr. Rick Perkins:** Mr. Haug, I'd like to ask you a question. We had a DFO official here at the beginning of the study who will be coming here again in a little while. I'll quote from what she said: "Our objective is not to reduce the seal population. Just like other fisheries where we try to keep our fish at very high and heavy levels...."

When you look at the numbers that Mr. Small gave earlier for our grey seal population, which is at over 400,000—and we have somewhere in the neighbourhood of 10 million seals with the various other species—I'll tell you that it's the only species DFO is managing successfully to keep at a high level. Might that be the reason that all our other fish stocks are in such massive decline?

**Dr. Tore Haug:** It's tempting to believe that, but I don't know enough about your fish populations to give you a firm answer on that.

**Mr. Rick Perkins:** I'll fill you in. There were 2.7 million harp seals at the time of the cod collapse in 1991. Now there are over eight million. Could that be a contributor to what's going on in our waters?

**Dr. Tore Haug:** Yes, I would guess so, because we have seen exactly the opposite. We have seen an increase in the cod population, and the harp seals, well, have some problems.

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

Dr. Lane, Dr. Haug and Dr. Walters, thank you for participating and for your witness testimony today. Thank you for sharing your knowledge with the committee.

We'll suspend for a moment while we switch out and start the second panel as quickly as possible.

Thank you again.

● (1200)

(Pause)

● (1205)

**The Chair:** I would like to welcome our witnesses for the second panel.

From the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, by video conference, we have Cédric Arseneau, director, Magdalen Island area, Quebec region; and Andrew Thomson, regional director, fisheries management. Here in person we have Jennifer Buie, acting director general, fisheries resource management; and Simon Nadeau, director, marine mammals and biodiversity science.

We'll now allow for opening remarks of five minutes or less. I don't know who's doing them or if you're sharing them.

Please go ahead when you're ready.

**Ms. Jennifer Buie (Acting Director General, Fisheries Resource Management, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** Hello and good afternoon, Mr. Chair and committee members. My name is Jennifer Buie. I'm the acting director general of fisheries resource management at Fisheries and Oceans Canada. My colleagues and I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this committee on behalf of the department. I think everybody has been introduced.

The minister is committed to supporting sustainable and prosperous fisheries through the use of science- and evidence-based decision-making. Accordingly, Fisheries and Oceans Canada manages fisheries with the goal of keeping stocks healthy, protecting biodiversity and fisheries habitats, and ensuring that our fisheries remain productive.

The department manages the seal harvest using the same approach as all other commercially managed fisheries, working to ensure that seal populations remain above a precautionary population level to ensure sustainability. Management decisions are based on the best available information, including peer-reviewed science and indigenous knowledge.

[*Translation*]

Based on the most recent scientific opinions, from 2018 to 2022, Greenland seal landings were 7% per year on average from a population of 425,000 seals. Grey seal landings were even lower, at 1% on average from a population of 77,300 seals. Preliminary reports for 2023 on the Greenland seal and grey seal hunts show increased landings at approximately 9.5% and 2% of their respective populations, based on the scientific data.

[*English*]

We are encouraged by the positive signs in market demand for seals seen this year. However, generally, the lack of market opportunities for seal products has led to fewer removals. The department is aware of the concerns from commercial fish harvesters about the impact of the seals on fish stocks. However, Canada's fisheries management framework is not intended to be used as a tool to reduce populations.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada is continuously improving its understanding of seal populations and potential impacts on fish stocks through surveys and targeted research projects, such as studies on diet and reproduction. Currently, there is only a single area where the department has scientific evidence supporting the negative impact of seal predation on commercial fish stocks. Scientific evidence has not been found linking harp seal predation to the current abundance of northern cod stocks in Newfoundland. Similarly, the department does not have evidence of pinniped predation as a key driver in Pacific salmon declines. Research, however, continues and, increasingly, the department seeks to integrate a greater number of ecosystem factors, such as oceanographic conditions and predation, into its stock assessments.

The department's commitment to seal-related science was also demonstrated by its establishment of the Atlantic seal science task team to gather input on science activities and programs related to seals and their role in the ecosystem in Atlantic Canada and Quebec. The task team's report was published in 2022, and one of its recommendations was a seal forum to bring together experts, which the minister did on November 8 to 9 in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. The purpose of the seal summit was to explore new opportunities to expand Canada's seal products into export markets, to highlight the importance of the seal harvest to indigenous communities and to help address gaps in data regarding seal populations.

At the conclusion of the seal summit, the minister announced an open call for project proposals to increase our understanding of the role of seals in the ecosystem. DFO science is currently reviewing proposals received under this initiative. The department will continue to advance scientific research on seals, guided by the recommendations from the task team, and we will look at ways to further collaborate with industry in science activities.

