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Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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• (1100)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 126 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans. This meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders.

Before we proceed, I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of witnesses and members. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. Those in the room can use the earpiece and select the desired channel. Please address all comments through the chair.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Monday, September 16, the committee is resuming its study of the impact of the reopening of the cod fishery in Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec.

Welcome to our witnesses on our panel today. We have, in the room, Mr. Glen Best, owner-operator and fish harvester. On Zoom, we have Ms. Sherrylynn Rowe, research scientist at the fisheries and marine institute of Memorial University. Of course, we also have Mr. Todd Russell, president of the NunatuKavut Community Council.

Thank you for taking the time to appear. You will each have five minutes or less for your opening statement.

Mr. Best, you have the floor.

Mr. Glen Best (Owner-Operator and Fish Harvester, As an Individual): Good morning.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members, for allowing me the opportunity to present before the committee.

I'm an owner-operator harvester and, I believe, the only one who has appeared before this committee thus far. Our operation is a family operation and contributes to the rural economy of Fogo Island and surrounding areas. Over the years, we have invested millions into adapting and growing our business as the industry changed. Today, we have 17 employees on the water.

The moratorium on northern cod was called on July 2, 1992. I was a young harvester at that time, just barely 22 years old. My father, brother and I had invested every dollar we had and borrowed heavily from the bank to build a 55-foot longliner that cost \$700,000 at the time. That vessel was built with the expectation that we'd be fishing groundfish, mainly cod.

History shows us that ecosystems are susceptible to environmental conditions, food supply, predator-prey relationships, and the list goes on. Humans have very little control over most of those variables, but the one thing we can control is the amount of fish we catch, who catches it and the method we use to catch it. To some extent, maybe we can exert some control over the politics of the fishery. Most times, the fish are on the losing end of the political side of the debate, I believe.

Some may think that the reopening of the northern cod is a time to celebrate and be proud of the hard work and sacrifices that have been made over the last 32 years. A lot of harvesters have gone through their careers in that time, and many more, like myself, are nearing the end of their careers. Since 1992, we have lost generations of harvesters and knowledge. Communities have declined and withered, and some have disappeared altogether. Kids like mine did not have the opportunity to experience the nearshore cod fishery first-hand, as we had transitioned to fishing offshore for days at a time. That opportunity disappeared with the moratorium.

I realize that cod could not and cannot sustain rural communities across Newfoundland and Labrador, as it was expected to do in the past. Fishing operations require large capital investments and incur significant expenses associated with the running of day-to-day operations. The crew expect and deserve to make a good, meaningful living.

Should we celebrate the re-establishment of the commercial cod fishery? Of course, and we can take comfort that the stock is on a path to recovery. However, I have to ask a question: Have we learned any lessons from 32 years of moratorium? To be quite blunt, I don't think we have.

This fishery has been reopened with an 18,000 metric ton quota. This quota is minuscule in terms of the TAC at the time of commercial closure, which was approximately 225,000 tonnes. I can stand to be corrected on that. Although our quota pales in comparison to historical values, the minister made the decision to establish this fishery as a commercial harvest. This eliminated the management scheme under a stewardship fishery. In doing so, the minister has opened the doors to a variety of pressures on a stock that science says is still not rebuilt.

With the end of the moratorium, Canada is now obligated to give NAFO 5% of the TAC, which it can fish in 3L, I've been told. Foreign fleets can now fish in Canadian waters. With the current shortage in observer coverage, monitoring of foreign vessels will be challenging. How can DFO be sure that foreign vessels will not take advantage of the lack of observer coverage? Past enforcement does not give me great confidence in the ability of DFO to ensure adherence to TACs.

The department has given access to domestic offshore trawler fleets, as well as to new entrants that will likely be fished by bottom trawling. Fair access is paramount in a public resource, but it must not be at the risk of the resource itself. The northern cod is still at the very early stages of growth. Trawling in the areas of pre-spawning and spawning biomass has the potential to disrupt fish behaviour and impede recovery. Additionally, bottom trawling is a non-selective technology that can have the potential for large amounts of bycatch, not to mention the disruption of the benthic habitat. Environmentally speaking, trawling is a carbon-intensive fishery. This is not management under the framework of the precautionary approach.

In conclusion, after three decades, we seem to be on a path to repeat the mistakes of the past. Politics still heavily influences the management of the northern cod. The people of Newfoundland and Labrador have, historically, felt that cod was used as a political pawn to be bartered for, for other interests of Canada—most recently, when the Prime Minister reneged on a commitment to allocate the first 115,000 metric ton to inshore and indigenous harvesters.

• (1105)

Bringing back this stock to commercial status at this time was hasty, when it could have continued as a stewardship fishery until such time that the cod stocks could withstand higher harvest levels.

I'll quote a friend about the cod. I think it's quite fitting: "The lowly cod asks so little but gives so much." Maybe we should keep that in mind when we consider how we manage the stock.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Best.

