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Chair

Mr. Scott Simms

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•(0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.)): Good morning, everybody.

To say this has been a little while coming is perhaps an understatement. We've been bouncing around this meeting for four months I think.

Mr. Donnelly, I think you were originally in on this. We want to welcome you and thank you. Sorry for the delay. I'm assuming you were anticipating coming here and full of excitement to be here. We thank you for that.

We have for the first 60 minutes witnesses on sustaining Canada's major fish stocks. Joining us from the Office of the Auditor General of Canada, we have Julie Gelfand, commissioner of the environment and sustainable development. We also have Sharon Clark, principal at the Office of the Auditor General.

From DFO, we have Kevin Stringer, associate deputy minister; Sylvie Lapointe, assistant deputy minister, ecosystems and fisheries management; and Arran McPherson, director general, ecosystem science directorate. Thank you all.

We'll have an introduction from the Office of the Auditor General, from the commissioner. Then we'll hear from Mr. Stringer.

Madam Commissioner, please proceed.

Ms. Julie Gelfand (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Office of the Auditor General of Canada): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

I am thrilled to be here today. As commissioner of the environment and sustainable development, I report directly to the environment and sustainable development committee of Parliament, yet sustainable development is much broader than just the environment. I don't know if you're aware that Canada signed on to the UN's sustainable development goals, the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

If you have a look at the agenda goals, there are 17 different targets. You'll see that sustainable development is much more than just the environment. I'm really thrilled, really happy to be here today to present in front of this committee the audit we did on fisheries, which was tabled in October of 2016. I am accompanied by Sharon Clark, who was the principal responsible for the audit. There are some other members of our team behind me in case I can't answer all your questions.

As commissioner of the environment and sustainable development, I wanted to perform this audit for one real reason. That was to make sure that Canada was not heading towards the collapse of another fish stock. Some of you, if you're of my vintage, will recall the effects of the closure of the northern cod fishery in the early 1990s. Some of us remember how devastating that actually was.

I wanted to make sure that Fisheries and Oceans Canada was managing our 154 major fish stocks in a sustainable way and that we weren't going to be faced with the potential collapse of yet another stock. That was my rationale.

As you know, being the committee on fisheries, fisheries are an important economic driver for Canada. Some 600 Canadian communities, often small, rural, and hard to access in some cases, depend on fishing and fishing-related industries for their livelihoods. The rest of us want fish to eat. At least I would like that.

The economic value of the Canadian fish and seafood exports was tabulated at \$6 billion in 2015, and when I met with Mr. Sopuck here on the committee, he reminded us that the recreational fisheries also have an important value of approximately \$8 billion.

What did we find in our audit?

The most distressing finding from my perspective was regarding fish stocks that were considered to be in critical condition. Of the 15 major fish stocks that were in critical condition at the time of our audit and that were still being fished, 12 did not have the required rebuilding plans in place. Think about it. We have 12 stocks, they're considered to be in critical condition, we're still fishing them, and we're supposed to have a rebuilding plan and we don't. These included certain stocks of cod, mackerel, herring, and scallop.

From my perspective, continuing to fish stocks that are in critical condition, without having a rebuilding plan in place, increases the risk of the stock's potential collapse. The officials at Fisheries and Oceans Canada also told us that they needed something called integrated fisheries management plans, with detailed information on each stock in order to manage each fishery sustainably. We went in and looked at these, what are called IFMPs, integrated fisheries management plans. We found that these management plans were in place for 110 of the 154 major fish stocks, including those with the greatest economic value. That's actually pretty good. That's 70% of the fish stocks with the greatest economic value having these integrated fisheries management plans.

However, for the remaining 44 of our major stocks, which is about 30%, plans were either missing or outdated at the time of our audit.

●(0850)

[*Translation*]

We also found issues with gathering, analyzing, and managing information on fish stocks. In particular, we found that Fisheries and Oceans Canada was unable to complete all of the scientific surveys of fish stocks that it had planned. This was partly due to the unavailability of ships, including Coast Guard ships. Specifically, during our audit period, of the 51 evaluations of high-risk stocks planned, 19 were not conducted during the year they were supposed to be.

Also, we found the department had systemic problems with their third-party observer programs, which calls into question the data's reliability and usefulness. We found issues related to conflict of interest and to the timely provision of data. For example, data from third-party observers in at least one case was only made available two years after it was gathered.

These deficiencies in surveys and observer programs contributed to the department's information gaps regarding the health status of Canada's major fish stocks. The department reported that 80 of the 154 stocks did not have all of the reference points required by the precautionary approach framework. These reference points are used to delineate the healthy, cautious, and critical zones for each major fish stock. This meant that the department was less certain about the health of these stocks. For 24 of the stocks, the department classified the health of the stock as "unknown".

Fisheries and Oceans Canada had no consistent way to manage data on fisheries across the department. For example, in one case, fisheries observers in two neighbouring fishing regions used different codes for the same species. This inconsistency put the department at risk of not having access to sufficient information to make effective and timely decisions.

[*English*]

Our audit concluded that Fisheries and Oceans Canada had identified the following five key elements it needed for fisheries management, and those are the integrated fisheries management plans, scientific surveys, third-party fisheries observer programs, stock assessments, and reference points for establishing stock health.

However, the department had not put all of these elements in place for all major stocks. Without a clear sense of how many fish there are and how many are being caught, Fisheries and Oceans Canada cannot ensure that fisheries are sustainably managed for the benefit of current and future generations.