On the margins of the summit, the Atlantic seal advisory committee also met. The committee is the primary consultative body for the management and development of the Atlantic seal harvest. A notable outcome of committee discussions was the establishment of a working group to review the policies and regulations that govern licensing aspects regarding the seal harvest. The review will determine what changes could be made to facilitate participation in, and reduce barriers to, the harvest. The working group has met multiple times, and it's on track to report to the Atlantic seal advisory committee at its fall meeting.

While these developments are a cause for optimism, much work needs to be done to achieve a seal harvest that is not only sustainable but prosperous. The department is firmly committed to playing a role alongside its indigenous partners and industry to advance this objective.

● (1210)

[*Translation*]

Thank you for your attention.

I will now be pleased to answer your questions.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now move on to our first round of questioning, and we'll start off with Mr. Small for six minutes or less, please.

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

My first question is for Ms. Buie.

Why does DFO have a picture of a whitecoat on its web page when the whitecoat is such a short period in the life cycle of a harp seal?

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** I actually don't know why we have a picture of a whitecoat. You're right; it's a very short part of a seal's life.

I can follow up and work with communications on that.

**Mr. Clifford Small:** Thank you, Ms. Buie, for your answer.

We just had testimony from a Norwegian scientist, and he talked about Norway's framework for managing not just pinnipeds but marine mammals—seals and whales. It's very important to them, and their fishery is so much more productive than Canada's.

Why can your department not have a similar policy and have a framework for the management of pinnipeds? Why don't we have it?

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** Thank you for the question, Mr. Chair.

We do have a framework for managing pinnipeds. It's part of the sustainable management of all of our fisheries in Canada. We want to ensure there's a harvest that continues to be accessible to our sealing community. That's why we apply the precautionary approach to ensure that our seals are managed sustainably.

**Mr. Clifford Small:** Thank you, Ms. Buie, but it seems that Norway has a bit of a different management approach, in that they look at how high the population should be and how low it should be, whereas our management approach is to look at making sure that our population is not too high.

I'm looking back at the last meeting. The main objective in the management of pinnipeds is to keep the population healthy, and it looks like it's a success story in terms of the health of seal populations. However, the Norwegian scientist we just heard from—Mr. Haug—said that seals and cod prey on basically the same species. Would you think that if cod populations are low and seal populations are high—if one goes up, one goes down—that's a factor in your wanting to increase the health of the cod stocks off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador?

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** I think that's certainly a consideration we take into account when we're making decisions around total allowable catches for our seal harvest. I mean, that is part of our science examination of both seals and cod and where there might be a relationship.

Perhaps I can turn to my colleague Dr. Nadeau to add to that response.

● (1215)

**Mr. Simon Nadeau (Director, Marine Mammals and Biodiversity Science, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** Sure.

**Mr. Clifford Small:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm going to turn my time over to Mr. Arnold.

**The Chair:** You have two minutes.

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

I'm going to use my time right now to move a motion that was put on notice on April 28:

> That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake a study of one two-hour meeting to examine how the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, within its role as the machinery of government agent for the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, allocates resources to the Great Lakes Fishery Commission in execution of Canada's commitments under the 1954 Convention on Great Lakes Fisheries, and the working relationship between the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the Great Lakes Fishery Commission in delivery of the convention's five major charges for the commission;
>
> that the committee call senior officials from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the Great Lakes Fishery Commission to appear as witnesses concurrently;
>
> that the committee present its conclusions and recommendations in a report to the House; and
>
> that, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee request that the government table a comprehensive response to this report.

I bring this motion forward, Mr. Chair, because we have been basically playing a tennis match between what we hear from DFO and what is actually delivered through the mechanism right now, with not all of the funds going to the Great Lakes Fishery Commission.

We've heard testimony from DFO officials and heard further from the Great Lakes Fishery Commission that their initial testimony was incorrect. We brought DFO back in. They said something further. The Great Lakes Fishery Commission had a counter to that.

We as a committee have already spent I think.... Individual members have been going back and forth a lot on this, even in this committee meeting. I propose that we have them both in at the same time so we can minimize the impact on our work as a committee and hopefully work towards a solution to this situation, which has become such an irritant that our U.S. counterparts in the Great Lakes Fishery Commission have withdrawn from the budgetary process.

I believe Mr. Epp has further information on this, if he'd like to add it.

**Mr. Dave Epp (Chatham-Kent—Leamington, CPC):** Yes.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I could speak ad nauseam to the series of frustrating communications that have come from the Great Lakes Fishery Commission's Canadian section. Most recently, I've been corresponding with the American section, which has reached out to me as well.

The united council of advisers, on April 25, published a media release and a statement that chronicled three years of frustration with the Canadian government, initially over financing. Actually, what's interesting now is that the pressure has built to the point that the Minister of Finance addressed Canada's shortfall, which had been ongoing since 2001, only to have it not flow through to the Great Lakes Fishery Commission.

I have much more I could say, but I'm hoping we can deal with this and not waste a lot of the committee's time.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Hardie.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** Yes, thank you.