We'll now go to Ms. Rowe for five minutes or less, please.

Dr. Sherrylynn Rowe (Research Scientist, Fisheries and Marine Institute, Memorial University, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

Thank you for your invitation to participate in this study. I'm appearing today as an individual, but for context, I've been a faculty member in the centre for fisheries ecosystems research at the marine institute of Memorial University since 2011, having worked previously as a research scientist with Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

I've been studying cod in one capacity or another for more than two decades now, and it has been the focus of my university research program, where I've been looking at abundance, behaviour and life history to better understand and predict recovery dynamics in a changing ecosystem.

Today, I'd like to share my perspective on the announcement in June by the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard to end the northern cod moratorium and re-establish a commercial fishery, which in 2024 would include a 46% increase in allowable catch to about 19,000 tonnes, as well as expanding access. Based on my experience, this would appear to be a risky strategy that potentially stands to jeopardize the current status of this iconic stock.

The reasoning for this is as follows.

First, although the stock has shown improvement and is now deemed to be in the cautious zone since 2016, it's not by any definition fully rebuilt or recovered and remains well below historical norms. To put it in perspective, in 1968, more than 800,000 tonnes of northern cod was landed. That's more than double the 2024 spawning stock biomass estimate of about 342,000 tonnes.

Second, stock growth has also largely stalled since 2016, with short-term prospects appearing limited. Even in the absence of fishing, in 2027 the probability of stock decline from 2023 levels is 62%, with the probability of being in the critical zone at 42%. Increased levels of fishing stand to increase risk to the stock, leaving little to no scope for growth.

Third, in addition to increased total allowable catch, the 2024 management plan provided an allocation for domestic and foreign offshore fleets. Northern cod is a migratory species that disperses throughout inshore regions in pursuit of capelin, their preferred prey, in summer, and becomes highly aggregated in offshore regions in winter as they prepare to spawn.

Some of the highest catch rates ever achieved in this fishery were accomplished by offshore draggers fishing on these dense overwintering and spawning aggregations. Some of my early research on cod described complex reproductive behaviour, with fishing on spawning aggregations demonstrated to disrupt shoals, potentially leading to reduced spawning success.

To safeguard cod during the spawning season, the 2024 plan reportedly includes a fishing closure spanning April 15 to June 30, but because of uncertainties regarding where and when cod spawn, it's really unclear whether or not this offers adequate protection.

Moving forward, what I'd like to see is priority research to address some key science gaps, including around the timing and location of spawning. I'd be especially keen to see updated data for the region off Labrador. We know that cod have returned here in recent years, and this area may be especially important to stock production.

I'd also call for further evaluation of the northern cod assessment model, including the accuracy of the catch bounds that are being used. NCAM, as it's known, is an impressive model that uses data from many sources. It was updated in October 2023, but questions remain about how it partitions mortality between fishing and other natural causes. This might not sound like a big deal, but it's really key to our understanding of cod population dynamics and our ability to make accurate projections as well as sound management decisions.

I'd also like to see increased engagement for resource conservation. Following the cod collapse, there was a recognized need for a more comprehensive approach to fisheries science and management, which, among other things, led to the formation of the Fisheries Resource Conservation Council, or FRCC.

The FRCC brought together stakeholders to provide a forum for transparent communication and participation in decisions about resource conservation and scientific priorities, but unfortunately was disbanded in 2011. Given ongoing issues in the industry and new challenges presented by climate change, the need for an all-hands-on-deck approach has never been greater, and measures should be taken to foster improved engagement and communication.

Some questions that merit discussion, for instance, might include these. What should a reopened commercial northern cod fishery look like in 2024? Who should have access? What types of gear should be used? How do we balance potentially conflicting objectives? During the pandemic, there was a lot of talk about building back better. Given that we've waited 32 years for a renewed cod fishery, shouldn't the same logic apply here?

Finally, I'd like to call for increased government transparency and evidence-based decision-making. Northern cod stock growth has been stalled since 2016, and the assessment model suggests biomass declines may be anticipated even in the absence of a fishery. Management actions in this situation should promote stock growth.

• (1110)

What, then, was the basis for an expanded fishery in 2024, given that it potentially stands to compromise cod stock status? The fishery in Canada is a common property resource to be managed for the benefit of all Canadians. In the case of northern cod, it would appear we deserve some answers.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Rowe.

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

Mr. Todd Russell (President, NunatuKavut Community Council): *Ulaakut*, Chair and honourable members.

Toddivunga. My name is Todd Russell. I'm a proud Inuk and the president of the NunatuKavut Community Council, or NCC, representing approximately 7,000 Inuit from south and central Labrador.

NunatuKavut means "our ancient land" and refers to our ancestral territory. Our ancestors have had a close and intimate relationship with the land, ice and waters of NunatuKavut since time immemorial, certainly long before European contact. NunatuKavut

Inuit are the beneficiaries of the British-Inuit Peace Treaty of 1765. This treaty is well documented. As a people, we uphold and celebrate it today.