The department agreed with our eight recommendations, and its responses appear in our published audit report. I'm very encouraged by these responses and hope that Mr. Stringer can give us an update on where the department is regarding those recommendations.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening statement. We'd be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Again, thank you very much for inviting me to appear. I'm very excited to be here.

●(0855)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gelfand. That was very well done, well presented. Thank you very much.

Now we go to Mr. Stringer for 10 minutes or less, please.

Mr. Kevin Stringer (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you.

My colleagues and I are very pleased to be here.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to speak to you.

We appreciated the commissioner's report and the analysis of how we can continue to improve fisheries management in order to support fish stock health and ecosystem productivity.

[*English*]

First, I really appreciate that this committee is interested in this report and this work. The report is probably the first one we've seen that looks at the core of how fisheries are managed. It spoke to our sustainable fisheries framework, an approach and a set of policies that we formally adopted over the period from 2007 to 2009, that underlies our approach to managing fisheries.

It spoke to the core elements, which I'm not going to get into because the commissioner just outlined them. It also spoke to how we apply all of those policies and tools, how we're doing in implementing our own policies, how we're doing applying our own tools, and to the challenges associated with finding evidence. You'll see comments in the report about how difficult it was to find out how we are doing on these things.

The committee is well aware of the importance of commercial, recreational, and indigenous fisheries in Canada. An important economic driver, it's the lifeblood of many communities in rural coastal Canada. It's vital for indigenous groups. It contributes to Canada's way of life. The minister and the department take this very seriously, in enabling a healthy commercial fishery, supporting a robust recreational fishery, respecting indigenous rights to fish, and supporting economic opportunity for indigenous groups, and ultimately ensuring that the fisheries resource is there for future generations to enjoy.

The commissioner has already summarized the findings. I'd like to mention a few points about the findings and then talk about the actions we've taken to date.

The audit found that DFO does have the key management tools and policies to manage the fisheries responsibly, such as integrated fisheries management plans, reference points, and harvest control rules, but we have not fully implemented them for all of our fish stocks. We found we need to develop criteria to ensure consistent catch monitoring in fisheries, and that we need to strengthen our oversight of the at-sea observer program and dockside monitoring program. It noted a lack of evidence that current science surveys reflect key priorities, and that the department lacks some information on the Greenland halibut stocks that could introduce more certainty around long-term sustainability.

Let me touch on some context in terms of how we're doing in fisheries management, how we've already responded to the report to improve our record, and how we're seeking to do this to go further and to do it in a transparent way.

First, on how we're doing, the report does point to important gaps in the following areas: integrated fisheries management plans that are not complete or are out of date or without clear objectives, the number of fisheries with limit reference points that indicate where there are fisheries in the healthy or cautious or critical zones, and others. They're important gaps, and they must and will be addressed. The fact is that the department has focused its attention on the most significant stocks where the most valuable commercial, recreational, and indigenous fisheries are.

We have the second most MSC-certified fisheries in the world, after the U.S. We have 31 fisheries that are certified by the Marine Stewardship Council. The bar is high for that certification, requiring all the elements of a well-managed fishery, including integrated management plans, sound and regular science assessments, bycatch and sensitive habitat measures, etc. We have 31 MSC certifications that include 41 of our fisheries, representing 75% of the landed value of Canada's fisheries. That is where our focus has been.

As the report says, we have a good, solid policy framework with a precautionary approach guiding decisions, and we have a suite of policies, including sensitive benthic areas, bycatch, rebuilding guidelines, etc. It's not fully implemented, but we have done much of it. Remember, they were established in 2009, so the report points out that of the 154 stocks, we have only 87 with limit reference points.

- (0900)

A limit reference point is something that says if you go below this point, you're in the critical zone, and that's where you really need to pay attention. We only have 87. When we established the framework in 2009, we had 34, so now it's more than double.

The report says we have 75 stocks with an upper stock reference point. That is the point between the cautious zone and the healthy zone, so we're basically at where we need to be once you get to that point. The report said out of the 154 stocks, we only have 75 with an upper stock reference point. In 2009 we had 33, so again it's more than double.

In 2009, we had 20 fisheries with harvest control rules. Now we have 104. Harvest control rules are when the stock is at this level, here's what we will do. They're pre-set rules with the industry so they know what we're going to do in various cases. Since we established

the framework, we've established these key tools in virtually all of our key fisheries. Now we need to complete the 154.

On recovery of species, we do not have formal rebuilding plans as our policy says we should in all of the areas that are in the critical zone, but we do have a good record on rebuilding stocks. Haddock and Atlantic halibut on the east coast are maybe the best examples, but we have examples all across the country. We've been moving much more aggressively in the last year on species at risk, recovery plans, action plans, and protection for critical habitat.

We have good results and we have good practices, but there are gaps. The commissioner's report pointed out those gaps and was, we believe, an excellent report.

On filling the gaps on IFMPs, reference points, formal rebuilding plans, we've committed—and this is in the public domain—to establishing plans to fill those gaps with priorities, targets, and timelines for completing these; to filling the gaps identified in the report for all major stocks; and to have this plan by the end of March of this year. That's a response.

Another key element is science. The \$40-million-a-year investment in ocean science from budget 2016 is a huge boost to enable us to do this, to fill the gaps. Just over half of this money is going directly into fisheries science—stock assessment, basic fisheries, biology. It will support and expand its survey program for fish and marine mammals, and we're doing more. We're aiming to finalize a national fisheries monitoring policy.