I share the frustration and the uncertainty around what we've heard, because a former colleague of ours is working with the commission and has been critical of Canada's response and its follow-through. That said, though, we'd like to propose an amendment to Mr. Arnold's motion that we undertake a study of a minimum of three two-hour meetings, and that we invite the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the chair of the Great Lakes Fishery Commission to appear as witnesses separately, not concurrently. We think there could be a far more productive review and analysis, rather than having the two of them getting into a sparring match in front of our very eyes. That's the amendment we're proposing.

**The Chair:** Okay.

**Mr. Rick Perkins:** Can I ask a question?

**The Chair:** Yes, Mr. Perkins.

**Mr. Rick Perkins:** Thank you, Mr. Hardie.

Why three? Do you have some other witnesses, in addition to those two, you'd like to hear from?

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** I think we should hear from our folks as well as from Global Affairs, because Global Affairs has been cited by the commission as perhaps a better management focus for this relationship, given that the U.S. Secretary of State is the one who looks at things from the American side.

Let's hear from our people. Let's hear from the U.S. side and then bring our people back in to really sort out what we've heard and get a response from them to that so we get a complete understanding.

We would be open to a two-meeting session if that's going to be sufficient, but we think three is probably more productive for really getting to the root of this, rather than having, as they say, a bun toss between the two sides, which we've witnessed all along.

● (1220)

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Epp.

**Mr. Dave Epp:** I'm curious about why that length of time is needed, because the advisers and the commission have written for three years and have complained that there has been no government response. Do you think the government doesn't know what's going on? Is that the issue? The commission has written a press release outlining eight points of correspondence and has had radio silence in return.

I'm trying to understand if it's ignorance of the issue you're trying to get at. Not having spent a lot of time on this committee, I certainly have a wealth of information that I've received.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** On this side, I would certainly want Vance Badawey, our MP, who's been very vocal on the issues in the Great Lakes, to participate with us, because like you, he's well invested in this.

I get the sense from what we've seen indirectly over the past Lord knows how many months that there's a disagreement about the value in kind, for instance, of work the Canadian side is doing. You may take issue with this, but on the government side, we're not as heavily invested as you've been. In order for us to really do our due diligence, we need to maybe take a few steps that you've already taken.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Arnold.

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

I'm not sure at which stage we are at. I proposed a motion. Mr. Hardie proposed an amendment, so we're discussing his amendment.

In response to Mr. Hardie, I note we have a very full agenda already between now and June, and it's even full after the summer recess. We propose one meeting to get the two parties in the same room at the same time, because we continuously play this back-and-forth of he said this, they said that, they said this and they said that.

To make the best use of our committee's valuable time, I believe it's very important that we have both parties in the same room so we can reduce the amount of back-and-forth that we've continuously seen on this issue for a number of years now. Even your party members have seen that. Mr. Badawey is well aware of what's taken place here. I'd be more than happy to have him as one of your committee members during this study. I think he could brief all of your party members quite quickly on what's taken place.

I'll move a subamendment to Mr. Hardie's amendment. We've proposed one meeting; you've proposed three. I propose a subamendment to your amendment that we compromise at two meetings, but we have DFO officials and the Great Lakes Fishery Commission appear concurrently.

**The Chair:** First I have to go to Mr. Perkins, Mr. Bachrach and Mr. Epp, and then I'll go back to Mr. Hardie.

**Mr. Rick Perkins:** I'm speaking to the subamendment to the amendment. Is that what I'm speaking to?

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Mr. Rick Perkins:** I think what I was planning to say is still relevant.

When I was first elected in 2021 and appointed fisheries critic, in my first meeting with the minister I raised this issue. In her first appearance before this committee I raised it. In letters to her after that meeting I raised this issue with her, in addition to everything Mr. Epp has been doing.

In response to that, the minister said in committee that she believed the government should pay its bills. The evidence is pretty striking that it has not been, given what the treaty obligation is.

In last year's budget, in 2022, there was bragging about the allocation of solid funding that would finally be committed to the commission. It was to the extent that the minister, in June, went to Lake Erie and made a big to-do out of the fact that they were finally going to get all the money the treaty obliges the government to give. Then they didn't get it.

How do we know that? Before this committee, not too long ago, the Great Lakes Fishery Commission said they didn't get it. In a meeting around that at the same time, the officials said they did get it. If we do that again, we're going to get the same result since we'll have them separately. It's “he said, she said”, as Mr. Arnold said. All we keep getting is the runaround from the officials.

Put the two in the room together, and let's sort this out. I support it being reduced to two meetings, because we have an important study coming up on the corporatization of the fishery. We need to get on with that and finish this study.

I suggest that if we have two meetings, we have a witness—in addition to Global Affairs—from the American side of the commission.

● (1225)

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Bachrach.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Prior to Mr. Arnold proposing his subamendment, I was going to do the same, as a very obvious compromise between the two offerings. I'm happy to support that proposal on behalf of Lisa Marie.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Epp.

