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Chair

Mr. Scott Simms

Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans

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• (0850)

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC)): We will come to order, please. There's a new sheriff in town.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): I want to say welcome to everybody, including our witnesses. This is one time I'm very disappointed to be in the chair, but I suspect that the witnesses are actually quite happy because I won't be able to ask any questions.

They're being very professional about it and not reacting to what I said. I do enjoy questioning our officials, given their wealth of knowledge, and I'm sure we will get a lot of very good information today from the briefing on the report of the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development. I would assume this briefing is on the department's reaction to the report.

Without further ado, the first speaker will speak for about 10 minutes, and then we'll have questions and answers after that.

Please begin.

Ms. Catherine Blewett (Deputy Minister, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for inviting the department to appear before the committee today.

[*Translation*]

I would like to introduce some of my colleagues who have joined me.

[*English*]

They are Kevin Stringer, the associate deputy minister; Mario Pelletier, the deputy commissioner of operations for the Canadian Coast Guard; Jean Landry, the director of the fish population science branch; and Marc Clemens, the manager of national fisheries policy for the department.

Our department welcomed the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development's report, "Sustaining Canada's Major Fish Stocks", which we received in October 2016.

We very much value the work of the commissioner, the work that went into the review, and appreciate the insights on how we can improve our management approach in critical fisheries that affect thousands of Canadians in rural, coastal, and indigenous communities.

As you know, Fisheries and Oceans Canada agreed with each of the eight recommendations put forward. We are also actively working on addressing them, as evidenced by our management action plan, which is now publicly available on our website.

The commissioner was very clear about the intent of the audit: to ensure that we manage the 154 major fish stocks under our control in a way that is sustainable and with the ultimate desire to avoid the potential collapse of another stock.

While the commissioner highlighted several gaps in our management delivery, to ensure the committee has adequate time for questions and answers I'll limit my introductory comments to address perhaps the two most significant recommendations.

First, the commissioner expressed her concern related to our integrated fisheries management plans, more commonly known as IFMPs. IFMPs are our core fisheries management documents for each major stock, which outline our objectives and how we manage a fishery. At the time of the audit, management plans were in place for 110 of the 154 major fish stocks, including those with the greatest commercial and economic value. However, the remaining 44 major stocks had either missing or outdated plans.

I'm happy to be able to have a conversation today with the committee about the progress we're making in that area. Today, IFMPs are in place for about 79% of the major fish stocks, while the remainder continue to be managed using other fishing plans. That translates into around 26 IFMPs that still need to be completed, and 14 that require updates.

Going forward, DFO has a work plan to address the priority IFMPs that will be updated or completed within the current fiscal year, including publicly posting those that are complete. Also, we have established timelines for completing or updating IFMPs next fiscal year and in subsequent years until the work is complete. I'm happy to provide any further details on the exact number of plans that need to be posted, completed, or updated, and will be able to provide you what you need.

The commissioner also expressed concern about the lack of rebuilding plans, coupled with continued fishing of some of the major fish stocks currently in the critical zone. I want to take this opportunity to reassure members of this committee that although formal rebuilding plans may not be in place for all stocks in the critical zone, DFO has strict fishery management measures in place to control fish harvests for those 16 stocks.

Those measures include a variety of actions. For example, some of the stocks are caught only as bycatch; directed fishing on them is expressly not permitted. For those that are fished directly, measures such as quota limits, restrictions on small fish, and catch monitoring and enforcement programs are in place to ensure harvests are kept within limits.

These management measures are based on scientific evidence and guided by our sustainable fisheries framework, a key policy instrument that provides the basis on which to develop environmentally sustainable fisheries that also support economic prosperity within the industry and within fishing communities.

Developing these formal rebuilding plans takes time. It takes scientific advice, and it takes considerable engagement with stakeholders, but we're very much committed to achieving the task.

This fiscal year we're seeking to add four more rebuilding plans to the existing three in place. This includes yelloweye rockfish, southwestern Nova Scotia cod, and redfish in Unit 1 and Unit 2.

We are also advancing work so that we can have plans completed next year in a number of other areas, including northern cod. We very much appreciated the opportunity to review the excellent work done by this committee on northern cod as well.