My people in NunatuKavut have relied on marine resources tracing back to antiquity, with northern cod subsistence and commercial harvesting deeply embedded in our history and culture. It is also well documented that our ancestors stopped to fish cod on the way to the treaty event itself. The survival of NCC's fishery and our future prosperity hinge on access to and allocation of northern cod and other marine resources adjacent to NunatuKavut.

Communities like Black Tickle, Mary's Harbour, the historic site of Battle Harbour and the many fishing places along our coast—Chateau Bay, Seal Islands, Indian Tickle, Grady, Cartwright and on to Fish Cove Point—contain irrefutable evidence of our Inuit forebears and the places where they pursued and we today continue to pursue our livelihoods. Our attachment with, dependence on and adjacency to the northern cod resource are indisputable.

The NunatuKavut Community Council has never accepted the contemporary history of the allocation approach for northern cod. That approach, in our opinion, ensured the decline of our communities, marginalization and lost opportunities. It was an embarrassment that defies what is expected under the norms of equitable fisheries management. The minister's decision of June 26, 2024, was an important step in recognizing and redressing very long-standing issues for NunatuKavut, Inuit and other peoples residing on the Labrador coast.

I would like to take a brief minute to provide some historical context.

The post-1900 era in the Atlantic Canadian fisheries, particularly off NunatuKavut, was marked by the arrival of rapacious industrialized fishing that interrupted hundreds of years of fisheries in NunatuKavut. Foreign factory fleets descended on the Hamilton Bank after World War II, through to the late 1960s, pillaging the great cod resource off our shores. Canada's offshore fleet followed in the late 1970s. This later effort was coincident with a confluence of public policy and other decisions that resulted in the repeated financial collapse of the offshore sector, underperforming inshore fisheries, attendant fishery restructuring and the declaration of the 200-mile limit, to name a few.

However, none of this restructuring or allocation of vast quantities of fish in NAFO division 2J was to lift up the historically disadvantaged communities in NunatuKavut.

The state or health of the northern cod stock has always been under debate, and so it is today. There is never absolute certainty, but the NCC is comfortable with the minister's conservative TAC level for 2024, and in the science and management process we engaged in this past year. Over the past five years, the catch has gone up annually while the snow crab and shrimp fisheries have declined. Bringing back the cod fishery has already been extremely meaningful for our communities. Hundreds of our people are engaged in the fishery again along the coast of Labrador—in harvesting and processing, and in managing and administering the fishery. This has brought hope and optimism back to our communities. The fishery itself has even given rise to housing starts in our little fishing communities. It really is a historical time.

When it comes to codfish, let's look at history again and today. The historical catch and scientific records confirm one thing: The preponderance of the northern cod resource has an affinity with the NunatuKavut coast. From the seventies to the eighties, it has averaged over 40% of the northern cod biomass observed in NAFO division 2J. Almost 35 years later, it is back to 50% of the biomass and 60% of the abundance observed off NunatuKavut.

• (1115)

The mere fact that the resource occurs predominantly off NunatuKavut—we are adjacent—is a sufficient premise within accepted resource management practices to allocate a substantial percentage of the resource to the NunatuKavut Community Council and our fishers.

The resource base currently available to the NCC and to our fleet, which is composed predominantly of NCC member harvesters, is now limited to small quantities of snow crab, northern shrimp and northern cod, with the latter becoming of greater significance over the past five years as shellfish quotas have been severely reduced. Other pelagic species and lobster are not found in much abundance off the coast of Labrador. It is cod and other groundfish adjacent to NunatuKavut that will matter to NCC harvesters and processors for the foreseeable future.

The NCC does not take away the rightful access of other interests to northern cod, but as you can appreciate from this retrospective, we are unwilling to concede our position on adjacency, priority access and allocations of this resource.

Despite much resistance, litigation and persistence, indigenous groups, including ours, are now being included in these allocation decisions—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Russell. You've gone over the five-minute time.

We'll go to our rounds of questioning.

Mr. Todd Russell: *Nakurmiik*. Thank you.

The Chair: Hopefully, anything you didn't get to say will come out in the rounds of questioning.

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

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for taking part today. My first question is for Mr. Best, through the chair.

If the promise had not been made to the inshore fleet and the FFAW that they'd have full access to the first 115,000 metric tons, do you think we would even be here today?

Mr. Glen Best: That might be a complicated question, but to sum it up, I'd probably say no.

Mr. Clifford Small: Mr. Best, based on your experience on the water, how are you finding the catch rates of northern cod? Do you think there's been a significant recovery based on catch rates and your knowledge on the water?

Mr. Glen Best: Yes. I can speak.... We do most of our fishing.... I'm from Fogo Island, the community of Fogo. We fish most of our cod about 40 miles north-northeast of Fogo, and there's a lot of effort contained there from vessels from all up and down the coast, fishing from 2J to 3L and 3K. We are seeing really good catch rates.