**Mr. Dave Epp:** I want to pick up on a comment Mr. Hardie expressed on the disagreement in how the money is calculated and Canada meeting its share. This is no longer a money issue; this is strictly a governance issue. I OPQ'd how the money flowed. I have 11 pages of spreadsheets. This should operate—it's been an international treaty since 1954—to address something that could not be addressed by eight states, a province and all the territories.

The International Joint Commission works. Why does it work? In the main estimates, for Global Affairs there's one line—the transfer. By all accounts, DFO does a remarkable job on the work as the contractee of the commission. The problem is on the governance side. That's what we need to get to the bottom of. That's where all the calls, almost unanimously, including from a good chair of your own caucus, if I may be so bold...is to fix the problem with governance. We don't have to get into the numbers. It's not a numbers issue.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Morrissey.

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

While I agree with everything being said here today, as a member of the committee, I want some assurance. I'm not interested in going through an hour or two of “he said, she said” finger pointing. Unlike Mr. Epp and some of the others, and Mr. Badawey from our side, I don't know the issue well.

How do we blend the two very competing interests into one meeting? An hour or two of finger pointing will be a waste of time as well—not to mention having another meeting. I'm willing to listen to how you see the meeting taking place, if they're both going to be sitting at the end of this table glaring at one another.

I'm lost. I'm not sure we could spend a lot of time on this.

Chair, you're a great chair, but....

**Mr. Rick Perkins:** Why would they be glaring at each other and not telling the truth?

**Mr. Dave Epp:** That is actually the exact—

**The Chair:** Order. Wait until you're recognized, please.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** That's fine. I'm looking for answers.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Hardie.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** Anecdotally, my suspicions align with yours, Mr. Epp, but we need to know for sure. An opportunity to hear both sides, without a big bun toss in the middle of the room, would be a useful way for us to determine for ourselves what is and isn't. Then what comes out of it should be a durable resolution, rather than just assigning blame or responsibility.

Again, having two meetings is perfect—maybe an hour with our officials and an hour with the Great Lakes group. Then, in the second session, we'd bring our people back in and say, “What are you going to do to fix this?”. Perhaps we can determine for ourselves whether something needs to be fixed.

I share your suspicions that something needs to be fixed, but I'd like to give everybody a good and adequate hearing. This, to me, means we hear from them separately, then bring our people back in and bring up the gaps where there's either a difference in understanding or simply a management issue, as you propose. Then we'd ask them what they are going to do to fix this.

That's where we're at and that's the substance of the amendment we are offering. We accept Mr. Arnold's proposal for two meetings. That's friendly, so it comes down, then, to a matter of whether it is concurrent or we hear them separately.

● (1230)

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Arnold.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** I may be able to save us some time so that we can get back to our witnesses.

If I were to withdraw my subamendment and Mr. Hardie withdrew his amendment, we'd simply change the original motion to having two meetings. We can't guarantee they're going to agree to appear at the same time, but it's something we should ask for.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Epp.

**Mr. Dave Epp:** It is critical that they both be in the same room, because right now it flows from the Treasury Board through DFO to the commission and back to DFO. If that relationship is evidenced in front of us as not working.... If it works, that is a big step. If it is not working, isn't that what we need to know as well? There are legal opinions that point out the structural conflict of interest DFO commissioners are in when they serve on the commission, so there is all of that.

If that relationship is evident to our eyes—that they can't work in front of a parliamentary committee—how are they supposed to work well in the backrooms?

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Hardie.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** The commission's position, their suspicions and your suspicions are already pretty well established. I don't know whether any further hearings about that will mean that much, other than for us to ask the commission a question about the position DFO is taking in all of this.

Having two meetings is okay. Concurrently...no, we don't think that's a good idea.

Maybe we can just call the question, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** I'm going to Mr. Arnold first.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** I have a question for Mr. Hardie.

When you referred to calling our people back in to clarify what was said, who are you referring to as “our people”?

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** “Our people” would be the DFO—the people who should be responsible for delivering the funding.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** I disagree with that. I believe it needs to be DFO officials appearing first—

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** Oh, yes. We'll make them first, then the commission and then DFO comes back.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** You're proposing having the back-and-forth tennis match again, which we've already experienced meeting after meeting and year after year. That's why we're saying we should bring them into the same room at the same time. It's to save this committee's time by avoiding having the independent, back-and-forth tennis match taking place.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** We haven't had sufficient hearings to bring all of us up to the speed Mr. Epp or Mr. Badawey might have.

We don't agree with the concurrence piece, Mel, but we'll call the question and see what the committee would like to do.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Arnold.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** If we're going to have two meetings, the first of the two meetings should probably be for hearing from the U.S. counterparts and others to get the background. Then the second meeting will be with DFO and the Great Lakes Fishery Commission.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Hardie.

**Mr. Ken Hardie:** We could agree to a separate hearing from the commission for perhaps one hour, because the story seems to be fairly simple. Then perhaps we could bring the DFO officials in for a second hour. Then, yes, we would go to a second meeting.