On our suite of policies, we have bycatch, we have sensitive benthic areas, and we have other elements. We do not have a national fisheries monitoring policy. We're going to have that in 2017 to ensure consistency and a standard of reporting and monitoring of catches in individual fisheries. We're developing a protocol to mitigate potential conflicts of interest in our catch monitoring programs. We're finalizing a verification program to ensure the observer and dockside monitoring companies are in compliance with their policies. We're prioritizing IFMPs requiring updates. We have 55 online now, and we're going to increase that number. We're reviewing our fisheries science monitoring activities to ensure that the new money is going to be effective in terms of filling the gaps that have been identified.

Finally, a point on transparency. The CESD, and other recent reports by Oceana and WWF, have pointed out it's difficult to find information on how we're doing. How many limit reference points? We made them go many extra miles to find the answer to that question, not on purpose—don't mistake lethargy for strategy—but we know we need to improve in terms of our transparency. We are seeking to do that.

To that end, this past October Minister LeBlanc announced that we're publishing an annual survey of 159 major fish stocks. The survey provides Canadians with information on how we're doing in managing our fishery on all of the elements that were looked at in the CESD report, and on all of the elements in our sustainable framework. It measures against our sustainable fisheries framework objectives and the elements that the CESD report covered.

We will publish it every year and make transparent our progress to implement our policies and our commitments to respond to the CESD report, the audit.

• (0905)

We've taken steps to improve our fisheries website. Now you can click on a specific species, you can go to Atlantic halibut and you can connect there to the IFMP, to the most recent survey, to the results, to the science advice, and other information. We're committed to having more of our science information in the public domain.

Last year if we had appeared here, I would have had to tell you that we had fewer than 10 datasets available through the open data and federal geospatial platform. Now we have over 60 datasets available, vital information on hydrography, marine protected areas, critical habitat of species, salmon escapements, and abundance of each species of salmon spawning in each B.C. stream each year. More than 30 additional datasets are anticipated to be added by the end of this year: oceanographic data, climate indices, aquatic invasive species information, and many other areas.

We have a commitment to respond, a commitment to do better, and a commitment to continue to have the excellence that we've had. Canadian fisheries are so important. The minister and the department take their responsibility very seriously. We believe we do have a good regime, though we must do better.

The CESD report pointed out some important gaps for which we thank them. We're committed to address those gaps. The report also showed us how difficult it is to assess how we're doing and to get information, and we're committed to address that as well. We'll make the improvements, we'll measure our progress, and we'll report on our progress going forward. That's the commitment our minister has required of us, and we've already made a good start.

We're pleased to take questions today.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Stringer. As always, it's good to see you again.

I'd like just a couple of quick clarifications. You said over 60 datasets currently, and 30 more by the end of 2017. Are we talking about a total of 90 of the 154 fish stock management...?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: No, those are datasets. Those are a completely different set of things.

Do you want to tell him what a dataset is?

The Chair: Very quickly, as I don't want to take away from the questions. I just want to clarify what the datasets are about.

Dr. Arran McPherson (Director General, Ecosystem Science Directorate, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Yes, no problem.

The datasets that Mr. Stringer was referring to are collections of data in the science program but not necessarily related to the fish stocks specifically. When we go out, for example in our research vessel survey, we capture information about many different species, many different parameters. We don't currently generate datasets by species. The datasets he's referring to are completely separate from the 154 or 159 species in stocks.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you. I'll leave it at that.

Just very quickly, what's the difference between critical and cautious? That's a limit reference point. What was the point again where it goes from cautious to healthy? It's the upper...?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: I actually considered talking about that instead of talking about the report because it is complex.

We have something called a precautionary approach framework.

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Stringer, could you make it very quickly and to the point? I have to get to Mr. Hardie.

Mr. Kevin Stringer: You can define a fishery in the healthy zone, in the cautious zone, or in the critical zone. A limit reference point and an upper stock reference point is the point between those areas.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you very much.

Mr. Kevin Stringer: There's a scientific basis for establishing them.

The Chair: Mr. Hardie.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We've put that in our report.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Hardie, you have seven minutes please.

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here this morning.

Ms. Gelfand, in the environmental report you put together, the audit you've done, for this one or in the ones past, have you ever had a look at the impact of aquaculture on the fish environment on the west coast?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We were just telling our dear colleague that the next audit we're going to be doing will be looking at aquaculture. We have not done one that I know of, at least not in the last 10 years, but it's on its way.

Mr. Ken Hardie: We had heard that the run in 2016 was actually worse than the run that signalled the collapse of the Fraser River salmon run. Obviously there are fingers pointing in all kinds of directions, the health of the herring stocks, etc. Again, this didn't factor into this latest report.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Here in this audit we were looking at how the department was managing its framework and how it was going to sustainably manage all of the fisheries. We were looking at its methodology, all of the different parts of its programs such as the integrated fish management plans, its scientific surveys, and its at-sea observer programs. We were looking at the whole program of fisheries management. We were not looking at any specific stock, although we did look at a case study on halibut.

We were trying to get a sense of whether or not.... I was wanting to answer the question, "Could we have a collapse?" We have 154 major fish stocks. What are they doing to make sure that there isn't going to be a collapse? I put myself in the head of the deputy. If I'm a new deputy, and I walk in, I can tell you the first thing I would do is gather all the senior managers and say, "Not on my watch. This better not happen. Prove to me that it won't."