We use a technology called longline, which is a Mustad system, and we use hooks. In that industry, getting three-quarters of a pound to one pound per hook is considered good fishing. On our last trip, we averaged two pounds per hook. In two days, we had 40,000 pounds of cod, so we're seeing really good catch rates.

Now, I can't speak for the 3L area, but from what I hear from other harvesters, from Labrador right up to 3L, the fish are distributed all along the coast and there seems to be an abundance of cod. That's from my personal observation.

• (1120)

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you.

My next question has to do with Mr. Adam Burns, who's the assistant deputy minister. In his testimony several weeks ago, he said the minister had decided to re-establish the commercial fishery for northern cod with the increase in quota because it would provide year-round employment in the northern cod fishery.

How is that playing out?

Mr. Glen Best: I don't see how it's going to provide year-round employment. The cod fishery for the inshore started in July and the TAC was taken by the end of September, and it was reopened a bit more for October. Now that we see there are offshore interest groups that are going.... The department just made the announcement that it opened on November 3 and the fishery will be open until April 25. It gives them the opportunity to fish all through the winter, but they don't have enough quota to fish all through the winter at this stage, so I don't see how it's going to provide year-round employment.

Mr. Clifford Small: My next question is for Ms. Rowe.

You have a lot of experience in studying northern cod. With the absence of trawl surveys in 2020, 2021 and 2022, and the 2023 survey being, on average, about three weeks early, how accurate can the current stock assessment be?

Dr. Sherrylynn Rowe: The stock assessment and the assessment model use data from a variety of sources. It's not just the research vessel survey, although that does feature prominently, no doubt. They also use information from commercial catch rates, sentinel surveys, inshore juvenile surveys and so on. There's a lot of data that feed into this evaluation.

During the last few years, survey coverage hasn't been where anyone would like it to be. Of course, there are new vessels involved. That was part of the challenge. I guess it came down to a case of short-term pain for long-term gain, because with the change in vessel, efforts had to be taken to make sure that these vessels were fishing in a similar way and we could continue on the time series. That work's been undertaken and was looked at extensively as part of the last assessment.

What I would say is that, given some of the issues that you raise, there are some uncertainties around how that may have impacted the assessment. However, generally speaking, I think we can have a high degree of confidence in the information that's there.

Is it maybe a perfect estimate of stock status? No, but there's no reason to think that there are significant issues with it at the present time.

Mr. Clifford Small: Thank you.

In his testimony as well, Mr. Burns didn't spell it out, but he indicated that the decision to change the stewardship fishery to a commercial fishery was partially because we were going to have to re-establish NAFO's access.

Are you aware of any undue pressure from NAFO to re-establish their access to northern cod?

Dr. Sherrylynn Rowe: I have had no direct interaction with the NAFO process whatsoever. I really can't comment.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Small.

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

• (1125)

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

Through you, Chair, to Mr. Russell, did I understand you correctly when you stated that you were comfortable with the ministerial decision on northern cod for this year?

Mr. Todd Russell: Yes, Mr. Morrissey, that's right. I did say that we were comfortable with that particular decision. That particular decision really aligned with submissions that we had made to the minister some months prior to that particular decision being made.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Are you aware that a number of presenters before the committee have expressed concern and indicated that they had questions about the minister's decision? Do you not support that particular narrative?

Mr. Todd Russell: Absolutely. We actually went to court within the last few weeks. The FFAW, for instance, went to the court to seek an injunction to basically stay the fishery as it currently exists.

They have also applied for a judicial review of the minister's decision. We opposed that particular application by the FFAW, and we were successful on that particular application.

The court agreed that, on the application for an injunction, there would be no irreparable harm to the resource or to the FFAW for this plan to go forward. In fact, the court said that there would be more harm done to groups like ours if the fishery did not proceed, because of the attendant benefits that would accrue from that particular fishery.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Mr. Russell.

Could you briefly outline the communities you represent or the individuals who are benefiting from northern cod?

Mr. Todd Russell: I think I gave a very brief background. Our people live primarily on the coast. Fishing the marine environment or access to the marine environment is huge for our people, our culture and our future. It has been in the past. We have been fighting for decades for fair and equitable access to the resources off our coast so that we can build our communities and certainly have good livelihoods and people can stay in their communities. Like most places, it's to have that sense of comfort and security, always keeping in mind, of course, that the resource itself is what is paramount in terms of its health, because if we don't have the resource, we don't have anything.

We made representations to the government that basically, given the science, given the management practices, we indicated that a 20,000 tonne TAC would be reasonable. We also put in, obviously, our position vis-à-vis how that should be allocated.

When it came in at about 18,000, certainly we felt that, given what our fishers are seeing on the water and their experience with fishing the resource over the last number of years under the stewardship fishery and now under the commercial fishery, this was a very sensible decision, but one that gave priority to our people and to our coast. That was so important.