Why not maybe think about bringing them both in at the same time and resolve it that way? At least we'll get the foundational stuff that some of us really need in order to appreciate the full extent of this thing.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Arnold.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** If we can agree to two meetings, then we can hash out the appearance order and get an indication from the parties involved as to whether they will come or not. We would include Global Affairs and the U.S. counterparts.

**The Chair:** Is everybody all right with that? We'll have two meetings, and we'll hash out who's appearing at which one and whether they're concurrent.

Go ahead, Madame Desbiens.

● (1235)

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Caroline Desbiens:** I'd like to know when the two meetings will be held. Will it be two meetings or one two-hour meeting?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** We'll probably try to schedule that at our committee business meeting on May 4. That might be a good time to see what the schedule is like and to say which two meetings we're going to allocate for this particular intervention.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Caroline Desbiens:** So everything is fine.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** All right. Is everybody okay with it?

I see a thumbs-up from Mr. Bachrach. I'm going to assume everybody else is okay with it because they've been talking about it for the past 20 minutes.

(Motion agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

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

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** Thank you, Chair.

My questions are going to be more generalized. They're for Madam Buie.

We've been hearing a lot of testimony in this committee. We've had numerous meetings. Various committees have heard the issue before.

Can you give an opinion on why the industry and why people in the fishery are so suspicious of DFO science? It's almost universal.

Three areas have come down in this report so far. There is the ministry, which should be objective. We've had scientists from various NGOs—arm's-length agencies—testify. However, the fishers who appear before us and the harvesters are not complimentary of the veracity of the science on this issue within DFO.

Can you give me your opinion?

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** We do have a very robust advisory committee process. We had the seal summit back in November.

We hear a lot from our stakeholder community about what they're seeing on the water. Oftentimes they are seeing different things—for example, large pools of fish that are currently under moratorium or other things that are different from what our DFO science is reporting on.

From a management perspective, our job is to consider all sources of information. However, in the end, it's the science and the evidence-based outcomes of their science processes that are helping to drive our decision-making around fisheries management. I think we always provide opportunity for industry and other stakeholders to provide their views.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** They do. They tell this committee, but then it doesn't get listened to. That's the testimony they're giving. It does not seem to have any meaningful impact on the decisions that come down.

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** Understood.

In our fisheries management decisions, as I said, we do rely on the empirical evidence-based results from science processes that are peer-reviewed, and we rely on the expertise of not only our science but—

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** Are there gaps in your science? Do you acknowledge, sitting before this committee, that your science is 100%, that it gives an accurate, beyond-reproach perspective of the state of the oceans east and west?

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** I would say that management is continually evolving. For example, we're looking at ways to incorporate more of an ecosystem-based approach to management.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** Has your science failed in the past? Has your science failed on the fishery recommendations?

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** As I said, our science is always providing the best knowledge at any given point in time to make our decisions.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** I know it's a difficult position, but this committee has heard a lot of frustration from harvesters, from indigenous harvesters and from fishers, and that the department is not taking the threat seriously. The substantial growth in reference to the east coast seal herd has the potential to have a very—I won't use the word “catastrophic”—significant impact on some stocks. It already has, and it will on some others that are the lifeblood of rural Atlantic communities.

My question is this. Your notes say, “Currently, there is only a single area where the Department has scientific evidence supporting the negative impact of seal predation”. Where is that?

● (1240)

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** That's in the southern gulf.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** Could you be specific? The southern gulf is a big area.

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** It is in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, in what they call the NAFO division 4T.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** What species and what fish stock is it—

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** It's for cod.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** For my closing question, what could you recommend to the committee that government must do differently to see the results that other jurisdictions, such as Norway, have? We keep getting pointed to models where they've had a successful balance.

Something that concerned me—it was in your statement as well—was that a management tool of DFO is not to reduce herds. That concerns me as an east coast politician, as I know we've had clearly documented dramatic growth in the seal herd in Atlantic Canada. I don't think anybody is disputing the fact that it's having an impact on fish stocks and that it could eventually move into fish stocks where it is not currently, such as lobster and crab. They will eat them. We're also told that when they run out of one food source, they will move to another.

I'm a bit puzzled as to why DFO does not have a management tool to reduce a herd that is having an obvious and negative impact when other jurisdictions do.

Thank you, Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Morrissey.

We'll now go to Madame Desbiens.

Somebody is telling me that a vote has been called. Do we know if they're 30-minute bells?

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** They're 30 minutes.

**The Chair:** With the permission of the committee, we'll continue on, and we'll stop our time long before the vote comes up. Anyone can do it by phone or whatever. Not only are there 30-minute bells, but there's a 10-minute voting time frame as well if we're doing it on our phones. We'll continue on as per normal.

It's over to you, Madame Desbiens, for six minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here.

Ms. Buie, you said earlier that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, or DFO, ensures that the fisheries in Canada and Quebec remain productive.

If we do nothing to control fish stocks and balance the relationship between predator and prey, how can we ensure that the fisheries will remain productive, and do it ethically and sustainably, since that's our primary concern?