• (0910)

Mr. Ken Hardie: Mr. Stringer, do you have any comment on the report that the fish run last year was the worst ever?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: Yes. I would say a couple of things.

One is on salmon, and you're talking salmon on the west coast, right? We're concerned. We knew there would be a low run last year. There was an expectation that it was going to be a low run, but it was worse than we thought. That said, it's very difficult to predict. In 2009 we had a disastrous year. This year, as you point out, was actually worse. In 2010 there was a huge rebound, and 2015 was actually very good as well, although last year was very bad.

The other thing is—and I know we're pressed for time—we don't have all the dials. Having an integrated fisheries management plan and having observers and having all of these things, you can't control for everything. There are issues. People point to predation. People point to climate change. There are many things it could be.

Mr. Ken Hardie: This leads to the last question in the time I have available, Mr. Stringer. We attended a session at Simon Fraser University a couple of Fridays ago, and there were some from around the world, in fact, drilling into the issues with salmon on the west coast. One of the things on which they really made a very strong point was how difficult it was to get third-party science into DFO. There didn't seem to be a channel that was open, or if it was open, it wasn't open very wide.

There is that. There is the citizen science. There is the involvement of first nations in monitoring, etc. It seems there are some opportunities there that haven't been taken up.

Mr. Kevin Stringer: If we're having a challenge with that, we do need to address it. In the case of salmon, it is the most complex and engaging process. We have integrated management plans with

commercial harvesters, with indigenous groups, with recreational harvesters. It is an extensive process, and we also have the marine caucus, which is environmental groups.

On the issue of science, we are seeking to be better at being good partners and sharing information. Getting those datasets into the public domain is helpful. That helps them do better science, and we need to be able to reach back and make sure that we're connecting with them. If they have information, we need to be able to use it.

Part of that \$40 million last year—\$5 million—was set aside as a partnership fund so that we can partner with universities and academic institutions and others who have information. We get that we are not the beginning and end of science. We have an important piece of it. We're at the core of it, but there are many others we need to work effectively with.

Mr. Ken Hardie: Thank you.

Much has been made of changes to the Fisheries Act that were implemented under the previous government, for which the focus was on the aboriginal, recreational, and commercial fish stocks and the fish that support them. There was a concern that we lost the ecosystem approach to managing the entire ecosystem around our fish stocks.

Ms. Gelfand, did you detect any issues with the shift that was made in terms of being able to accurately monitor the big picture and the health of our fisheries?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We did not look at the impact of the new Fisheries Act on the management of the fish stocks in this audit. One thing we did notice though was that the reductions in funding that DFO had were probably the reason why, as Mr. Stringer mentioned, they focused on the most important commercially viable stocks in order to do the IFMPs, and that's why there were 110 of them and not all 154 of them. I would guess that as a result of reductions in funding, they had to make some priority decisions. To answer your specific question, however, we did not specifically look at the impacts of the changes to the Fisheries Act in this audit.

• (0915)

Mr. Ken Hardie: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Sopuck, go ahead for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepeewa, CPC): Thank you.

Just for the record, in terms of funding, our government instituted a new program in the department called the recreational fisheries conservation partnerships program that has funded 800 fisheries habitat enhancement programs across the country to date, so let's not get too carried away with this notion of reduced funding all the time. Much of the funding was shifted to projects that actually created fish habitat and enhanced fish numbers, as opposed to studies, which I'm not belittling. The point is that it was the focus of our government.

I found the report, Commissioner, somewhat misleading—the title especially. This actually irritates me from the standpoint of loose language that's not specific enough. The report's entitled “Sustaining Canada's Major Fish Stocks”.

Mr. Stringer, I asked you a question a few years ago in committee: what's the most valuable fish species in Canada? I remember very well that you said the walleye. The word “walleye” isn't mentioned once in this report. Your title should have been “Sustaining Canada's Major Marine Fish Stocks That Support Commercial Fisheries” because that's what the report actually was about.

If someone was to pick this up, they would assume...because Canada's fisheries go far beyond marine commercial fisheries. I would strongly recommend in the next report, or in subsequent reports, that the titles be very specific as to what they are. If the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, for example, saw the title of this report, they'd say, “Great. Let's see what's going on in the Great Lakes.” There's not a mention of the Great Lakes fish stocks, which are at least as major as any marine fish stock. That's just an observation.

I have another observation and question for the commissioner. In part 2.4, you write, “Fisheries and Oceans Canada is the federal department responsible for managing and regulating fisheries.”

Well, no, it's not. That implies that DFO manages all fisheries in this country, and they don't. Much management has been delegated to the provinces, especially in terms of allocating commercial fishing quotas, recreational fishing seasons, and so on. My question, Commissioner, is this. Why include that sentence that's so broad but so clearly inaccurate?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: It is the federal department. I am the federal commissioner of the environment and sustainable development. I do not audit. I work in the Office of the Auditor General of Canada. That's the supreme audit institution that audits federal departments. It is not within my mandate to audit at the provincial level.

The statement that “Fisheries and Oceans Canada is the federal department responsible for managing and regulating fisheries”, it is the federal department that is responsible for that.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Again, with respect, as a former regional fisheries biologist in Manitoba, no, it's not. Managing fisheries has been delegated to provincial governments, but we'll leave it at that. Again, I recommend that the language in this report certainly be tightened up.

