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Chair

The Honourable Maxime Bernier

Standing Committee on National Defence

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• (1550)

[Translation]

The Chair (Hon. Maxime Bernier (Beauce, CPC)): Good afternoon.

[English]

We're going to start our meeting number 44.

Welcome to the Standing Committee on National Defence.

I want to welcome our witnesses.

Mr. Skinner, from the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, thank you for being with us.

We also have with us Mr. McCurdy, from the Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union.

Thank you for being with us.

Also, appearing as individuals, we have Mr. Breen and Mr. Hann.

Welcome.

From the Syndicat canadien des communications, de l'énergie et du papier, we have Mr. Murphy and also Mr. Kelly.

Thank you for being with us.

I will give the floor to Mr. Skinner for five to seven minutes. After that, the other witnesses will have the same time to make their first comments to all members.

Mr. Skinner, you have the floor.

Hon. Shawn Skinner (Minister of Natural Resources and Minister Responsible for the Forestry and Agrifoods Agency, Department of Natural Resources, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador): Thank you very much.

It is my pleasure to be here today and to have the opportunity to speak to representatives of the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence during this hearing on search and rescue response times.

This is an important issue. I commend the Standing Committee on National Defence for taking the time to review it in such detail.

SAR capacity in Newfoundland and Labrador is important to the provincial government due to the fact that so many of our residents make their living through the resources off our shores, as well as on the land throughout our vast wilderness areas. We are a big land. Our province covers over 4,005 square kilometres, and we have 29,000

kilometres of coastline, which makes us more than three times the total area of the maritime provinces and 1.75 times the size of Great Britain.

At any given time, there are approximately 650 personnel on board drill rigs off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador. There are 22 helicopter flights per week, which ferry these personnel to and from production installations at Hibernia, Terra Nova, and White Rose, and the offshore drilling rigs, the *Henry Goodrich* and the *Grand Banks*.

Furthermore, there are approximately 11,000 fish harvesters operating some 8,000 vessels in this province, who spend their lives on the ocean earning a living for themselves and their families. There are also thousands of people involved in commercial shipping, marine transport, and the crews and passengers of airlines in transit to and from North America.

It is a very busy place in a remote and at times hostile environment. The people who work in the offshore energy sector, in the fishery, and in marine transport have to navigate the unpredictable waters around the province on a daily basis, often finding themselves in dangerous situations.

On more than one occasion, these industries have relied on the services of search and rescue personnel to assist them when things go wrong. Our government has long advocated for high safety standards in our ocean industries, including SAR response times.

One of the more tragic incidents was on March 12, 2009, when Cougar flight 491 crashed into the Atlantic. This crash claimed the lives of 17 Newfoundlanders and Labradorians and forever changed the life of the sole survivor, Mr. Robert Decker, and the families who suffered a profound and unimaginable loss.

The fishing industry has faced many losses as well. Since 1979, 193 fish harvesters have tragically lost their lives at sea: on average, this is one life every 60 days.

These tragedies bring into acute focus the fact that maintaining and improving the SAR capacity available in the province to respond to these types of emergencies is crucially important.

In response to the Cougar tragedy, the Offshore Helicopter Safety Inquiry was established by the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board to recommend improvements to the safety regime to ensure the risks of helicopter transportation of workers in the Newfoundland and Labrador offshore are as low as absolutely possible. With a great deal of thanks, owing to the outstanding work of Commissioner Robert Wells, who was the commissioner of the inquiry, the offshore oil and gas industry is working to realize improvements for the safety of its workers.

On February 8, 2010, Commissioner Wells advised the C-NLOPB that establishing a fully dedicated first-response helicopter, which can be wheels-up in 15 to 20 minutes from Cougar Helicopters, is an essential priority that should be addressed forthwith and implemented as quickly as possible. As a result of that recommendation made by Commissioner Wells, as of March 22, 2010, response time at Cougar Helicopters was reduced from one hour to 30 minutes, and should be reduced a further 15 to 20 minutes once a dedicated hangar for SAR operations is constructed at Cougar Helicopters. Even when the service is implemented, it will be provided only to oil and gas workers in the offshore.

While this improvement in private sector SAR response is welcome, the fact remains that there are many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who will not benefit from this increase in private sector SAR capacity, as they do not work in the offshore oil and gas industry. The province's position is that DND should work toward the goal of providing that all those who work offshore, whether in the energy sector, in the fishery, or in marine transport, have the benefit of the SAR response times recommended by Justice Wells. All people should have equal coverage from a SAR perspective.

The current SAR response times provided by DND are inadequate. This stems from the fact that 103 Search and Rescue Squadron in Gander, the province's primary SAR responder, maintains a 30-minute response time between the hours of 8 to 4, Monday to Friday, but only a two-hour response time thereafter and on statutory holidays.

•(1555)

Given that an incident requiring SAR response time could occur at any time, this response time must improve to provide a 15- to 20-minute response time 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. In our world, that's the environment we operate in, and the SAR services should be deployed in the same way.

I want to make it very clear before I continue that the concerns we are here to discuss today cannot and should not be attributed in any way to those SAR personnel who ensure we make it home to our families when nature would have seen otherwise. We are tremendously fortunate to have at our service the dedicated, professional, and uncompromising staff of 103 SAR Squadron, to whom so many people of this province owe their lives and to whom we all owe our gratitude. My remarks are meant to recognize and support what they do and to ask that they be given the resources to do it more comprehensively.

The province is also concerned that DND may soon be unable to maintain current primary SAR response times. The April 2010 study produced by the Department of National Defence task force struck to

examine SAR personnel recruitment and retention indicates three points of concern.