We've had hundreds of people involved in the cod fishery this year. Household incomes have risen because of the cod fishery this year. Economic activity in our community has increased dramatically. We've also had more people involved on the processing side. It's been very helpful and very necessary.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Thank you, Mr. Russell, for the detail.

In the time left, I want to go back to Ms. Rowe.

Ms. Rowe, you said that the FRCC was disbanded in 2011. Could you outline to the committee why and what the shortcomings are that you have observed since 2011? Did I interpret that correctly?

Dr. Sherrylynn Rowe: Yes, that's my understanding. I am not familiar with the rationale at the time for disbanding the FRCC, but that was one of the lessons.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Since the FRCC has been disbanded, what impact have you experienced as it relates to the management of this fishery?

• (1130)

Dr. Sherrylynn Rowe: It doesn't necessarily have to relate specifically to the disbandment of the FRCC, but shortly after the cod collapse, there was a lot more engagement. Given what had occurred, there was a lot more engagement between the industry and scientists to try to do things better, more collaborative research on cod and more discussion around management decisions.

Over the last decade or so, we really seem to have lost some of that. Yes, there's still participation by these groups in the science advisory meetings. We have industry advisory meetings and what-not, but I think there's room for a lot more dialogue to help solve some of these challenges that exist.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Thank you.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Morrissey.

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

[*Translation*]

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

I want to welcome the witnesses and thank them for joining us. We're happy to hear from them. Their comments are quite insightful.

In Quebec, we're still concerned about the Gulf of St. Lawrence cod. This fish doesn't have the same DNA as northern cod, but bears a close resemblance to it.

Ms. Rowe, do St. Lawrence cod and northern cod have similar traits?

[*English*]

Dr. Sherrylynn Rowe: Broadly speaking, yes, it's the same species, so it would share many similar features with cod, like the way in which they reproduce, as an example. It is obviously recognized as a separate stock with differing life history traits, like how fast they grow, when they mature and so on. They're similar, but somewhat different.

One thing is that there has been some mixing in the past. We know that northern cod, for instance, from time to time, do in fact travel and intermingle to an extent with fish in the northern part of the gulf. They're separate, different, with some interchange from time to time.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you. Your comments are enlightening.

In our area, people fish for both species of cod. My father used to fish for cod, and he could tell the difference between cod and black cod. In those days, a long time ago, both species were caught in the St. Lawrence River.

I would now like to talk about DFO's transparency. In your opinion, is changing the threshold—meaning the limit reference point for the stock to move from the critical zone to the cautious zone—a transparent way to show the reality?

Aren't we making data talk to drive decisions, instead of making decisions based on data?

[*English*]

Dr. Sherrylynn Rowe: Thank you for your question.

The decision to move cod from the critical zone to the cautious zone was a result of a framework process held by DFO in October of 2023. It was a science advisory process and peer-reviewed. There was a lot of discussion around the information that was there. Of course, the assessment model is a wonderful model that makes use of all kinds of data from different sources.

There are still questions that remain, however, on the extent to which this model is really capturing cod population dynamics. I mentioned a little bit about how it partitions mortality between natural mortality—cod dying from natural causes, from disease and parasites and so on—and fishing mortality. There's been some question about how well the model is tackling this key issue. It's really important, because while the survey can give us a good idea of how well cod are surviving from one year to the next, we have to estimate the relative impact of these two factors, fishing versus natural mortality, from the model using the data and some key assumptions around the data.

That right now involves ideas about catch bounds, the extent to which the reported landings may in fact represent the true landings and how that's varied over time. There are also some key assumptions in there about tagging information and I guess the likelihood of harvesters to report those details back to DFO.

Yes, I think there are questions that require further examination. Hopefully, that will happen over the months and years to come. The decision to change the reference point did stem from a science advisory meeting.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you.

Mr. Best, you're an entrepreneur. You have your finger on the pulse of the people on the ground.

In your opinion, will the reopening of the offshore northern cod fishery bring cod biomass or stocks back into the critical zone?

[*English*]

Mr. Glen Best: Thank you. That's a good question.

When you say offshore, you're talking about, I would assume, mostly bottom trawling and the bigger offshore vessels. In the past, we've seen what has happened with the concentration of these large vessels that can fish at any time of the year, in any type of weather, through ice and all kinds of conditions. That's why I asked in my opening remarks whether we're doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Somewhere along the way, there has to be room for offshore, I'm sure, but with a commitment of 115,000 tonnes before we even entertain that kind of fishing, we could be putting ourselves backwards really quickly and go back into a critical zone and do damage that we really don't want to do. That's why I asked whether we're doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. Right now, I don't think we're at a position....

I mean, I'm comfortable with the 18,000-tonne quota from what I see on the water, but I don't think we're at a position right now where we should be introducing large vessels and bottom trawling back into the industry.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Desbiens.