Commissioner, you made the choice not to look at allocations, but allocations are critical to the sustainability of fish stocks. For example, the Atlantic salmon fishery is completely a recreational and indigenous fishery now. There's no commercial fishing for Atlantic salmon, and that was done for the sustainability of the stocks.

I gather, and perhaps Mr. Morrissey can correct me, that the tuna fishery off Prince Edward Island is becoming a sport fishery, which will enhance its sustainability. Why would you not at least look at allocation as a management tool to enhance sustainability?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We have limited resources in terms of how we develop our audits. Audits can be this big, and they can be this big. Depending on the size of the team, you have to make a decision.

In our section called “Focus of the audit”, we indicate clearly in 2.8 what the focus of the audit is. In 2.12, we clearly indicate that “we did not examine the Department's enforcement activities or how it allocates fishing quotas among commercial, recreational, or Indigenous fisheries, or among fishing fleets. We concentrated our examination on management planning for individual stocks of commercial fisheries, which have the greatest impact on stock levels in most fisheries.”

● (0920)

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Mr. Stringer, I have a problem with certification like MSC. What's happening under these certification programs—whether it's for certification, humane trapping certification, MSC certification, and so on—is that it's as if Canada is delegating fisheries management responsibilities to an outside agency that is completely unaccountable to the voters, completely unaccountable to the fishing communities that depend on those resources. They take the decision-making process out of the hands of departments that ultimately report to elected officials. We've had this discussion at this committee before. It's elected officials that the citizens have redress to. Citizens have no redress to the MSC if they disagree with the assessment by the MSC.

Why would we place a priority on certification?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: Thanks for the question. Concern about requiring MSC certification is an issue we often hear from some of the harvesters. It's totally up to industry if they want to get that certification, but it really is about the markets and maintaining the markets and the accessibility to the markets. Some countries and some companies have said that they will or plan to only stock certified fish. We either respond to that or we don't.

I would also say that our sustainable fisheries framework, established in 2009, was done at about the time that the MSC excitement was developing, so it really came along about 10 to 15 years ago. We realized that we were actually doing much of that, and we thought we should actually put it in a sustainable fisheries framework. We will always make sure that we are looking after what our priorities are and what we need to do as core issues. We will also do what we can to assist with marine stewardship certification. It can't come first, but we do understand that it's important to industry.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: As somebody who represents a rural area, I know it's largely rural communities that have been abused by certification programs across the world. I go back to forestry and trapping, so it's not just this. As a member of Parliament, I'm extremely sensitive to these kinds of issues.

I have a question for you, Mr. Stringer, that is not related strictly to this but is related to fisheries sustainability. It has been reported that fertile Asian carp have been found in the Great Lakes. Can you tell us where the department is at on this particular issue and what you intend to do about it?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: Over the last two or three years, we've heard about individual findings in Toronto Harbour, in the Sandusky River system, in Lake Erie or just out of Lake Erie, so we have done a risk assessment. We did a risk assessment for bighead carp and for silver carp a few years ago. We've just completed a risk assessment for grass carp. There are four types of Asian carp. They're all a challenge. Maybe the least of the challenge are the grass carp, but they're still a challenge. They're voracious. They eat a lot of algae, etc.

The finding is—as I understand it and I ask Arran to correct me if I'm wrong—that it's not established, but has arrived. We have an Asian carp program that does early detection. We seek to remove them as quickly as we can. We work with the U.S. on it. Part of the challenge is that most of the findings are on the U.S. side, not on the Canadian side. We think the ones on the Canadian side, for the most part, come from the live food trade. On the U.S. side, we're less certain about that.

We are working with stakeholders. We're talking to Ontario. We're talking to stakeholders. We're assessing the new science, and we are maybe entering a new phase in terms of that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Stringer.

Mr. Donnelly, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Fin Donnelly (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Commissioner, I'd like to thank you and your team for your report and for your presentation today.

You mentioned that your next study is the aquaculture study. Do you have a timeline on that?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I think it's next spring. What are we now? It's February 2017, so it would be the spring of 2018, probably March, April, May.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: The fisheries committee recently undertook a study on northern cod, and we're still working away on that. As you know, cod has been under a moratorium for almost 25 years, and this stock does not have a rebuilding plan. In fact, three of the 19 stocks in the critical zone do not have rebuilding plans. How important do you think rebuilding plans are to recovering stocks?

• (0925)

Ms. Julie Gelfand: It was the most disconcerting finding, from my perspective, given why I started the audit. I started the audit because I wanted to make sure that we weren't headed towards another collapse. I wouldn't want that to happen. When I read the team's findings, I saw this bit about 12 stocks that are considered to

be in the critical zone, but we continue to fish them and there's no rebuilding plan. That was the issue that was the most disconcerting and upsetting.

If a fish stock is critical and we keep fishing and don't have a plan to rebuild it, I think we're at risk. Rebuilding plans are necessary. You need to question whether we should continue to fish species that are in the critical zone. That is a decision that the department makes. I don't make that decision, but if the department says once a species hits the critical zone that it should have a rebuilding plan, that's what I audit. I audit whether it has a rebuilding plan.

The answer in the case of 12 stocks was no.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thank you.

Mr. Stringer, Ms. Gelfand's report emphasizes how important rebuilding plans are. You just heard her say how important she feels they are and how vital they are to recovering stocks, especially in the critical zone. One of the recommendations in the commissioner's report is that DFO should set out priorities and timelines for establishing the reference points at which major stocks it manages can be considered healthy, in the cautious zone, or in the critical zone. The department committed to a plan for March 2017.