We're putting in place a strategy that's going to allow us to focus on the most pressing areas of concern in the near term while at the same time ensuring that we have a long-term strategy and capacity to guide the completion of IFMPs and rebuilding plans in the years ahead.

To support this effort and to continue to strive for further transparency, we'll be annually publishing our sustainable fisheries survey—we call it the fisheries checklist, somewhat informally—as committed to last fall. This will identify the status of the work that is to be completed each year and indicate how we're doing in implementing our sustainable fisheries framework, which includes our rebuilding plans, reference points, ISMPs, and other elements.

Mr. Chair, this is just a brief overview of some of the work we have accomplished since the commissioner tabled her report last October. Going forward, our department will continue to use scientific evidence to guide our work.

The \$40 million per year that was set aside in budget 2016 for aquatic science is helping us fill some of the gaps mentioned in the commissioner's report. Approximately half of this funding is going directly into fisheries science, such as stock assessments, data analysis, and environmental monitoring. It's also being used to support and expand DFO's survey program for fish and marine mammals. In addition to the work, we're developing a national catch reporting and fisheries monitoring policy.

The additional funding for science will allow us to improve our stock assessments and our capacity to make projections about future harvest levels. For the stock assessed on a multi-year basis, it's also going to give us the chance to put in place the necessary tools to ensure that when unexpected changes in stock status are identified in interim years, science will have the capacity to carry out full stock assessments ahead of schedule.

An important element tying all of this work together is being more transparent with Canadians about how we're managing our fisheries. Making our science, information on fisheries, and our progress to implement our sustainable fisheries policies more accessible to Canadians is important, and it's a priority for our department. We've already taken important steps in this regard and will continue to do so.

Before closing, I just want to reiterate our department's commitment to building indigenous commercial and recreational fisheries that are economically prosperous and environmentally sustainable. As deputy minister, my goal is to ensure that we have the key management tools and policies in place to manage each of these fisheries responsibly. By continuing to take action on each of the recommendations put forward by the commissioner, I'm confident we're going to be in a position to achieve just that.

● (0855)

I understand that I've only touched on a few of the significant recommendations at this time; however, we're happy to answer any of the questions that the committee may have on the full report.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Thank you.

I should have noted before we began that this session will go for not quite an hour, and then we'll go in camera for a very short period of time because we have some committee business to deal with—for five minutes at most. Then we'll have our guest for the next half.

For seven minutes, then, the first questioner is Mr. McDonald.

Mr. Ken McDonald (Avalon, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning and welcome to our guests. Thank you for coming back again this morning to appear before committee.

What level of resources does DFO require to close the gaps that have been identified in the commissioner's report?

Ms. Catherine Blewett: Through you, Mr. Chair, thank you very much for the question.

Resources, as you will know, are something that the commissioner pointed to in her concern about our capacity to deliver and ensure that we have a sustainable approach to fisheries going forward.

It's difficult to put a specific and precise dollar amount on it. It's a cumulative picture of financial resources, human resources, and stakeholder input. A dollar amount won't necessarily fix it, but we would be happy to talk through the elements of that.

Mr. Ken McDonald: Thank you.

DFO indicated that it will increase its monitoring coverage of key areas and species of marine mammals, fish, and invertebrates. Will DFO increase the frequency of full stock assessments and monitoring coverage for northern cod and capelin? The reason I ask that is that it's very important to my home province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

• (0900)

Ms. Catherine Blewett: I must say that we're certainly following Newfoundland and Labrador very closely at the moment, given some of the developments and challenging shifts in some of the stocks.

We may talk to you about some of the pieces. We have Jean and Marc here who can talk about the process. We are going to be doing more monitoring.

Jean, do you want to respond on the cod?

Mr. Jean Landry (Director, Fish Population Science, Ecosystems and Oceans Sector, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Yes, we plan to do more on those species.

You mention capelin. We recognize that we have a gap to fill in our knowledge of capelin. In using the funding from budget 2016, we plan to improve our knowledge of capelin. For example, we plan, in fiscal year 2018-19, to conduct a major survey of the whole capelin stock off Newfoundland and Labrador. This approach should give us an opportunity in the future to develop real abundance indices of the value of biomass for this stock.