[*English*]

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** In terms of assuring productivity, that is part of our precautionary approach to fisheries management. We want to ensure that the stocks are continually being maintained in a healthy state to ensure that we can harvest them in a sustainable manner.

As I mentioned earlier, something we're looking at and starting to use more in our fishery management decisions is the ecosystem approach to fisheries management, whereby we're looking at this on a bit of a grander scale. We don't yet have the tools to manage fisheries in that fashion, and we continue to use our sustainable fisheries framework as the foundation on which fisheries management decisions are made.

That will be one way in the future, once we get further scientific evidence and once we understand those relationships within the ecosystem...because they're quite complex. We don't understand what the interplay is between some of those species. If one is removed, what will happen? Will another species come and take its place? We just don't know. That's why we really rely on the scientific information of today, what we have, in order to make sound, robust decisions about our fisheries.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Caroline Desbiens:** Do you feel you have enough data and measurements at this time? Would having more help you?

● (1245)

[*English*]

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** Based on our sustainable fisheries framework, we have the information to manage seals for a sustainable harvest. However, I mentioned all of those facets of how to manage at an ecosystem level, and that is where we would rely more on needed scientific evidence of where those relationships are in the ecosystem.

As a department, we're starting to explore that as a management tool, but we're not there yet.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Caroline Desbiens:** We've heard from many people here that it's urgent action be taken. We're seeing mackerel dwindle, herring, some fisheries are shut down. Folks have confirmed to us that they have found pinnipeds are even eating lobster.

The urgency factor, is that a variable you can't avoid considering in the current situation?

[*English*]

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** I will turn back to some of my opening remarks about putting out a call for proposals on science, and maybe I can turn to my colleague here to speak to it. That's part of the progression forward to understand better some of the, perhaps, science needs we have in order to develop a better system for understanding what role seals are playing in the ecosystem.

Perhaps I can turn to my colleague for further details.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Simon Nadeau:** Thank you for this question.

Last fall, we issued a call for proposals. Twenty-five projects were proposed with the goal of increasing scientific input to study the role of seals in the ecosystem. We're finalizing approval of these projects and we will announce them soon.

We're also conducting a new project this year that will quantify the impact of grey seals in various Atlantic fisheries management areas. Using the ecosystem approach that Ms. Buie was talking about, we're looking to better understand pinniped predation's impact on cod on the Scotian Shelf.

**Mrs. Caroline Desbiens:** Can you put forward some sort of time frame for the application of this new data to come up with concrete results so we can tell our fishers not to be overly alarmed, or on the contrary, to be more alarmed?

**Mr. Simon Nadeau:** The concrete results come more from the management side of things. The scientific work remains unfinished. Science is improving all the time and ecosystem conditions are changing as well, so we have to consider that. What was prevalent 20 years ago is not what's prevalent now or what will be prevalent in 20 years. Let's say we're still racing to reach our target, but we're continuing our work and undertaking new projects to better understand the role of seals in the ecosystem.

**Mrs. Caroline Desbiens:** That said, you can't give me a time frame, can you?

**Mr. Simon Nadeau:** No, we can't give you a time frame as such, I'm sorry.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madame Desbiens.

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

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to both of our witnesses. This is a very interesting topic.

My questions focus mostly on British Columbia because that's where I'm from, and obviously I have a particular interest in the situation there. Hearing the contrast between your testimony and that of Dr. Walters I think is interesting to the committee.

I'm curious. You've highlighted the lack of conclusive evidence pointing toward pinnipeds—if I wrote it down correctly—as the "key driver" of west coast salmon declines. What key data is missing to inform that question?

**Mr. Andrew Thomson (Regional Director, Fisheries Management, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** I'll take that question.

I'm Andrew Thomson, the regional director of science for the Pacific region.

We continue to do, I would say, a multivariate study on the key factors for particular salmon stocks. We have one going on right now for west coast Vancouver Island chinook to assist in understanding rebuilding plans for them. There is a wide variety of research avenues in which we're trying to understand what the drivers are for some of our salmon populations and their decline.

As Dr. Walters said earlier, the Cowichan River is a good example where habitat impact was one of the key drivers for that particular stock. That tends to be variable depending on the stock, depending on the area and, of course, depending on the life history of the salmon.

● (1250)

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Thank you very much, Mr. Thomson.

I'm curious about various assertions regarding the population abundance of pinnipeds. You indicated that you're doing research on drivers of salmon abundance.

When it comes to the abundance of pinnipeds, we have heard the view that there are as many as two times the pinnipeds now as there have been historically. We have heard another view—or there's certainly another view out there—that pinnipeds in British Columbia are recovering to historic levels.

What do the peer-reviewed studies indicate when it comes to pinniped density and abundance?

**Mr. Andrew Thomson:** In the department, we have conducted aerial surveys of pinniped populations since the 1970s. Currently, our estimate from 2019 for harbour seals is about 85,000 harbour seals in British Columbia. That's slightly down from the peak of over 100,000 in the early 2000s.