Mr. Stringer, can you provide the committee with an update regarding where you're at on developing this plan? When can we expect to see all rebuilding plans for stocks that are in the critical zone, including northern cod?

Finally, can you let us know which stocks will be prioritized?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: The plan that we're working on, which we said will be complete by March 31, is going to have all of that, so I can't speak to what will be in the plan. We are working on the gaps that have been identified, the ones that we really need to address first, the timelines for implementation, and we're going to have that plan done by the end of March.

In terms of the priority, you talked about northern cod, specifically 2J3KL cod, and we do have a limit reference point for that. It's 660,000 tonnes. We've been working with stakeholders on a rebuilding strategy. Even though we don't have a formal rebuilding plan on our website, we have all kinds of plans in place. We're working with stakeholders. We have the WWF involved with the inshore and the offshore fleet on a number of plans. We have a very detailed set of plans, but not in a formal, rebuilding plan. We know we need to move into a formal, rebuilding plan.

In terms of the potential for collapse, it's the opposite for cod at the moment. About a decade to 15 years ago, it was 2% of the limit reference point, which is quite terrifying and way at the bottom of the critical zone. Three or four years ago, it was 18%; two years ago, at 26%; and last year, at 34%. Science is coming out soon on the northern cod and its comeback is a success story. The challenge is that we do need a formal, rebuilding strategy to ensure that we don't take off on that fishery too soon. It's a success story, but it does need that formal, rebuilding strategy.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Why are 44 management plans for certain stocks missing or outdated?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: Again, we have focused our efforts. We do have plans in place for all of them. However, we do not have formal, integrated fisheries management plans in place for all of them. In fact, at one point, which was probably in about 2007, we said we were going to keep them evergreen. Then when we went back six years later, they were out of date and we hadn't updated them.

That's the effort we need to accomplish it. I don't mean to belittle it at all. It is an important gap in terms of our own discipline and our own ability to be convinced that we are doing the right thing.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: I think you mentioned it in your remarks, but can you reiterate what the key thing required to allow you to get to 100% management plans or even to formalize these? You did reference an injection of cash. That helps. Is that the key thing or are there any other things that might...?

• (0930)

Mr. Kevin Stringer: There's no question that cash always helps. You won't find a public servant that doesn't say that and you won't find a public servant that doesn't say that they will manage, regardless of what the resource levels are. It will be based on....

Mr. Fin Donnelly: So you needed cash.

Mr. Kevin Stringer: Absolutely. All that said, our plan is going to say how long it's going to take us to do it. The level of resources is important in terms of how long it's going to take to close that gap.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: The commissioner recommended that DFO should improve controls for third-party fisheries observer programs to ensure sufficient coverage on fishing vessels, timely data, and the mitigation of potential or actual conflicts of interest on the part of the observer companies. The department has committed to, among other things, a national policy on fisheries monitoring by 2017. Can you provide us with a bit of an update on the status of that policy?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: That's very interesting and it is a challenge. We actually profess and try to say that we will partner with the fishermen and figure out how we're going to manage their fishery through a shared stewardship.

However, you end up with very different rules in terms of observer coverage, dockside monitoring, and other elements. What we realized—and the report was helpful, but we were getting there anyway—was that we needed to have at least some basic standards, so that all key fisheries must have these types of standards in terms of monitoring, whether it comes from observer coverage, or dockside monitoring, or some other third-party approach. That's what we've been working on. We've been working on it for a couple of years. We've been having internal sessions, but we're also talking to the industry about it as well. They know it's coming.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I just wanted to make a suggestion.

The public accounts committee that the Auditor General reports to when he does his audits requests that the department provide an action plan in writing on a six-month or annual basis. It would be within your jurisdiction, and it's almost your job, to take the recommendations of the audit and to ask the department to provide you with a written update on a periodic basis so you find out whether or not the recommendations have been implemented.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Mr. Chair, how do we do that? Do we need a recommendation at this committee? Is that something we should discuss at another time, or can I make a recommendation that we consider that?

The Chair: You can formally in a motion, as we normally do, and bring it to committee if you so desire.

As long as we have the required 48-hours' notice it would be great, so that we could share with other colleagues.

Thank you, Mr. Donnelly.

Now, we have seven minutes with Mr. Morrissey.

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

Ms. Gelfand, I believe this spring will mark 25 years since the collapse of the northern cod fishery. Given your position and your auditing of DFO policies, can you assure this committee that management practices are in place that would prevent a collapse of any other commercial fishery?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Until those 12 rebuilding plans for the stocks that are in the critical zone have been developed, I would be uncomfortable providing you that assurance, based on the standards of audit that we use, that the Auditor General uses. It is disconcerting to me that we have 12 stocks in the critical zone, and they're supposed to have rebuilding plans in place. At the time of our audit, they did not. It is the department's job to provide them, so you should be asking the department whether or not they have those rebuilding plans in place.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Yes, but I wanted your opinion.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I'm an auditor, although I don't think of myself as an auditor but in the Office of the Auditor General. I can only give you what is in our document, and what is in our document is that 12 plans are not there.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Because we've had 25 years, and the commercial fishery sustains rural small Canada....

Mr. Stringer, a lot of your preamble and your statements reference what the department is doing now. I interpret it as a go-forward. I'm curious, because 25 years have gone by. We have the commissioner saying that on commercial fisheries dependent on...there are still some questions on whether some of those species may be in danger of collapsing. What's the department been doing over those 25 years? Be brief because I have a couple of other questions.