This is roughly a \$2.3-million investment for that year. I expect that once this development is done, it will fill an important gap in our knowledge of capelin. We recognize that it's really a key species that lives with cod.

For the cod assessment, currently the frequency of the full assessment of the cod stock is three years. We fully recognize the importance of that stock, but in terms of the frequency, I would say that the approach we have put in place currently is probably adequate.

I'm going to explain what I mean by that. We made a substantial improvement in our approach to assess the stock in 2016. We have a very good model and a more robust approach. We now can forecast three years in advance when we provide this assessment.

We monitor carefully the species each year. Each year we do an update on the stock, as we did in March 2017. Moreover, as part of the recommendation of the commissioner's report, we have developed indicators that would trigger an earlier assessment during interim years if something happened. This is quite important.

We don't want to miss anything important that could put the resource at risk. So, during interim years, if we see something happening that is not what we expected, we can immediately do a full assessment and make sure that we act rapidly on the stock.

Mr. Ken McDonald: I appreciate that.

DFO committed to implement the program to verify observer companies' compliance with its policies. How does DFO verify the compliance of observer companies with the national dockside monitoring program policy and the at-sea observer program?

Ms. Catherine Blewett: That was another very pointed recommendation the commissioner made. Actually, as we were reviewing all of the elements, the department pointed out the specific cases to the commissioner, because we were very aware of it.

Kevin may want to talk a bit to you on it. What's so interesting, about it is that balancing third-party monitoring is a challenge in different places. In small, rural outport communities, there are fewer resources available. There are fewer vessels and industry members available. So, we have worked carefully on that.

Kevin, you might want to give bit of an update—but we've taken a serious look.

Mr. Kevin Stringer (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thanks. I'm happy to add to that. As the deputy said, it is a challenge in rural coastal Canada to have observers and dockside monitors who have no relation to the fishery. It is a challenge, so those conflicts exist.

We do two or three things that we've done for many years. First, for a dockside monitoring company to be designated, it has to be approved and has to meet a number of conditions. It is approved by the regional director general. Second, RCMP officers—our conservation and protection officers, our enforcement people—show up at the dock, sometimes in uniform and sometimes not, sometimes announced and sometimes not. We have a certain number of random samples that we do.

What we've added now, following the CESD report, is to look at at.... The issue was conflict of interest. There are all kinds of potential conflicts that you might have. One is if someone had been a fisherman, left the fishery, and became part of the dockside monitoring company or the observer company. Another might be if a close relative is in the fish-buying business. Those potential conflicts always exist, and the challenge is to declare them and mitigate them. We now have a form and a system whereby we are asking the dockside monitoring companies and the observer companies to identify those conflicts and to explain how they are going to mitigate them. We are developing and testing a verification system, in terms of how we go through with the company to check that they are doing it. They also need to maintain a list of current conflicts and let us know when any of those change. Those conflicts will exist.

• (0905)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Thank you very much.

We'll have to stop there. I suspect you'll be able to develop that answer further with other questioners.

Mr. Doherty, you have seven minutes.

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

Thank you, again, to our guests today. I have a question for Ms. Blewett.

You mentioned that management plans are now up on the website. I'm looking at the website as I speak. Can you tell the committee which plans have been updated and added since October 2016? The report has been filed since the last time we spoke about this. I see one report that has been updated as of 2016. Which reports have been updated since then? You have testified today that, after the report was tabled, you now have management plans. I believe 79% are in place, and 26 are still needed. Which ones have you updated since the report was tabled?

Ms. Catherine Blewett: Just to be clear, our plan is on the website. The actual IFMPs are still being developed. I don't know that you'll see all of them up there on the website. What we did, and wanted to have done by the end of last fiscal year, was to make sure that our plan, our approach, was up there.

I see Marc furiously flipping through his paper there.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Perhaps we can have that supplied to us after this, for the sake of time. That would be great.

Ms. Catherine Blewett: Okay.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I have another question to follow up on. I think I mentioned this at the time. We've mentioned it a few times, and I think our colleagues across the floor have mentioned it, because obviously this hits home for them. Northern cod has been an issue for over 26 years. Why is the plan still not done?