The first is that the current SAR personnel shortage is dangerous and it is predicted that flight engineer numbers in particular will drop to a critical level across the country in less than a year. The second is that in the near future the 103 Squadron in Gander, which provides primary DND SAR response in Newfoundland and Labrador, will not be able to perform SAR operations without assistance from other DND bases. Third, private sector recruitment of DND SAR personnel is a challenge for DND's recruitment and retention efforts.

The province recommends that this committee urge DND to act immediately to address these recruitment and retention issues. A plan of action must be developed and deployed to respond to this critical situation.

I wish to be perfectly clear that any changes in the SAR asset configuration in this region must not come by way of reductions in Gander, but must be incremental to the services already in Gander. This government would strongly oppose any negative change or reduction in service in Gander.

In conclusion, this government would like to see SAR response times be as short as possible, as was indicated in the comments from Justice Wells.

Our interest in enhanced SAR capability in the province is not focused solely on the offshore oil and gas industry. We also recognize that the province's fish harvesters, those who work in marine transport, and indeed any individuals who are active off the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador deserve to have the benefit of response times equal to those made available to offshore oil workers.

The Department of National Defence, the Canadian Forces, and the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans, through the Canadian Coast Guard, should work toward achieving this goal as per the responsibilities outlined in their mandates.

With approximately 29,000 kilometres of coastline in this province, we have a tremendous interest in seeing that there is SAR coverage for anyone who needs it, from the northern tip of Labrador to the southern tip of the island. We hope these hearings will help inform the defence committee on the needs of this province with respect to search and rescue capacity that currently exists, the challenges we face, what improvements that can be made, and the requirements of this province to ensure the safety of all Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

I thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to bring this important information to your attention. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. We appreciate your presentation.

I will give the floor to Mr. McCurdy.

Mr. Earle McCurdy (President, Fish, Food and Allied Workers Union): Thank you and good day to the committee.

I'd like to express my appreciation for the opportunity to present here today. I'll try not to be redundant with regard to the comments just made. It certainly was a presentation with which I was in substantial agreement.

Our union represents about 11,000 fish harvesters in the province in about 4,000 fishing enterprises, most of which are small boats under 65 feet in length, so the search and rescue facilities are of the utmost importance to these people and their families.

Fishing has been deemed by the International Labour Organization as the most dangerous occupation in the world. On average, worldwide, something like 24,000 people annually die fishing at sea.

In this province, the minister touched on the numbers going back to 1979. I think one way to look at it is that if you start at the date of the *Ocean Ranger* tragedy, from that day to this, there have been more people killed in fishing fatalities at sea than in the *Ocean Ranger* and *Cougar* tragedies combined, just to give an idea of the cumulative magnitude of the loss. Mostly it has been in ones, twos, and threes at a time, not 20, 30, or 50 at a time, but nonetheless, a large number of families have suffered the heartache of losing a loved one at sea.

A question one might ask is, what are we doing about it? I think everybody has to answer that question.

For our part, back in the early 1990s we saw the need for training in a number of areas, but in particular in the area of safety. With the help of the provincial government through a provincial statute, we set about forming the Professional Fish Harvesters Certification Board in the province, which has as a mandate not only registration, but also the development of education and training programs for harvesters.

In the last decade, 10,000 fish harvesters in this province have received medical emergency duties training under the auspices of the board. About 8,000 have received first aid training and about 1,500 have taken radio operator certificate courses.

It's frustrating to those of us in the fishery when we hear from time to time that the Transportation Safety Board investigates an accident and issues a cavalier comment about the lack of safety culture in the fishery. I would suggest that those kinds of training numbers speak for themselves. If there is a lack of safety culture, then I guess everyone should ask this: on whose part does that lack occur?

There's more safety equipment being carried on vessels today than ever before: EPIRBs, immersion suits, life rafts, black boxes, and so on. In fact, there is a growing number of what I call success stories, where it was very clear from interviews done after the fact with the people who were involved in the loss of a vessel at sea that the training provided through the professionalization board was deemed by those involved—who ended up in the water—as being instrumental in their survival.

But having said that, I will say that obviously one fatality is one too many. The numbers have been reducing, but they're still too high. We have had cases in the recent past where the loss of life was clearly directly related to the response time for search and rescue.

I'd like to second Minister Skinner's remarks about the search and rescue personnel, the people. Certainly there have been some heroic

rescues, and our comments are in no way directed towards those who are involved in what is also a very dangerous and demanding occupation.

But really, the two-tier structure we currently have for search and rescue in this province—in a developed country—is really quite staggering and totally inadequate. Out of a 168-hour week, for 128 of those hours people who are out fishing for a living are operating under a protocol of a two-hour response to a situation at sea where lives are at risk. Two hours in the North Atlantic is too long, in most cases, for people to survive. It's just as simple as that. It's a very hostile environment.

As for 40 hours with a 30-minute protocol and 128 hours with a two-hour protocol, I haven't found any evidence whatsoever to suggest that you're more likely to have a mishap during banker's hours. If anything, it's probably the other way around, because of the difficulties involved in anything that might go wrong at night.

● (1600)

It's a bit like having the fire department knock off at five. If you're going to have your house catch fire, you would be hoping that it happens during regular working hours, and on a weekday, not a statutory holiday. So really, what we need is a standard protocol regardless of the time.

Certainly, I think that Gander, in relation to the total area that is to be covered, which is a huge coastline, is a central location. Again, I would certainly second the minister's comments about not wanting to see any downgrading of that service out of Gander, because you have to go so far north of Gander to the tip of Labrador, where some of our people are out fishing.

If we look at response times elsewhere... I understand the committee has heard this already, so I won't belabour it. There are numerous jurisdictions comparable to Canada, developed countries, where the response time ranges are in the 15- to 30-minute area. Judge Wells recommended 20 minutes for the offshore oil industry. Again, I would certainly support the comments of Minister Skinner that this would be an appropriate and necessary standard for everybody making their living in the hostile environment of the northwest Atlantic.