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

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

Welcome to all of our witnesses today.

For my first question, perhaps it would be best to start with you, Mr. Best, just following the responses you're providing.

I recognize that this is a complex issue and I don't wish to oversimplify, but I'm curious to know if you could say what the one main learning is that you feel is most important for us to take into account as we move forward in this study from the mistakes of the past. What would that one main thing be, or do you have one main thing?

Mr. Glen Best: There are a lot of comments I could make on that.

I was 22 when the moratorium was called. One of the things I'll always remember is that fish harvesters on the water were telling people that the cod was in trouble. They said that people—this includes the science, the managers, DFO—didn't listen.

All of a sudden, in 1992, John Crosbie made that announcement down in Bay Bulls—when everybody was going to beat down the door in St. John's—that the cod was in trouble and that we'd lost the cod. You know, sometimes the people on the water can say it best. They know what's happening.

Now we're saying that the cod is growing. We feel that the cod stock has come back. I mean, in 3K, like all of Newfoundland, we've relied on shellfish. Shellfish are what paid the bills, what grew businesses and what kept communities going, and we see in 3K that shellfish is on the decline. I think that's directly a predator-prey relationship.

The lesson we need is that we have to remember where we came from with this northern cod. We have to be careful with where

we're going, because if shellfish is in decline.... I firmly believe that we can't manage and design the ecosystem to what we want. The ecosystem is going to do what it's going to do. Sometimes we don't have much control over that. We have some control, so we had better be careful how we manage the stock, because this is what we'll have to rely on in the future.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Mr. Best. That's lots of really good information that you've just shared.

Dr. Rowe, could I please bring the same question to you around what you think the main learnings—or learning—and the mistakes of the past are?

● (1140)

Dr. Sherrylynn Rowe: In terms of lessons learned, I really think that one of the key things we learned during the collapse would be the need for greater dialogue and collaboration between science and the industry. We made some really good progress with that during the 1990s. While it hasn't disappeared by any stretch of the imagination, it does feel like it has become reduced, maybe, over the last decade or so. I'd really like to see more discussion.

In terms of some of the questions we have right now, like those on the cod stock status and whether it is being rebuilt, whether there is more work that needs to be done and whether we should be doing what we're doing, that's where the FRCC was really so instrumental. It created a forum for the different stakeholders to discuss these important issues and to make recommendations on sensible paths forward.

At this point in time, I think we could really stand to see a lot more of that type of approach.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you very much.

Dr. Rowe, you mentioned briefly in your opening statement the risks associated with fishing on winter spawning aggregations. You're not the first person who has brought this up. Can you tell us a bit more about the concern regarding having large offshore factory trawlers fishing specifically on winter spawning aggregations?

Dr. Sherrylynn Rowe: Sure.

Cod are extremely aggregated into dense shoals during the winter period. Some of this is related to pre-spawning and some actually to spawning. While in the past cod spawning behaviour was often assumed to be this behaviourally vacuous process of just random mating within large groups, we now know that it actually involves a lot of complex behaviour. There are aggressive interactions among males, which allow the most dominant ones to establish territories from which they court females using a combination of exaggerated fin displays and short grunting sounds.

Basically, the thought is that by fishing on these aggregations you can disrupt these types of behaviours, with potentially negative impacts on spawning success. On that basis, there's a lot of merit to trying to avoid fishing cod during the spawning season. The management plan, it sounds like, does include some provision for a spawning closure, but unfortunately we have really inadequate information about precisely where and when cod spawn to know for sure whether or not that's going to be adequate.

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Dr. Rowe.

I only have about 30 seconds left.

I was wondering, Mr. Best, if you could share more of your thoughts around fishing cod. You mentioned that there needs to be fair access to public resources. I'm wondering if you can share a little more of your thoughts around the importance of that public resource being used to the benefit of local communities.

Mr. Glen Best: Yes. Thank you.

Fair access is paramount. It is a public resource, and it is managed as such. I'm all for fair access, but fair access and the management of a resource have to be based.... There are a lot of variables—adjacency, historical attachment, viability of current enterprises—and I think those are the key factors. To manage a resource, access is always going to be a political hotbed. There are always groups looking for fish.

However, I think we have to look at the whole picture and ask this: What road do we go down to give that access to different groups?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron.

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

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

Thank you to all three witnesses for appearing today. I'd like to start with Mr. Best, if I could.

You're from the Fogo Island area, I believe. The committee was fortunate enough to travel up there a number of years ago, studying the North Atlantic cod situation. I recall hearing from the Fogo Island co-op about how it had changed its method of harvest and so on, so that it was providing a higher-quality retail or wholesale product and getting much more value per pound of impact on the fishery through that process.

Can you possibly provide a bit of testimony on the value through the longline process provided versus the value of fish caught through other processes?

• (1145)

Mr. Glen Best: Yes. Thank you.