Ms. Catherine Blewett: We are looking carefully and hope that we will have a plan in place—

Mr. Todd Doherty: Ms. Blewett, you mentioned that time is needed. Is 26 years not enough time to understand?

Ms. Catherine Blewett: I would say that in 26 years an awful lot has changed. We've brought in our sustainable fisheries management practices and we've started to manage with the precautionary principle. There has been a lot of study and work done on the stock. While a formal plan, as I mentioned, isn't in place for some of those stocks, we are focusing very closely and managing the science. We know where the stock is in the zone and track it very carefully. Again, although you may not see a formal IFMP in place for every one, every fishery is covered by another type.

• (0910)

Mr. Todd Doherty: Okay. I appreciate your comment. I still don't understand why. It's been 26 years, over successive governments, so you would think we'd have plan in place.

Mr. Landry, you gave what I believe were two conflicting comments. One was that we don't know enough about capelin. The next comment you made was, well, I think we know enough to move forward with capelin.

I think we heard on the ground how important the capelin biomass or fishery is. It's a food source for our northern cod. How come this hadn't been studied previously?

Mr. Jean Landry: I thought or hope that I mentioned that we recognize there is a gap on capelin and are ready to move forward. I wanted to highlight the fact that we are engaging in plans and actions to fill that gap.

I just want to make sure my comment wasn't misinterpreted.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Stringer, on September 21, in the context of the committee's study on northern cod, Mr. John Bratney stated that the limit reference point for the stock is 900,000 metric tonnes. However, on February 7 your testimony indicated that the reference point is 660,000 metric tonnes. Why is there a discrepancy there?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: As I understand it, it's been 660,000 tonnes for years and years. Science has adjusted the model and is now saying it's 882,000 tonnes, but where we're at in terms of the percentage has not changed. I would have said that we were at 34% of the limit reference point. They just adjusted the scale. The actual limit reference point is now formally 882,000, but we're still, as of last year, at 34% of the limit reference point.

Mr. Todd Doherty: I appreciate that.

Do I still have time, Mr. Chair?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): You have a minute and a half.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Okay.

This will be really quick, Mr. Stringer. Do you believe—yes or no—that DFO received adequate levels of funding in budget 2017?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: I think the deputy answered that one. You'll always find public servants looking for additional funds, etc., right?

Mr. Todd Doherty: All right. Perfect. I knew that answer. I just wanted to get it on record.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Todd Doherty: To either Ms. Blewett or Mr. Stringer, a number of times we've had you before the committee, and we've talked about the disconnect between Ottawa and the regional offices. We've also heard that there's been investment, that we have better technology, and as such, things are getting better.

Tell us about the plan in place to ensure that the priorities on the ground reach the decision-makers in Ottawa, that there isn't a disconnect, that management is doing what they can to be effective and efficient, and that we are not sitting here next year still seeing that we have 16 critical plans not done.

Ms. Catherine Blewett: I'm really delighted you asked that question.

What's different? I'd like to tell you a little bit about the structure and what I've done as a manager coming in as deputy minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada. There are lots of different models and lots of ways you can manage them. We have the largest, most decentralized department in the country, with 85% of our staff operations in the regions.

I come from a region, although I'm not wearing the tartan that I should be wearing today. I'm very shy about that.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Catherine Blewett: I'm very sensitive to the regions. It was a change I made, as someone coming into the office. I made the regional directors general report directly to the deputy minister. That's a structural change. For me, as I've said, it's a recognition that there are times when what we do at 200 Kent Street in Ottawa doesn't connect to the ground, and it's critical that we are tuned in. That set a pretty good tone and a pretty good signal.

The other thing we've done is this. I've implemented regular... Every two weeks I'm talking to them. We're out in the regions. It makes a difference. Our regional management, our regional leaders, know that they can pick up the phone. And I have expectations as well in terms of delivery.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you.

• (0915)

Ms. Catherine Blewett: You're welcome.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Thank you very much.

Mr. Donnelly, you have seven minutes.

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

Welcome to our witnesses. Thank you for appearing before our committee today.

I want to take a crack at the resource question. Prior to the last election, the department did suffer a fair number of cutbacks, which some would categorize as very severe cuts. In terms of making choices and choosing what gets done and what doesn't get done, obviously when you're cutting it's very hard to carry out some of these things that the environment commissioner has identified.