I note that Canadian Coast Guard ships, which carry bigger crews than a helicopter, have a 30-minute protocol at all times, so you can get a coast guard ship off the wharf in 30 minutes. I'm not quite sure why it has to take so long to get a helicopter in the air.

Clearly, if even a 30-minute protocol had been in effect over the last 20 years, who knows how many of those lives that were lost would have been saved? Clearly in some instances, there are some that would have been. We could debate the numbers.

We believe that the current level of coverage is totally inadequate. The people who make their living from the sea and in that kind of environment deserve a better of level of service. I believe it's a national emergency service that needs to be improved and at a level that's compatible and consistent with what is in place in numerous other jurisdictions.

With that, I'll conclude my remarks, but I would be glad to participate in any discussion.

Thank you.

•(1605)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. McCurdy.

I'll give the floor to Mr. Breen and Mr. Hann. You have seven minutes.

Mr. Danny Breen (As an Individual): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee.

As a city councillor here in St. John's, it's my duty to welcome you to St. John's as well, so I hope you enjoy your stay here.

But today I'm not representing the views of the City of St. John's or my colleagues on council. Rather, I am here as a family member who was impacted by the crash of Cougar Flight 491. My brother Peter was lost aboard that flight. Before that day, when you would hear of tragedies like this, you would think to yourself, "I can't imagine what the families are going through": we now know what they go through.

We all know of the dangers of working offshore, whether it be in the oil or the fishing industry, but we can never be prepared for the immense tragedy and loss that occurred that day.

As a city councillor, I also represent the east end of St. John's, and in that area there are many workers in the offshore, and many who travel offshore to do those duties. You can sense, by talking to them, the concern they have over the response times if they ever get in trouble.

Those aboard the helicopter that day were only doing what is done every day across our province and country by men and women going to work to provide for themselves and their families.

Historically in Newfoundland, many people have worked and continue to work in the industries related to the ocean, whether it be in fishing, the oil industry, or shipping, industries from which the province and our country derive many economic benefits from their hard work. It seems to me that a basic protection for those people would be knowing that in an emergency and a life-threatening situation help is available in a timely fashion.

It is certainly not within my area of expertise to offer technical advice on search and rescue, nor do I feel the need to reiterate the issues that have been discussed and well documented over the past 30 years. But I do know that the time for talking about improved search and rescue is long over and the time for action is here. It is your committee that we look to for that action.

Beginning with the royal commission on the *Ocean Ranger*, and with the latest report by Justice Wells into the crash of Cougar Flight 491, recommendations to improve search and rescue response times

have not been dealt with adequately by the Government of Canada. Many, including me, are left to believe that this shows either a lack of understanding or, to some, even a lack of respect for who we are as a people and how we make our livelihood.

As I said previously, the case for improved search and rescue capabilities is well documented and proven. Now we need this committee to hopefully promote recommendations that have been long overlooked and to implement a plan.

Certainly, the first priority should be to provide 24-7 coverage with the shortest possible response times. Secondly, a fully equipped search and rescue unit should be stationed in St. John's. Finally, a fixed-wing search and rescue aircraft should be based in Gander, while Gander should remain the centre for search and rescue on the island.

I realize that with any service finances are limited and costs are always of concern. However, in this case, it is not the cost of implementing proper search and rescue capabilities that is important. It is the cost of not doing so.

On a final note, it is unfortunate that these hearings were held here this week in advance of the Transportation Safety Board's report on the crash of Flight 491, which will be released next Wednesday. I expect that report will contain important information, and I urge you to take it into account in your deliberations.

Thank you very much.

•(1610)

The Chair: I will give the floor to Mr. Murphy and Mr. Kelly for seven minutes.

Mr. Kevin Kelly (President, Local 2121, Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada): Thank you very much.

I'm Kevin Kelly, president of CEP Local 2121, and I work as a central control room operator on the *Hibernia* platform. I've worked at *Hibernia* for the last 13 years.

CEP Local 2121 feels that establishing search and rescue operations in St. John's is much needed in order to facilitate shorter response times in the case of a helicopter emergency. We feel that with exploration and the development of new fields such as Hebron and Orphan Basin, the risks are substantially increased due to the increased amount of travel.

If you were to poll our members, the majority would say that the travel to and from the offshore installations is one of the most dangerous parts of the job. This was brought to light on March 12, 2009, with the loss of Cougar Flight 491. We hope that an incident such as this is never repeated.

We feel that a dedicated search and rescue operation stationed in St. John's is essential to ensure that offshore workers and their families can feel as safe as is reasonably practical when they travel to and from their place of work.

I would now like to hand things over to Brian Murphy, the vice-president of Terra Nova FPSO. Brian will give you some information on the offshore.

Mr. Brian Murphy (Vice-President, Local 2121 - Terra Nova Unit, Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada): I work on the *Terra Nova* FPSO, which is one of two FPSOs currently producing in the oil fields off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. The FPSO is an acronym for “floating production storage and offloading”. These are floating production facilities, as opposed to the *Hibernia* production facility, which is gravity-based and sits on the ocean floor.

The amount of offshore activity has grown substantially over the decade and a half since the *Hibernia* facility was put in place and started producing. *Hibernia* was followed by the *Terra Nova*, which was followed by the *SeaRose*, which will be followed by another gravity-based structure that we currently refer to as the *Hebron* project. It is not going to stop there.

There are semi-submersible drill rigs operating on the Grand Banks: the *GSF Grand Banks*, the Transocean semi that is currently leased to Husky for the White Rose field; the *Henry Goodrich*, another semi; and the Transocean semi on lease at the moment to Suncor. The *Stena Carron*, a drill ship, has recently been doing drilling on the Grand Banks as well.

The number of supply boats has risen in order to cater to increased drilling and production on the Newfoundland Grand Banks. There is a required number of standby vessels for all of these facilities, as well as supply boats that transport equipment and supplies, as well as personnel, when the weather does not allow for helicopter flights.