● (0935)

Mr. Kevin Stringer: I think there are a number of things, but I would touch on a couple of them.

In those days, we did not have the precautionary approach. We did not establish a limit reference point, and that limit reference point, I think, is the key. The limit reference point says that if it goes below here, this stock is not in imminent danger of collapse but you need to pay attention to it in terms of the potential to collapse. We didn't have limit reference points for any of that. That precautionary approach came after.

I'd just add one more thing. Sometimes there is not that much you can do about it. Oceanographic change takes place. We are seeing a change from a crab- and shrimp-based fishery, a mollusc-based fishery off the Newfoundland Shelf, to a groundfish-based fishery. Not everybody is convinced that's fully there, but that seems to be what's taking place. The cod recovery, the shrimp that have been decreasing over the last number of years, some of those things are natural. The challenge is a collapse, so that precautionary approach and the ecosystem approach are the things that have come into play that we did not have 25 years ago.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: You referenced a rebuilding plan as it related to halibut on the east coast. Could you explain that?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: Halibut has not had a formal rebuilding plan, but effectively there has been a rebuilding plan, which started by saying we're not going to take any fish smaller than 81 centimetres, I think it was, and we'll limit the total allowable catch, set harvest limits, set IQs in some fisheries, pull together an industry committee, set the observer requirements and the dockside monitoring requirements, etc. Bit by bit in the last 20 years that has fully developed and is now, I think, a \$30-million or \$40-million fishery off Nova Scotia mostly and southern Newfoundland in coastal areas and in the gulf.

In the last two or three times, we've also had harvest control rules that say no matter how fast it goes up, we're not going to increase the total allowable catch by more than 15%. We do that in the coastal area and in the gulf.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: In 2015, there was a halibut allocation announced just prior to the election. Last year, when the quota was announced that changed it, I inquired and met with senior officials of DFO. They could not provide me with the rationale that the minister used to make that quota allocation in 2015.

Could you tell me how it was made?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: I don't know about 2015—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: It seems to defy all the logic you were giving me.

Mr. Kevin Stringer: What I would say is that there is an objective in terms of conservation for stability of access and allocation. If

everybody knows what they're going to get as the stock grows, we have a better chance of good stewardship partners. That's been a general objective.

There are eight fleets around the Gulf of St. Lawrence that have access to the Atlantic halibut stocks; you know which ones they are. Everybody feels a little bit aggrieved about some allocation in the past.

There was an exercise last year in terms of transparency. It was a very public process. All of the input that came in from all the players—it was 2016—went up on our website. The minister's rationale for his decision went up on our website.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: But in 2015...?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: That process did not take place in 2015.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: So there was no transparency process that took place in 2015.

Mr. Kevin Stringer: I don't think there was a public.... There was nothing on our website that explained what the process was. There was a decision.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Thank you. I think you answered my question.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Morrissey.

Mr. Doherty, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): Thank you.

I want to say thank you to our witnesses today for providing their testimony and coming forward. I'm going to direct my questions to Commissioner Gelfand.

Commissioner, in your findings, you found that the department had committed to developing integrated fisheries management plans for each of Canada's major fish stocks, first in 1995, then again confirming this commitment in 2009. Your testimony was that your audit focused on the management planning of our fisheries and you found deficiencies in delivering our management plans. Indeed, you found that 12 of our 15 major fish stocks are not in place. You found conflicts of interest.

We have also heard testimony from other witnesses with respect to a disconnect between management and our regional offices. This, to me, doesn't necessarily speak of a funding issue. It speaks more to a management issue overall.

I'd like your comments on that because we are indeed—and I appreciate your honest report—hearing a lot of excuses over the last while I think, and your report is glaring to me, more as a management issue. There were deficiencies that management knew about and simply overlooked or let go, let it slide, so to speak, and I'd like your comment on that.

● (0940)

Ms. Julie Gelfand: That's a very broad question. It's difficult for me to say. Based on the audit that we did, we found deficiencies—

Mr. Todd Doherty: With all due respect, it would be a management issue.

We've had Mr. Stringer report that he has a good solid policy framework. His department has had the resources required to manage. Obviously there's been an influx of investment in the last while. However, prior to that, 1995 to 2009, even with successive governments, we are still at this point right now. As my colleagues across the way said, it's been 25 years and we are on the verge of perhaps 12 of our critical stocks in collapse.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Absolutely.

Mr. Todd Doherty: With that, would you say that is a management issue?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: It's difficult for me to put a precise finger on whether it's funding versus management. What I can tell you is that in the case of, for example, the data issues, it became very clear to us that data transmission between regions to headquarters was very difficult. You see in our report that they did make a commitment to upgrading their IT systems. It hasn't been done.

Absolutely in this report, we find deficiencies throughout all of the different systems. Through the IFMPs, the observer program, there are a variety of deficiencies. That is typically what an audit does. An audit goes in and looks at what the government says it's going to do. My example is that we're going to put a woman on the moon. The government says, "We're going to put a woman on the moon." My job is to go in and see whether or not we're getting there, how well we are doing.

So if the government has said they're going to have IFMPs for 154 stocks, that's what I go in and look at. If they say they're going to have good solid observer programs, I go in and look at that.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Perfect.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: That's exactly what the job of an auditor is.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I really appreciate that comment.