You mentioned the Fogo Island co-op. We're the largest fisheries co-op in Canada, I think, and we've been around for 57 years. We're pretty proud of that.

When it comes to quality, with the help of the AFF, the Atlantic fisheries fund, it has invested millions into longline technology. In my opinion it's a fantastic way to fish. There's very little bycatch. There's very little bottom destruction or habitat destruction. It's just

hooks that are out on the bottom, and the fish come and take the hooks. The co-op buys that fish.

We just finished fishing in October. The problem is that there's not enough quota late enough into the year because a lot of the fish come in earlier in gillnets. That's a challenge. When the fish are full of capelin, the water temperature is at its highest. There are a lot of challenges in catching fish at that time of year, and I understand that's the time of year small boats need to catch fish. There's a balance between how much fish you catch in the summer and how much you can catch in the fall when the quality is probably better.

I'll just say that, with the longline product, the co-op was buying that fish and getting that product to a customer who pays more for the fish. Therefore, you can get a better product and a better return.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

Would there be an impact on marine certification with recognition of the longlining versus the bottom-trawling product? In the long run, do you expect there could be any impacts on marine certification?

Mr. Glen Best: When you talk about the certification, I guess you mean groups like MSC, the Marine Stewardship Council.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Yes.

Mr. Glen Best: I'm not the best person to ask on that because I don't know the process. They do audits, and there's a process where a fishery has to meet certain requirements to get certification. I would suspect that maybe longline would be more favourable. I don't know how they would view it, but I would suspect it would be. When you're talking about bottom trawling, the trawler doesn't discriminate what goes in there. There's no grid. There's no sorting like there is with shrimp. I would think there could be implications in terms of the certification for the cod when you're using different gear types.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

The way I understand it, the fishing areas have been split or divided differently. Can you provide your input on how that is impacting either fishery—the inshore or the offshore?

Mr. Glen Best: Historically, cod was managed under 2J3KL. That's right from Labrador to 3L and south. The way it was managed up until a couple of years ago, there was a set TAC and weekly limits, and everybody fished under the same thing.

As of late, 2J has been assigned a different portion. They get 20% for the same vessel class that I fish, and all others in 3KL, but their trip limits are greater. As I say, for the fall fishery, they get a biweekly limit of 120,000, I believe, and I get a biweekly of 42,500. There's a lot of friction in the industry regarding how that management scheme is set up.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Okay.

Were you consulted on how that division would take place, or was anybody consulted on that change in the division and TAC?

Mr. Glen Best: I wasn't privy because I wasn't part of those processes. I'm your individualist. I represent myself as an individual harvester. Through the FFAW and the Atlantic Groundfish Council, I guess that was discussed—and then, of course, through the DFO—and those decisions were made.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Thank you.

I think my time's up.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Arnold.

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

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the witnesses, Mr. Best, Dr. Rowe and Mr. Russell. We've had some really good testimony here today with respect to northern cod.

I'm going to start with Mr. Russell.

There are a couple of things that really hit home to me about your opening remarks.

First, there were some key words, “equitable fisheries management”, and you talked about the optimism and hope that it's brought to communities. I think it's really important to highlight that. I like the words “equitable fisheries management” because when we look at the quota for this year, we see that it's 84% inshore; 10% indigenous, Innu and Inuit; and 6% offshore. You talked about the optimism and hope. I want to drill down a little deeper, though, to what it's like when you're not involved in a fishery or when you're not involved in a significant way. For the folks around this table and the folks who are watching, I think it's really important to get a sense from you, and from the people you serve, of what that feels like. That's number one.

Number two is that during testimony it was referenced that northern cod in Newfoundland and Labrador will be processed in Nova Scotia. I'm wondering if you can give us any feedback as to processing plants in Newfoundland and Labrador. Have they extended, or will they be extending, hours of operations to accommodate processing inshore or offshore?

Thank you.

● (1150)

Mr. Todd Russell: Yes, the cod fishery is hugely important for my people and the communities. When the moratorium came on in 1992, like for many communities in this province—and maybe even more so in Labrador—there was a huge shock. It really struck our communities in such a visceral way because cod was really almost the entire fishery that we had on the coast of Labrador. You know, we had for some time then been involved in a small crab fishery that was being built and prosecuted on the coast of Labrador, and there were signs of things happening with the inshore shrimp.

You know, when the cod moratorium came on, it was almost like total devastation because our people really had no other fisheries to

turn to. I mentioned that in my remarks. The cod has always formed almost a crucial foundational relationship with our people, both from a sustenance and cultural perspective and, of course, from a commercial perspective. When the stewardship fishery was introduced a few years ago and our people participated, you know, the energy started to come back into our communities because, of course, we started to experience declines as well, as I said, in those shellfish resources. The cod was rising up while those other resources were lessening. Of course, many people talk about the relationship between groundfish and shellfish and about whether the increase in groundfish will have an impact on shellfish and their production, so it was huge.