The tankers are an integral cog in the wheel of offshore production. There is a fleet of tankers that transship the oil from the producing facilities to the transship and storage facility in Whiffen Head, Placentia Bay. The number of helicopter flights has risen proportionately as the number of facilities has increased on the Banks.

At any given time, somewhere in the range of 800 people are working offshore in oil-related jobs. This goes on all day, every day, 365 days a year, so this tells me we have to be prepared for events that can happen and can put lives in danger—our lives, the lives of the people who are living and working on these facilities. In the event of a catastrophic incident, the response time is going to mean the difference between life and death to the people who are caught up in the event.

When you talk about a response time, if I'm involved in any of these events, “immediate” would be the ideal one. And I know the logistics in all of this. That's unrealistic, but that's what I hope you would strive for if I'm out there in that water waiting to be rescued.

Our whole point here is to emphasize to you people something that you already know anyway, and that is the increasing amount of activity going on in oil and gas alone out there on the Grand Banks. This is the substance of our submission here today.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Murphy.

I will give the floor to Mr. Hann.

Mr. Tom Hann (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As my colleague said, we welcome you to the city, and we welcome the opportunity to appear today.

As my colleague stated, we are not here representing the City of St. John's. I'm here simply to put a personal face to the issue and, like others, to recommend that it's now time to make the improvements needed to provide increased search and rescue capabilities and institute them on a 24-7 basis.

I point out also that my council colleagues did support me when I presented a motion last year to write to all concerned to do a complete review of search and rescue capabilities with a view to establishing an additional SAR unit here in St. John's.

The personal issue with me is the fact that Allison Maher, who was the young lady lost in the Cougar crash, was a next door neighbour. She was a bright young lady with a great future and she was lost. After the crash, I got to know her family. They were devastated.

The hardest thing I've ever had to see was that they had to come out and clear out her house that she had bought just months before. Unfortunately, Mr. Maher, her father, still firmly believes that his daughter would have been saved or had a better chance of rescue had we had the necessary equipment and had we had the necessary response time, the improved response time that you have heard about, both here and in Gander.

Unfortunately, that day the dedicated search and rescue unit in Gander...all of the equipment was out of the province on a training session and that happened during the day of the Cougar crash. That left a backup unit supplied by Cougar here in St. John's. It is my understanding that this unit was at that time responding to emergencies as a backup to the Cormorants when the Cormorants weren't available. I also understand that the backup unit does have some capabilities. They did a really good job and I commend the people who went out that day, but they don't have the full capacity of the Cormorants.

It is also my understanding that the first on the scene of the crash was a fixed-wing aircraft owned by a local company and used to patrol the coastline. There were transmissions between that aircraft and the tower at St. John's airport. While I have not heard the tapes, Mr. Maher tells me he has—in fact, I think he was the only one allowed to hear the tapes—and he has come to the conclusion that his daughter was alive at the time they were there and that if there had been a quicker response the chances of survival would have been better.

So I would urge that this committee listen to the tapes, which are protected by the freedom of information act, I understand. Some media in the city asked for the transcript of the tapes and were refused. I would hope that when the Department of Transport report comes out next week, there will be some recognition of that, and maybe some point made about it.

As you've heard, one of the major recommendations to come out of the *Ocean Ranger* inquiry was the establishment of a fully equipped long-range search and rescue unit stationed at the nearest airport to the Grand Banks and our offshore. That should be here in St. John's.

The most recent Wells inquiry, as you heard today, made basically the same recommendation. There is no reason why the people who work on the sea in Newfoundland and Labrador cannot have search and rescue standards that are enjoyed by and are part of industry in other parts of the world.

Each year, tens of thousands of aircraft, fishing and cargo vessels, and offshore support vessels travel the waters of this province, which has the longest shoreline of any province in the country. At any given day during the summer, it is estimated that up to 5,000 vessels could be operating within 200 miles of our coast. This means that tens of thousands of family members can be affected.

• (1615)

At present, we have restricted hours at only two locations for DND helicopters. That's in Gander and Happy Valley-Goose Bay. They're only available, as you've heard, between 9 and 4:30, with a call-in system after hours and on weekends. That increased the response time significantly.

As an example, what kind of public outcry would there be if we had an ambulance service in Newfoundland and Labrador that was in only half a dozen locations in this large province and only worked from nine to five? What kind of outcry would there be if the St. John's Regional Fire Department worked between nine and five and you had to take your chances after five o'clock in the evening?

I also think we should face the fact that supplying offshore equipment and improving search and rescue in this province is a budgetary item. It's a budgetary issue, and it's time for the federal government and DND to come to the conclusion that the situation in this province is not acceptable and allot the necessary funding to make the required changes.

What price are we willing to pay is too high for the lives of those who work in the offshore and those who make their living on the sea? If you ask the families, the answer would be "priceless".

In my opinion, we are under-resourced in this province. Given the exceptional growth in our offshore industry and given the ongoing fishing industry, action should be taken immediately to provide more protection for those who work in the area. Our history shows that lives are always at stake. Money should not be an issue when you're making a decision to provide service.

In conclusion, it is my considered opinion that an additional unit here in St. John's, an enhanced response time of 24-7 in Gander, and fixed-wing aircraft in Gander—not in Greenwood, two and a half hours away—should be the recommendation of this committee.

The reason I feel very strongly about this is because it's the right thing to do.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Hann.

I'll give the floor to Mr. Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-sor, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the guests.

Mr. Hann and Mr. Breen, thank you very much for welcoming us to your city. Also, thank you for your heartfelt thoughts, especially you, Mr. Breen, on the loss to your family.

Mr. McCurdy, I'm going to start with you on this one. Yesterday we had some interventions by a couple of fishermen who brought up some good points about the EPIRBs. Also, we visited the coast guard this morning and talked about the EPIRBs.