Similarly, we're seeing about 43,200 Steller's sea lions. That is an increase over 2013, but it has been relatively stable since 2017. There's an estimate of about 13,600 California sea lions, which, again, is an increase since the 2009 survey but not a significant increase since 2017.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Does DFO have any comparison to historic population abundance for seals and sea lions on the B.C. coast?

**Mr. Andrew Thomson:** As I understand it, the historic population from the 1960s was also around 100,000 for harbour seals. I don't have the data in front of me for the others, but we have some past surveys.

Of course, we have been trying to bring greater rigour to our survey methodology through these aerial surveys we have been conducting since the 1970s.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** For the RFP that has been put out for additional research on these topics, what proportion of the proposals dealt with the west coast versus the east coast?

**Mr. Andrew Thomson:** I don't have the exact figures in front of me, but maybe one of my colleagues does. I understand that a number of proposals have come forward from the west coast from both universities and indigenous groups. I have seen some of those proposals.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** I will try to ask this a bit more pointedly. On the west coast, what are the key questions we need to answer?

**Mr. Andrew Thomson:** There are a lot of questions we're still looking at, both within DFO and I think with others, in trying to understand what the ecosystem impacts of pinniped predation are. As we know, pinnipeds obviously consume salmon. That's not an issue of debate. It's about the proportion of salmon they consume and whether or not they are consuming other predators of salmon. For instance, the majority of seals consume more hake than they do salmon. Hake, as we know, is a predator of juvenile salmon, so we're trying to understand that ecosystem effect.

We're also looking at the way we conduct these studies. We're moving from just scat analysis of seals to more fatty acid analysis that might give us a longer time frame of the data, not just a single point of data.

There are multiple avenues we're pursuing to try to get a much better understanding of the role of seals and pinnipeds generally in British Columbia and their potential impact on salmon populations and other populations within the ecosystem.

**Mr. Taylor Bachrach:** Thank you, Mr. Thomson.

My understanding is that DFO, historically, has targeted marine mammals. Maybe I'm incorrect with that assertion.

In past management approaches, has there been an effort from DFO historically to control marine mammal populations, and how has that worked out?

**Mr. Andrew Thomson:** In the long history past, prior to the 1960s and in the 1960s, as I understand it, some cull programs were tried. I don't have all the data of those programs in the distant past.

I think the most recent example would be from 1997 to 1998. There was a cull of 55 seals in the Puntledge River, which was conducted by the department. It looked at seals that were consuming salmon in that area.

● (1255)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Bachrach.

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

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

My question is for Ms. Buie.

In 2020, legislation was brought in by the current government to outlaw the euthanasia of nuisance pinnipeds because our seafood markets were being threatened under the MMPA. Norway is the number two supplier of seafood to the United States. Today, we had a Norwegian scientist here telling us that their management of marine mammals, seals and whales has no impact on their trade relations with the U.S. They have a policy of automatic euthanasia of seals in rivers, estuaries and aquaculture facilities.

Why is your department so fearful of the MMPA bogeyman versus Norway's fearlessness towards that threat?

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** Part of the consideration is that the MMPA does not outlaw our regulated commercial seal hunt. It affects only the unintentional killing of marine mammals as we undertake other commercial fishing activities.

In terms of our seal hunt, there is no question that the MMPA does not apply. We can continue with a well-regulated seal hunt that has a very large total allowable catch, and we can continue to export our more lucrative seafood products, such as lobster and crab, to the U.S.

I can't speak to Norway's position, but we continue to manage our seal hunt the way we are.

**Mr. Rick Perkins:** To the same witness, as a follow-up to that, the United States has allowed the culling of sea lions—and we're not suggesting the culling of seals—on the Columbia River. It's over 9,000 animals, as we've heard at this committee, and they've seen a return of the Pacific salmon. They've actually done something that has resulted in change and the restoration of stock.

Your answers so far have been that you don't have enough information, so you'll just do the status quo and not do anything until you have more and more science. You have about 30 years of science, and I can go over some of that with you if you'd like, but why is it that a do-nothing strategy will show us some way forward and an actual action strategy of trying something will not?

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** We do have an action strategy, and that strategy is to get the scientific information we need in order to undertake another avenue. So far, as I mentioned, the only direct evidence we have of the impact of predation is with grey seals on cod in the southern gulf.

**Mr. Rick Perkins:** A DFO scientist said a few years ago that they will be extinct if we don't do anything, yet nothing has happened. DFO has not done anything to deal with that issue.

Earlier in your testimony, you said there's no evidence they even eat cod. Well, I can give you lots of pictures of seals eating cod. There's tons of evidence. There are commissions going back to the 1990s. In fact, in 1995, former fisheries minister Brian Tobin said the only one still fishing cod was named “harp” and “seal”.

There are Fisheries Council reports, scientific reports done for DFO, going back as far as the 1990s, yet you, as the manager of seals, say only that we need to leave them alone and we need to do more study. We've had 30 years of scientific studies.