Ms. Blewett, you mentioned the \$40 million in budget 2016, but you didn't mention anything in budget 2017. I want to ask that question. In order to fill those gaps, in 2017 are there resources to help identify and close those gaps within the time frame of a year, I'll say?

Ms. Catherine Blewett: As you can imagine, we've been very focused on what the resource picture looks like. I have to say that we are still unpacking budget 2017, and I'm actually quite hopeful that we are going to get some resources and support that will come alive for us this fiscal year.

We're very focused on our fisheries management area, and we are going through the exercise right now. Yesterday, we had a quite protracted executive committee meeting about how we're going to ensure that the resources that came from budget 2017 will be focused in the areas where we've had integrity issues.

We've had a frank discussion about the integrity challenges the department has faced. You heard Minister LeBlanc speak about them before, and yes, we are going to see resources directed to the area.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: You mentioned that 79% of the plans are complete. Could you supply those IFMPs to this committee?

Ms. Catherine Blewett: Yes, we could.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: That would be great.

Ms. Catherine Blewett: Marc, is that noted?

Mr. Marc Clemens (Manager, National Fisheries Policy, Oceans and Fisheries Policy, Ecosystems and Fisheries Management, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Yes.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Good.

Maybe I could switch to Mr. Stringer.

In response to the report by the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development, your department committed to developing a plan with priorities, targets, and timelines for completing rebuilding plans for stocks in the critical zone by the end of the last fiscal year. Can you tell the committee if that plan is complete, and if so, can it be made available to this committee?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: It is complete, and our response to the report is on the website.

What it basically says is that we've set some priorities for 2017 and are planning to get that specific plan into the public domain. I can tell this committee, as the deputy already said, there are four that we plan to move forward on and to have done this fiscal year. These are yelloweye rockfish, Atlantic cod, redfish in Unit 1, and redfish in Unit 2.

In terms of the latter two, the management strategy evaluation for them would be done at this time next year, and early in the following year they would be finalized. We have those four, and work is continuing on the others. We'd be happy to get those to you.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Okay, that would be important, because I think what you're giving us is a plan for a plan for a plan.

Mr. Kevin Stringer: What is on the website is our response to the committee, and it says that we have a plan. The plan is focused on short-term objectives—what we are going to do this year—and priorities for future years. That is what we have.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Your department policy advises that rebuilding plans should be developed before the stock crosses the critical threshold. In light of this, can you commit to not increasing the quota on stocks currently in the critical zone until there is a rebuilding plan in place with reference points and timelines?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: That is always our objective. There's no question that fisheries management plays into this as an important factor, but when the commissioner looked at the stocks that are in the critical zone, she identified 12.

That was from our 2014 report. There are now 16. One of the additional ones is northern shrimp. No amount of recovery strategy for northern shrimp in SFA 6 is going to make that come back. That's about an oceanographic conditions change. In other words, we're not going to stop something from getting into the critical zone by what we do in fisheries management. Sometimes that's the case. We seek to do everything we can from a fisheries management perspective to ensure that we don't slip below that limit reference point and into the critical zone.

• (0920)

Mr. Fin Donnelly: You say that's always the department's objective. Is that a commitment? Is that a "We won't"?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: It is always the department's objective to seek to do what we can to make sure.... The entire objective of what we're trying to do is not to have those stocks get into the critical zone.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Okay. Thank you.

The environment commissioner called into question the reliability and usefulness of the data of third-party observer programs in providing information to DFO for use in fishery management decisions. As a result, DFO has missed scientific surveys and problems with third-party observer programs. The audit found that data gaps prevented DFO from classifying certain fish stocks as healthy, cautious, or critical. Could you explain how the department is addressing that issue?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): There is about 30 seconds left. I'll let you continue past that somewhat.

Ms. Catherine Blewett: Thank you very much.

If it's okay, I'm going to turn to Marc, who can give some specifics on that really quickly.

Mr. Marc Clemens: I think part of the response is also with Jean.

Just to start from the second part of your question about the impact on our ability to analyze stock status, that information comes from scientific surveys. In some cases it also comes from observer programs if that data is needed.