The thing about EPIRBs is that they're imperfect—perhaps that's the most apt description—when it comes to distress and finding the exact location. Many people would ask why you don't just get the latest technology involving GPS or some variation of GPS to use that. Could you comment on that, on the stress, the onus, it puts on the individual harvester about acquiring all this equipment?

Also, given the fact you are with the union, the FFAW, and that some of the major decisions to come out of this I think stem from tragedies, unfortunately, such as we've heard talked about, with the Cougar helicopter crash, but also with situations such as the *Ryan's Commander* and the *Melina and Keith II*, could you comment on that?

Specifically, could you comment on this idea about the daytime hours 30-minute response? Because nowadays in the fishing industry, they're not smaller boats that return to their families in the evening. They are bigger boats, with bigger catches, and therefore are required to go farther offshore. As a result, they're several days on the open water, where the idea of banker's hours disappears, which you alluded to.

Mr. Earle McCurdy: Well, I might not be the least qualified on the subject of the technical workings of EPIRBs, but I'd probably be on a short list. I think what's really needed, as I understand it... A lot of the vessels, certainly the larger ones, the ones you just made reference to, are out for several days at a time. When I say they're larger, these would be, say, vessels that are 45 feet to 65 feet in length, carrying crews of half a dozen or so, roughly speaking. Those vessels, by and large, are equipped with the so-called black box, so lack...better coordination is needed between the information in the black box and the EPIRBs.

Clearly, the *Melina and Keith II* was one case—and I'd like to acknowledge the captain, Shawn Ralph, who is present here today—where, with a better, sharper response and better coordination between agencies, there would have been a strong likelihood of saving lives there. There's nothing any of us can do to change that, but I think we all have a responsibility to ask what it is we can learn from what went astray there. Clearly, integrating the information contained in the black box with the alarms that go up...because I understand that there is a tendency for these EPIRBs—this was the rationale given—to give false alarms or false signals from time to time. But clearly, coordination is needed in that regard.

I don't know what else you can say about the separate times for daytime and nighttime. It really makes no sense whatsoever in relation to the activity, to the work schedules and so on that people have. We have 65-foot vessels going out in what is a nasty climate around here at the best of times. It appears, with climate change, to be getting worse. There's more extreme weather. There's more wind and so on.

These are not very big vessels, really, even the 65-footers, to be out in those conditions. As a matter of routine, they fish or are at sea 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That's not every vessel. They come to shore at three- or four- or five-day intervals on an individual basis, but there are almost always—other than in severe weather—a whole lot of them at sea at any one time. And they're just as likely, or if not more so, to have a mishap at night or on a Saturday or a Sunday as they are on a Wednesday at four o'clock in the afternoon.

I can't think of any emergency service in the country that's run on that kind of a basis and I can't possibly think of what would be the logic behind having it that way. It really makes no sense to me whatsoever. While there was once a time when our fishing activity was day trips, in and out the same day, and there were a lot of boats—the majority of our boats still operate that way—a lot of the most recent tragedies have involved 45- to 65-foot vessels that are out on three-, four-, and five-day trips and longer.

•(1625)

Mr. Scott Simms: So certainly there could be a lot of improvement when it comes to the emitting of any signal. This morning we heard some tapes of people with desperation in their voices who were calling for mayday, so certainly... What chief recommendation would you make when it comes to the alerting system for the individual harvester?

Mr. Earle McCurdy: Well, if at all possible, obviously, somebody wants to get a mayday out; that's not always possible in every circumstance. But I don't have advice for harvesters. They know more about that than what I have, other than I think this has to be registered: look at those numbers, the fatalities. This is an epidemic we have here. And these are the Newfoundland numbers. That's not counting numbers in other provinces. That is serious stuff. There's no other occupation where that would be accepted.

Obviously the impact is identical on families, whether it's somebody working on offshore oil, working on a ferry, or whatever they're working on. Just with the sheer number of vessels and the number of fatal incidents over the years, it cries out for remedial action and a standard of service that meets the need to give working

Canadians a reasonable chance of coming home alive when they go to work.

Mr. Scott Simms: By way of comment, I want to thank Mr. Skinner for his comments, because there's one issue we haven't brought up in the last couple of days, and that is the recruitment and the retention, which are so needed.

That's a critical situation. There are the flight engineers you mentioned and pilots as well. Certainly, I think, at the drop of a hat, I always like to promote a career in the forces, especially for search and rescue, as I am somewhat biased. I thank you for your comments.

Sorry, gentlemen. I didn't have time to get to you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

I will give the floor to Mr. Bachand.

Mr. Claude Bachand (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I want to thank our witnesses for being here. As the week has gone on, the testimonies have become more and more interesting, but I want to try to explain to you what it is that committee members have some influence on. It's clear that, when I say "some influence", it means that there's an influence hierarchy. We will make recommendations, and the government can answer yes or no to each of them. What I've seen so far are things we can have a minimum impact on. I've noted four of them, and I want to share them with you.

First, there's the structure. I imagine you know that it's people from National Defence who take care of aviation occurrences. As for helicopters, clearly it's National Defence that will take care of it. Now, when it's a maritime issue, it's the coast guard that comes in. When it's a land emergency, it's the provincial authorities that take care of it. I can tell you that we're in the process of looking at whether this is the best structure. Perhaps you can give us your opinion on that.

The other thing is the response time, namely, how long it will take a helicopter or boat to get going. We can start with the helicopter because it's one of the quickest modes of transportation. What we were told, and you're right, is that it takes about 30 minutes during regular hours, between 8:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. What you seem to be saying isn't normal is when it takes two hours. But what we were told is that we will need to double the number of aircraft and double the number of crews. There's going to be a cost attached to that. I'd like to hear your thoughts on who will pay for all of it.