I have, right here, 122 pages of DFO work on seal stomach samples that have been done all over Atlantic Canada in only five years. There's no excuse right now for DFO to continue to say it needs more evidence. There's lots of evidence. I don't know why the department won't do what's been done in the United States under the Marine Mammal Protection Act to try to restore the biodiversity balance in the Columbia River. Why won't you take the same approach here?

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** I think in the Canadian context we have a very robust and open total allowable catch for harps. The question is, if we could take out a number of harp seals—for example, up to 425,000 harps a year—there could be, but I don't know for sure, an impact on the population of harp seals. However, there is no market available to our Canadian sealers—

● (1300)

**Mr. Rick Perkins:** That's because the government won't do anything about it. The government doesn't promote it. The government doesn't protect the industry.

**The Chair:** Mr. Perkins, you're now over time.

We'll now go to Mr. Cormier for five minutes or less to finish up, please.

**Mr. Serge Cormier (Acadie—Bathurst, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair. I thought the time was expired.

[*Translation*]

To continue in the same vein as my colleagues, you senior officials often use the following excuse: You say that if we do things incorrectly and have a seal hunt or take any other action to reduce the seal population, that could affect other markets, like crab or lobster. That seems to be the easy way out. Is that what's bothering you? Is that the only reason we don't dare move forward with more stringent control of the seal population?

I'd like a brief response to this question.

[*English*]

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** I know I'm sounding repetitive, but again, where there is scientific evidence that promotes a healthy and abundant seal population, we manage this species for a commercial seal harvest. There is an active harvest. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we saw that this year, there was an increase in landings of up to 9.5% compared to previous years.

I think the position of the department has always been that we are supportive of harvesters' interests in the seal hunt.

Perhaps I can quickly turn to my colleague in the Magdalen Islands, Monsieur Arseneau, to speak to the importance of the seal harvest to a community in the Magdalen Islands.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Serge Cormier:** Okay, but first I'd like to ask another question, which perhaps you can answer, Mr. Arseneau, since we've already heard from other witnesses from the Magdalen Islands.

All the witnesses who have come before the committee, with the exception of the scientists from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, have said that seal overpopulation was having an impact on the ecosystems. Now, they want to do more to reduce the population so that it doesn't affect their ecosystems, but we always seem to be going in circles. The excuse is that it could be harmful to our markets or that we need a healthy seal population. We already have a healthy seal population. It feels like we're going in circles.

What's your perspective on this?

**Mr. Cédric Arseneau (Director, Magdalen Islands Area, Québec Region, Department of Fisheries and Oceans):** I'd like to thank the member for his question.

The issue of commercial hunting is a bit tricky. That's kind of the problem with the approach. You can't develop a market for seals if that fishery is not properly controlled. To control it properly, you have to work with the industry to use the right harvesting and slaughtering methods, and then you can go out and sell that meat in the different markets that are available.

**Mr. Serge Cormier:** I have one last question for the officials.

Have you been talking to the United States about ways to hunt seals that would help us reduce the seal population so that they don't harm ecosystems in the future? Are you talking to your partners in the United States? When was the last time you had a discussion about this?

[*English*]

**Ms. Jennifer Buie:** We are in constant contact with our U.S. counterparts on a number of fronts, including with regard to their Marine Mammal Protection Act. We are waiting for the comparability findings that should be coming out at the end of the year.

On this front, we're constantly talking about marine mammals in the context of, for example, North Atlantic right whales and the impact of their unintentional entanglement in Canadian waters due to Canadian fisheries. While we may not be talking specifically about pinnipeds, I think that once we get the comparability findings at the end of this year, we'll continue discussions with them around marine mammals.

● (1305)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Cormier.

I want to say thank you to the witnesses for once again appearing before our committee and answering questions, and for making themselves available to be here in person and by video conference.

That concludes this particular meeting.

**Mr. Mel Arnold:** Before you conclude the meeting, Mr. Chair, I'd like it clarified that the motion was passed that we do two meetings—

**The Chair:** It's two meetings, yes. That's done. I said when we were voting on it that it's for two meetings, and everybody was fine with that, just not the composition of those two meetings.

On Thursday, we will provide drafting instructions to the analysts for the report on pinnipeds and we will discuss committee business, including potential committee travel during the July to December period. The deadline to submit travel budgets for this period is Friday, May 19.

To give the clerk and logistics officers sufficient time to prepare a budget, I would ask members who wish to put forth a travel proposal to come to Thursday's meeting prepared with details on the cities and regions to visit, the dates and duration of the trip, and the format of the meetings we would hold.

If anyone has any questions regarding this process, please contact the clerk.

Go ahead, Mr. Morrissey.

**Mr. Robert Morrissey:** Chair, to clarify, on the questions that were asked, could the witness provide the answers in writing to the committee, because they didn't get a chance on a number of them?

**The Chair:** Yes, definitely.

Hearing nothing else, the meeting is adjourned.