What are we doing to improve the reliability of data from the observer programs? We're developing a national policy on catch monitoring. The aim of the policy is to set out a protocol for determining the appropriate levels of at-sea observer coverage in fisheries. Currently, that doesn't exist.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): The time's up. Thank you very much.

Ms. Jordan, you have seven minutes.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan (South Shore—St. Margarets, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for appearing again before this committee.

I'm going to take a little bit of a different track with my questions. As you know, I come from the south shore of Nova Scotia. Two particular species, the Atlantic whitefish and the Atlantic salmon are at risk. The Atlantic whitefish, I believe, is now endangered.

One of the concerns that I have heard in the communities and with organizations that have worked with this specific fish is that DFO's attitude, plan, and way of managing is to save what we have, not rebuild what we have. There are real concerns that there's no plan in place to rebuild the stocks, but just one to make sure that we don't lose what we've got.

I'm just wondering if you can comment on that. Can you put people at ease that we do want to rebuild this stock? A lot of the concern comes from the fact that the hatchery that we had was not only closed, but was totally dismantled. There's some question as to where the smolts, the eggs, and everything else went when that was dismantled. There has been an interest in rebuilding another

hatchery. Is that a possibility? I know I'm asking you all kinds of questions at once, but they're all interrelated.

Furthermore, while you were giving testimony, I heard a couple of times about the importance of stock. How do you judge what the importance of stock is? Does that play a role in your rebuilding plans? If something is a commercial fishery, is it more important than something that is almost gone, like the Atlantic whitefish?

I'll start with you, Ms. Blewett. Maybe you can start that conversation.

Ms. Catherine Blewett: We may tag team a little bit to unpack the question, if that's okay.

The first part is a resource issue. I can't speak as much to the previous cuts and challenges from hatcheries being closed and the plans made.

You'll notice that I focused on some of those 154 economically important stocks, but we have a commitment to all of them, you know. I don't want too undue emphasis on.... We're focused on all of the stocks.

I might ask Jean to talk a little bit about our rebuilding plans and approach, and Kevin might want to talk a little bit about the balance in terms of retrieval.

Does that work?

Jean.

• (0925)

Mr. Jean Landry: In terms of the science we, I will make a link with what Mr. Stringer mentioned before. In some cases it's very difficult to control what will happen. We can act on the things we can control, but when there are other factors, it's very difficult to control what's going to happen.

In terms of the work we do in science, what I can say is that we continue to monitor and provide updates on the status of the resource. We have many salmon populations that are not doing well, especially in the more southern regions.

With budget 2016, we put in place the Atlantic salmon research joint venture. In my view it's a really a precious tool to bring together everybody who is concerned about Atlantic salmon in order to leverage expertise, knowledge, and resources. We'll engage in more research and more monitoring. We'll try to better understand what happens with Atlantic salmon. We do the best we can to improve our knowledge and to try to fill the gap in knowledge.

Mr. Kevin Stringer: I'll just add quickly to that.

Concerning the focus on the big stocks, as the deputy said, that has been the case and, certainly, we need the integrated fisheries managements plans for those major stocks. But we also, as the deputy said, need to be paying attention to the others. Hence, there's a focus on capelin when we're working on cod. There's a relationship between cod and other species and a relationship among cod, shrimp, and crab as the ecosystem changes.

A broader ecosystem approach is something that we have been moving towards. You'll find that we changed our integrated fisheries management plans over the years to include an ecosystem component. We know that we're not just managing one stock; we're managing an ecosystem. More and more we're moving in that direction, but, yes, there has been that focus to get that initial IFMPs, the initial limit reference points, etc., in place.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Am I still good?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): You have two minutes.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: I'm going to continue on the Atlantic whitefish and salmon, specifically. Is there an appetite to allow community organizations, fisheries groups, and fisheries management groups that work in our area to develop a hatchery? Would that be something that DFO would be supportive of in order to help? We're talking about groups that have a knowledge base, a good plan in place. Would DFO be willing to work with those groups if there were an interest in developing a hatchery?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: We're always willing to work with groups. There are different views about hatcheries, about whether they create competing fish, competing in terms of predation, etc. As Jean said, we have partnerships with local groups up and down all of Atlantic Canada. We have a wild Atlantic salmon policy that speaks to these things, which is the foundation for how we manage and work with watershed groups. I would say that of all of our fisheries, we have more partnerships with watershed groups on Atlantic salmon than in any other fishery we have. With respect to specific hatcheries, that one has been a challenge, but I know people are talking about this.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Okay. I have one final quick question.