The other factor is how fast we can get to the sites. So, if we're in a boat, it will take longer. If we're in a helicopter, it'll take less time, and if we're in an airplane, it'll take even less time. So, I want to remind you that we are in the process of pushing for a program in Ottawa, the Fixed-Wing Search and Rescue program. It's a \$3 billion program that will be funded by all taxpayers. People are already telling us that they'd like to have these planes as much in Gander as here.

Lastly, I also have something to say about the location of services. Are they well located? I hear people who say, and this was repeated in the National Research Council study on fixed-wing search and rescue, that the location of services can be discussed. If we have people in Greenwood, is that a better place than Gander? We are a little caught up in it. You'll understand that we're getting slightly different messages depending on where we go.

I tell you, we're doing what we can, but the basic question I have for you is about funding. Is it normal that it's the Canadian government covering the whole bill? I understand that you can't put a price on someone's life, but we, as members of Parliament, have responsibilities, and we must look at where this money will go in the community. Besides, the choices that I make with my party are often different from the government's. But with regard to funding, is it normal that the oil companies—which I admire a lot because they are very, very rich—don't pay more than that? Are the provinces ready to go and see the oil companies, the mining companies that sometimes need rescue services, or companies that use search and rescue? Is there also a way for the private sector to give a part of it and do so correctly? Furthermore, the judge recently told me about the helicopters. He would like to see them in the air in about 15 or 20 minutes. It's the oil companies that should assume the costs. I agree with that, but I'll take it even further. Shouldn't the oil companies pay more for it?

Explain the funding to us. How do you see it? It's easy to say that the federal government will take care of it, but this isn't how it works at all. Sometimes, it's important to also look at private and public funding.

I am sure that the chair of the committee will be happy to hear this, but I must quickly give you the floor if I want to at least hear the beginnings of an answer.

• (1630)

The Chair: And why would I be happy?

Mr. Claude Bachand: Because it's the private and public sectors.
[English]

Mr. Brian Murphy: I have an opinion on that in regard to your suggestion about the oil companies. It has been expressed by many workers offshore that we have companies out there that are profiting in the billions of dollars on resources that belong to Newfoundland and Labrador—which is all great. Everybody loves everybody making money, including myself and everybody else involved.

In regard to search and rescue response times, I think there should be a helicopter search and rescue station here on the extreme east coast for that reason. I think there should be a fixed-wing in Newfoundland because of the increased activity, and everybody here agrees that just the activity requires it.

In regard to who's going to pay for it, it's you guys who are going to have to work that out, but I certainly think there's a reason there for the oil companies to be involved in this. That's between you guys and the regulatory authorities and the oil companies.

• (1635)

Mr. Claude Bachand: Are there other reactions?

Maybe the provincial government should pour something into it also?

Mr. Brian Murphy: No, leave them alone—

Mr. Claude Bachand: Well, Mr. Skinner is here. He's going to answer that.

Hon. Shawn Skinner: Yes.

First of all, I would say to you that the challenges you throw out are certainly ones that I think we all share a concern over. The purpose of today's presentation, speaking for myself, is to outline to you what we believe the base of the service level should be. Operationally, how that is deployed, where it's deployed from, and who pays for it I think will require further research and further discussion. All of the parties you have mentioned potentially would have a role in that.

But as I understand it, it is the federal government's responsibility, through DND in particular, which currently has the mandate for this, with other agencies like the coast guard and the Canadian Forces and so on, depending on the nature of the emergency. So the bulk of the responsibility and the bulk of the accountability, I would suggest to you, is with the federal government.

I would suggest that the federal government should, from the presentations that it's hearing over these last number of days, recognize that we believe the current structure and the current response times are not satisfactory. They are not acceptable and therefore you need to change the way search and rescue is provided.

If you, upon your reflection—because you are the ones with the mandate—feel there are other partners that may be able to help in that, and if you'd like to engage with us in terms of how it should be done on a more detailed level, there would be a lot of willing participants who'd like to sit down and discuss it with you.

In terms of having answers to some of your questions today, I think it would be a bit simplistic to expect that we would have answers for that. My point to you would be that there are more than enough people around the table who can come up with solutions. We need to be engaged in it to be able to do it. The point to leave you with today is that what we currently have is not acceptable.

Mr. Tom Hann: Mr. Chair, I'd like to make a comment, seeing that I brought up the budget issue.

I think there can be better coordination. Maybe you'll have to restructure the whole thing from search and rescue to coast guard and to other entities that are engaged in rescue and search and rescue. Maybe it's time that you looked at restructuring the whole thing so that there's better coordination.

With regard to the funding, there may be a place for the offshore industry to be a partner in terms of funding. But as the minister pointed out, I think at this point it is the responsibility of the federal government. I think if you do anything, if you look at restructuring and then look at efficiency in terms of what that restructuring can bring about, then there's the possibility that this can happen.

Again, I say that we need to...and I notice you're talking about doubling the personnel, the equipment, and so on. That should not be an issue, because we're dealing with people's lives. We have to find a way to fund a system here in St. John's. We have to find a way to fund an enhanced system in Gander. And we have to find a way to put fixed-wing in Gander, whatever the cost, because Greenwood is not the place for it if you're responding to offshore in Newfoundland, especially the east coast.

I think there's an opportunity to look at restructuring and to look at operating efficiencies. Maybe that's where you find the funding to enhance the service.

The Chair: *Merci beaucoup.*

I'll give the floor to Mr. Harris.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen, for your presentations, in particular Mr. Breen, in relation to the loss of your family member. Your presentation and all of them are obviously motivated by grave concern for the lives and safety of all those working, particularly offshore, whether it be in marine transportation, fishing, or offshore oil industries.

I have just one comment. Mr. Murphy was talking about the billions in profits that the oil industry is making. I think it's also fair to say that they're paying billions of dollars in taxes and enhancing the ability of the government to provide the kinds of services that are needed as well. I think that's important to note.