Like I said, in the communities, we have more people now involved in the fishery from a harvesting perspective. It's almost the first time that we can recall in our history that our people have been prioritized for the adjacent resources that are next to our coast. We don't know.... We've searched the records, and we can't come up with an allocation that has appreciated our adjacency, our dependency and what it means to indigenous peoples to be involved in commercial fisheries. We can see what happens when indigenous peoples continue to get marginalized. We've seen this throughout the Maritimes, for instance, in other fisheries, so this decision was hugely important.

What I'm hearing, sir, around this decision is not so much a decision around the resource itself and whether or not the 18,000 TAC is really about the impact that it's going to have on the sustainability of the resource. Really, most of the discussion is around management. It's around allocations and who gets what. You will note that even with the FFAW's own interventions and the positions that it has taken.

When the FFAW took a position around northern cod, it wanted much more than the 18,000. It wanted a bigger allocation, as high as 30,000 or 40,000 tonnes, you know. That's almost double what the minister brought in this June. The equitable part, of course, is that the people closest to the resource, dependent on the resource, who have historically not benefited from their own resources, should be prioritized and should have an equitable share of that resource.

It's hard to express in words just how meaningful this has been for our older fishers who have gotten back into fishing cod and for our young people who are, in many ways, engaged now in a new fishery.

When it comes to processing, sir, I can tell you that all of the inshore quota in 2J was landed in 2J and was processed in 2J. I can tell you also that the indigenous quotas will all be harvested as well.

● (1155)

Mr. Mike Kelloway: Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Russell. We've gone past time a little bit.

Before I go to Madame Desbiens, I want to say that we're going to end off at Ms. Barron.

Madame Desbiens, you have two and a half minutes or less, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Best, I'll come back to you later if I have time.

Mr. Russell, you voiced concerns about your community's ability to maintain access to a resource that contributes to both your traditions and your diet.

Do you trust DFO to take this issue into account in a meaningful way in the near future?

[*English*]

Mr. Todd Russell: Thank you.

It's an interesting word—trust. We have been involved much more in the processes that DFO has in place around science, assessments and surveys, all of those kinds of internal processes to DFO that touch on external partners or users. We have been involved much more in those particular processes.

Is that building trust? I think it's building some trust in the system, but I think trust really gets built when we see that what we bring to the table is reflected in decisions.

With the decision of the minister in June 2024, I can see that what we have contributed to the process has been heard and reflected. Do I share some of the concerns that others have raised? Yes, but at the same time, I think there is trust being built and developed as we go through these very intricate and important processes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Caroline Desbiens: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Desbiens. Your two and a half minutes are up. It's not a lot of time, but it was used wisely.

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

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: Thank you, Chair.

I think I'm going to address my last question to Mr. Best, who's here with us today.

Thanks for all of your testimony.

Mr. Best, we spoke a little about the impacts on my family through the cod moratorium but also around your multi-generational fishing family in Newfoundland. I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit to the impacts, in particular the fact that, through a stewardship fishery model over the last three decades, there has been so much done by local fishers to work on the rebuilding of the cod stock.

Can you talk a little about the impacts and the work that's been done to rebuild this fishery over the last few generations?

Mr. Glen Best: In what context do you mean, “work that's been done”? Can you elaborate a bit?

Ms. Lisa Marie Barron: There are a couple of things. First of all, I'm curious about the impacts that the cod moratorium had on your family but also the fact that, since then, we know that there have been so many fishers who have done work to ensure that they are protecting the cod. There has been a huge investment in changing the methods in which the fishing has been done and so on. Perhaps you can speak to that.

• (1200)

Mr. Glen Best: Yes. Thank you.

Back in 1992, the impacts on the community were huge. The impacts were big for all communities.

As I told you earlier, the community of Fogo Island had 5,000 people. There were 1,000 kids in school in 1987 when I graduated. My wife's a teacher. Now we're at about a little over 2,000 people in the community, and we're at fewer than 200 kids. We lost generations of harvesters. We lost culture. These are things that you'll never get back in Newfoundland.

Like I said, the lowly cod asked so little but gave so much. It had such a large impact on Newfoundland and Labrador.

Since then, we've gone through the pain. We were lucky that we had shellfish to fill in the gap. Now the shellfish are starting to decline again. Over the years, people had very few fish to catch, and they took just the small amounts of fish that they had to catch. Now we're transitioning to new gear types like longline with the help of the Atlantic fisheries fund. Those are sustainable ways to go forward. You can catch better quality fish like that.

Those are a couple of examples of how the cod has impacted and how we've moved forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Barron. You had two seconds left, I think. You won't get in a question in that time frame.

I want to thank the witnesses for appearing today. Mr. Russell, Ms. Rowe and Mr. Best, thank you for coming, testifying and showing the committee what knowledge you have on this particular subject.

We're going to suspend now to go in camera to do committee business.

Again, thank you to everyone who participated.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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