Commissioner, if you were to give this DFO management a letter grade what would it be?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I can't do that unfortunately in the position that I have. I have indicated clearly where they have deficiencies. I have to say that the department, compared to other entities that I have audited, was very co-operative. Mr. Stringer has already indicated that they appreciated our report. Some entities will just say, "Forget it. We don't want to hear from you."

Mr. Todd Doherty: With all due respect, we heard the department appreciate reports and findings, and commit to fisheries management plans in 1995 and 2009. Here we sit again, years later, without critical management plans.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Agreed.

Mr. Todd Doherty: We're getting excuses as to why things are not done.

I'll move on from that, Commissioner. In section 2.14 of "Report 2—Sustaining Canada's Major Fish Stocks—Fisheries and Oceans Canada", you mention that there are some existing plans that have been done, but have vague objectives, neither specific nor time-balanced. This would not be a budgetary issue so much as a management issue. Can you elaborate on that?

I also want to ask if you can elaborate on the conflicts of interest that your report found.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: When we looked at the integrated fisheries management plans, we did find that some of the plans that were in place included vague objectives. They are also supposed to do performance reviews of these IFMPs and look at their objectives. In many cases, they did not do that.

Mr. Todd Doherty: That, again, is a management issue.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Absolutely, some of these are definitely management issues. I just can't give you a broad brush. That's all. I can tell you specifically where we found deficiencies. That's the role of the auditor.

What was the second part of your question?

Mr. Todd Doherty: Conflict of interest.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Specifically, you'll see in our report that we found at least four companies where there were serious conflicts of interest. The department did not act on those areas.

● (0945)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Doherty, I appreciate that.

Thank you to our guests. We've come to a conclusion. It's now 9:45.

If I may, colleagues, I just need a very quick point of clarification again. I know we had a lot of discussion about northern cod, and we are in the midst of a study on northern cod.

Mr. Stringer, or others, you said that the LRP, the limit reference point, if I have it correctly, for northern cod was around 660,000 tonnes. Is that correct?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: That's right.

The Chair: What is the estimated current biomass of northern cod based on the last—

Mr. Kevin Stringer: It's 34% of that limit reference point. The limit reference point is the average of the 1980s.

The Chair: Interesting, okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Stringer.

Mr. Arnold, did you want to add something?

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

Before we leave this topic, in responding to the commissioner's report, DFO has agreed to all of her recommendations and a majority of DFO's related commitments are due on March 31 of 2017.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Mel Arnold: I move that we invite the deputy minister to attend the committee meeting, the week of either April 3 or April 10 to report on how many of these commitments have been achieved.

The Chair: It is germane to the topic that we're talking about right now so I'm going to make the ruling that it is admissible.

Could you repeat it one more time please?

Mr. Mel Arnold: Yes. I did make an error.

I move that we invite the minister and deputy minister to attend the meeting of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans in the week of either April 3 or April 10 to report on the commitments that were made subsequent to the commissioner's report.

The Chair: Is there any discussion on this particular motion?

That's a two-week period you put out there.

Mr. Mel Arnold: Either one of those two weeks, yes.

The Chair: What if they're not available either of those two weeks? Sorry, I don't mean to help you write your motion but—

Mr. Mel Arnold: Or as soon as possible.

The Chair: Okay.

Is there any discussion on this?

Mr. McDonald.

Mr. Ken McDonald (Avalon, Lib.): Is it for the deputy minister and the minister, or either-or?

Mr. Mel Arnold: It is to request both the minister and deputy minister. It will depend on their schedules which of them may be able to attend.

The Chair: Mr. McDonald, did you want a shot?

Mr. Ken McDonald: No.

The Chair: Is there any further discussion? Then we'll proceed with the vote.

Ms. Jordan.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan (South Shore—St. Margarets, Lib.): If the schedule doesn't allow for one but the other, is it okay to just bring one?

Mr. Mel Arnold: The committee would be able to say yes to either one or the other, or both.

The Chair: Are you requesting, Ms. Jordan, that he change his motion to reflect that, or are you okay with the current wording?

Ms. Jordan, then Mr. Doherty.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: I would prefer that the motion reflected that if the minister is not able to attend, the deputy minister would still attend.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I'm fine with that.

The Chair: Would you like to read that again, sir, with the amendment, with the absence of the minister, to include the deputy minister?

Mr. Mel Arnold: I move that the committee request the minister and the deputy minister of Fisheries and Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard to attend, either one or preferably both, during the first two weeks of April 2017, or as soon as possible afterwards, to report on the commitments made to the report of the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development.

The Chair: Thomas, would you like to read that out for everybody here?

● (0950)

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Thomas Bigelow): Mr. Arnold moves that the committee invite the minister and deputy minister, or in the absence or unavailability of the minister, one or the other, to attend during the weeks of April 3rd or 10th, 2017, or as soon as possible thereafter to report on the commitments made in the environment commissioner's report.

Mr. Todd Doherty: It should read "dated" commissioner's report.

The Chair: So it's "In response to the commissioner's report dated October 2016", to be more specific.

Is everybody okay with the motion as just read by our clerk?

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: It's unanimous; therefore, it is passed.

Before we break, I want to thank our guests for coming in. It's very kind of you, of course. From the Auditor General's Office and the environment commissioner, and of course Mr. Stringer and our friends from the department, thank you again.

We're going to break for a few minutes because we're going in camera. At that point only my colleagues, MPs, and their staff will be in the room.

[Proceedings continue in camera].

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