We received some statistics this morning suggesting that nationwide there are, on average, in excess of 6,700 SAR incidents occurring throughout the country every year, of which over 5,000 are maritime incidents. It's obviously pretty key in our offshore situation, as Minister Skinner pointed out, where we have three times the area mass of the Maritimes, yet it seems all the fixed-wing assets are in Greenwood, in one corner of the whole so-called Halifax area of service.

Also, as Mr. McCurdy referred to, we don't know how much goes on between 8 and 4. In reality, a study done by DND in 2004, over a three-year period, in an assessment of when these incidents occurred, shows that in fact—in terms of the eight hours per day, five days a week service—17% of the incidents occur in that time, meaning that over 80% occur outside that 8 to 4 period. So it does seem skewed the wrong way.

We also have a situation, as we heard yesterday from Mr. Feltham, one of your members in Gander, where there's a big change in the fishing industry since the moratorium. People are going farther out and staying longer and are therefore at greater risk. This is a big change. There's a big change—as Mr. Kelly, Mr. Murphy, and you, Mr. Skinner, pointed out—in that there are more people in the

offshore, hundreds and hundreds of people at any one time...the number of vessels.

I don't know how long the 30-minute response has been in place for daytime, but we heard today that the average response out of Gander in the last two years during the daytime has been 19 minutes. So it seems that it is possible. If the average is 19 minutes, then obviously some of the time is lower than 19 and some of it is a little higher. But it seems that it is possible to get an aircraft, a helicopter, in the air in 20 minutes—if you have the resources available, if you have the staffing issues sorted out.

Mr. Skinner, my question really is to you. There's been a big change in the use of our offshore, the risk that's involved, and the need for better facilities. What expectation does the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador have of the Government of Canada, which has the prime responsibility for search and rescue in Canada? What expectations does your government have of the national government?

• (1640)

Hon. Shawn Skinner: The expectation, to put it simply, is that the level of search and rescue response time that is acceptable is the one that Commissioner Wells recommended through the offshore helicopter inquiry, which is basically no more than 30 minutes.

The provincial position is that, upon the review of this committee and the presentations that are being made to it, we would expect that the federal government will, through its resources—as I indicated earlier in response to a question—look at restructuring how it deploys SAR resources to the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador so that we have no more than a 30-minute response time.

As I indicated in my presentation, we believe that Gander needs to be the focal point for the province. If it means that we need to bring in other resources, like the fixed-wing aircraft, then operationally that can be determined by people better qualified than I to do that. If there needs to be secondary placement of resources in other areas like the city of St. John's, because of its proximity to the activity happening offshore, then we would expect that the federal government would engage to ensure that happens as well.

Mr. Jack Harris: Mr. Skinner, do you have any idea—and of course Mr. Hann and Mr. Breen are also involved in government and budgeting—of what the cost might be? We've heard different numbers thrown out. I don't know how accurate any of them are, although I've seen a study, which I referred to yesterday, showing that the cost of having a 30-minute, 24-7 fixed-wing operation would cost \$1 billion over 30 years, which was a billion dollars extra and which of course breaks down to \$33 million a year. That's just for fixed-wing across the country.

There were other numbers thrown around. I hear numbers like \$200 million. I hear other numbers. We don't know what the numbers are. How big a factor is cost, from your point of view, given the nature of what we've been discussing here today, given the numbers involved, the risk involved, and the people involved? How big a factor should cost be in determining whether we go 24-7 on the 15- to 20-minute standard that you're talking about or whether we have a different system?

• (1645)

Hon. Shawn Skinner: Well, I think cost certainly is something that we all have to consider as elected officials, but I'm more inclined to say to you, Mr. Harris, that I think the amount of resources we have available to us at a federal level, at a provincial level, and at a private level in terms of companies operating, and in terms of the companies that are exploiting the resources off our shores, in terms of resources that they have available to them...it may mean looking at how we restructure ourselves to be able to respond to emergencies as they occur.

We don't necessarily need to create more resources. It may be how we deploy those resources: looking at where those resources are based and how we may be able to access them in the time of an emergency, no differently than when we had Hurricane Igor, for instance, just recently in Newfoundland and Labrador. Everybody who had resources came to help in a situation like that. There are ways that our fire and emergency services were able to coordinate there. I think that kind of coordination can be done.

Mr. Jack Harris: Mr. McCurdy, you look like you're anxious to get in on this one.

Mr. Earle McCurdy: I'd just like to make the point that there are some in this world who believe there's no such thing as a good tax and that there's something wrong with the concept of taxation. Let's face it: we can't have things like adequate search and rescue facilities in this country unless we're going to accept that there has to be taxation that has as its purpose to raise funds to provide necessary services—and in particular in this case, emergency services.

If we had a little less debate about how can we.... You know, you can't have it both ways. You can't say "let's cut, cut, cut on taxes" and at the same time say that we're going to be able to deliver improved services—or even maintain services, let alone improve on them. Clearly what we have here is an unacceptable situation. It requires revenue to deal with it and I think it is primarily a federal responsibility.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will give the floor to Mr. Boughen.

I know that you're going to share your time with Ms. Gallant.

Mr. Ray Boughen (Palliser, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Minister Skinner and gentlemen of the panel, let me add my voice to those of my colleagues in welcoming you here this afternoon and in thanking you for taking time to meet with us.

I listened carefully to your presentations. I have a few comments and perhaps a question or two.

First of all, I know that what happened with the *Ranger* was a terrible tragedy—unbelievable—but had we had an F-18 on one

wing and a chopper on the other, we couldn't have prevented that, because that was a mechanical failure. It didn't matter who responded or how quickly they responded in general terms, because it had a mechanical undertone to it that took that aircraft out of the sky. I think we have to keep that in our minds as we try to look at how we can prevent those kinds of things or things similar to that.

I think one thing we have to look at is perhaps the restructuring of what we do now with our search and rescue. In other words, do we always have to throw money at anything we're trying to do and say that we need money to change it? Sometimes I think we're much better off if we say there is no money, but there's definitely a change needed, so how can we do that?

When I look at our current situation, if the heavy action is from 4 p.m. until midnight, why don't we have a heavy concentration of resources matched to that time? Why would we have the heavy concentration from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m.? Wouldn't it make just good common sense to shrink those resources down, heavy at the end when the incidents tend to occur?

As my colleague Mr. Harris said, something like 20% of the action that needed attention happens in that 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. timeframe. Why have all the resources there? Have just enough to handle the calls, but have your heavy concentration later. That's a redeployment and restructuring of the operation. That's not an expensive issue.

As I look at it, is there a need for some dollars? Probably there is, no matter what it is we do, because there's always a need; I guess I ask myself, is there enough blame to go round...? If the answer is yes, then there's enough positive to go around to create a change. So I guess I'm saying, have we had an opportunity to sit down with the union and ask what kind of training programs are in place for the union folks who are doing the work? Are there some safety things we should introduce to the membership? Is there some responsibility on which we should have to sit down with management and say, "Together, let's sort this out"? Let's try to make sure that to and from work is as safe as it can be. I think we haven't done that yet.

Minister, you talked about the involvement of the provincial government with the federal government. It's not one or the other. I think it's together. I think that together, with the unions, we can sit down with the military and put together a package that makes some sense.

The first step of that package, I humbly suggest to you, is happening this afternoon. Your presence here and our presence here from Ottawa, with both sides of the table present, should indicate to you folks that we view this as a serious problem. We're trying to work together as to how we can handle that problem so we make the problem go away. I think we have some work to do together on that.

Here's what I think we have to think about. What has the province done? What has the federal government done? What has DND done? What has the union done? Again, I would come back to the thought that we're just in the embryo stage of this. We haven't done a whole lot of anything, but it's time for us to do something.

All of you gentlemen talked about response times. You talked about being responsible to the citizens of this province. We, too, are responsible to the citizens of this province as Canadians and we're going to work hard to make sure everyone understands our position, what it is, and how we'll implement it.

Mr. Chair, let me conclude by again saying thank you, gentlemen, for being here. You've heard from our colleagues, and you know from this side of the table we recognize what you're saying. We don't debate that. We're fully in agreement with your observations. We want to work together to change things.

• (1650)

Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Often this afternoon I've heard about 30 minutes and two hours—the difference in the required response times—but we've learned over the past couple of days that in practice the actual response time from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. is 19.5 minutes, and in practice outside those hours it's 50.7 minutes. It doesn't actually take the two hours, and they are working very hard to get those numbers down as well.

You talk about having an extra place, an extra chopper unit, in St. John's. That gives me great anxiety. Here we had the situation with the Cougar, and the people in Gander couldn't deploy anyone because they were all on training. It's not just a matter of money; it's a matter of human resources. They don't have the people, so if we split them up, it's going to be even more diluted. I'm concerned that if this sort of approach is taken the response times would be longer.

It's a rare individual and a rare group of individuals who will get into a chopper in a storm like we had last night, over seas, and then have someone go down the rope and try to land on a ship that's rolling in the waves. It's those rare individuals who we are in dire need of, and again, with the private sector now trying to get our people, who are intended to help all Canadians, to help just the oil industry, that makes it even more difficult.

In Ontario we have inland seas, the Great Lakes, and it would never occur to any of us, even up in the Ottawa River, to count on the coast guard to come and help us. We have our province that actually has its resources deployed, and not at the same time; it might be one part of a river, or one lake, or another river on a given

weekend. But we pool all our resources. Even the municipalities put boats out, so that it's a community effort.

I know that it would be ideal to have the federal government be there in the 30-minute response time 24 hours a day, but in practicality, we do have to pool our resources. Just as the oil companies are starting to pitch in because they're profiting from the resources, so too, perhaps, should the province think about the benefits that it is obtaining economically from that sector and figure out a way to pool our resources, federally as well as provincially—and from the private sector.

• (1655)

The Chair: Who would like to give a short answer to that?

Minister.

Hon. Shawn Skinner: It is the federal government's mandate to provide the service. That's simply the way it is.

You're not providing it. You need to provide it to a better standard.

I indicated in my earlier remarks that if you are willing to look at restructuring it and you feel there's some role for others to play, I'd be more than happy to do that. But I find it offensive that you would sit here today and say to us that you would never think to call the coast guard from some other location.

We're talking about the offshore in Newfoundland and Labrador. We think about it. We expect it.

Mr. Tom Hann: With all due respect, Mr. Chairman, again, we're not talking about money. We're talking about resources that protect lives.

We have been talking about this issue since the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger*. We have been talking about this and we continue to have tragedy after tragedy after tragedy.

Like the minister, I find it offensive that we are here talking about budgeting when we need resources because we are under-resourced in this province. We need resources. How you would do that, I don't know. That's up to the experts. How we do that, I don't know, whether it's restructuring or anything else.

But it is offensive to be talking about budgeting when we're talking about people's lives.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, everybody. I think I can speak for all the members of this committee in saying that we hear you loudly and clearly and that's why we are here today. I'm sure that the committee will have that in mind in their deliberations when we're back in Ottawa.

That's why it's important for the committee. The committee decided to come here to hear you and that's what you're doing. I'm sure that all the members understand that. We'll take that into consideration in our deliberations. You can be sure of that.

I want to thank everybody for being here with us this afternoon. This hearing is very, very important for us as members of Parliament, so thank you very much.

We'll have a pause for five minutes and come back for another session at 5:05 p.m. This meeting is adjourned.

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