With regard to invasive species, one of the challenges we have with the Atlantic whitefish, particularly, has been the chain pickerel. That was a result of somebody's thinking it was a great idea to stock a lake.

Is there anything that can be done to mitigate those problems with invasive species, particularly when we're looking at species at risk? What is the department doing to deal with those kinds of challenges that are affecting our species at risk?

Ms. Catherine Blewett: Species at risk and invasive species, generally, are a national focus and concern for us as well. We recognize where there are concerns across the country. It is something you may have seen on a resource question. We received funding for some invasive species work in the department. We're going to continue to be quite focused.

I don't know the specifics on the whitefish versus the pickerel, but we'll follow up and let you know. I don't know the specifics in that region. I know others. We'll get back to you, if that's okay, to find out what the approach is.

Thank you.

• (0930)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): We're going to be adjusting the time a little bit given our time constraints, so there will be four questioners. You'll have four minutes each instead of five. I'm going to be fairly tight with the time this time. I allowed a little more time for the first round, but for this second round, I'm going to be tight with the four minutes.

Mr. Arnold, you have four minutes.

Mr. Mel Arnold (North Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I thank the witnesses for being here today. It's great to have you in to give us further information on this report.

I don't mean to sound facetious, but getting back to what Mr. Donnelly started to address, in 1995, DFO committed to developing integrated fisheries management plans for the major fish stocks. In 2001, they recommitted to developing those plans. Last year, the commissioner's report identified that there were still 44 stocks for which plans hadn't been developed or plans needed to be revised.

What we saw by way of a response was that the department had committed to developing a plan to develop plans. Yes, develop a plan to develop plans that were committed to some 20 years ago. Can you explain why it's taken more than 20 years to develop plans, and now all you've reached after this environment commissioner's report is a plan to develop plans?

Ms. Catherine Blewett: Mr. Chair, I don't find it facetious at all. I'll try to give you as straight-up an answer as I can.

I'll start in the short term. This year, we've gone from 71% to 79%—and I have to say very candidly—we welcomed the report the commissioner did. It gave us an opportunity to look at where we were, where there were areas that we could push to complete it. The work is ongoing all the time. Frankly, that is a challenge that we will often have, keeping some of these things evergreen. Some of the plans existed but they were outdated.

You're right. We have a plan in place, but if your question is, "What's your commitment to actually push and get these done?" I can't speak to the early nineties, but I think you will see an earnest and direct push to make some progress. I think you could have us back next year to ask us.

Mr. Mel Arnold: I can't help but be somewhat skeptical, looking at past history—

Ms. Catherine Blewett: Understood.

Mr. Mel Arnold:—and when I see in the response here that you have also established timelines for updating both plans before the 2018-19 fiscal year and every subsequent year thereafter until the work is complete.

Can you give us an approximate timeline when you think these plans might be complete so that we may have targets? I think that's something this committee has seen over and over again, that there is a lack of targets and accountability to a lot of the things that are creating problems here.

Ms. Catherine Blewett: One of the things we're working on internally and have talked about is disaggregating that, getting more specific on it. So you're going to see more movement, not just our talking about a plan for our plans. We'll have more disaggregated information, and we would be happy to share it with you on an ongoing basis.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): You have 30 seconds.

Mr. Mel Arnold: I want to talk briefly about the government's interest last fall in acquiring so-called bridge vessels for the Canadian Coast Guard. This relates to the review of scientific survey activities, identifying gaps and adjusting activities to ensure that they are fully aligned with departmental priorities.

Now we see it says that the work is complete. Is this only a plan that is complete, or is it actually adjusting activities to ensure that they are fully aligned with development priorities? Have the activities been adjusted, or is there simply a plan that has been completed?

• (0935)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): You're out of time. Please be very brief.

Ms. Catherine Blewett: I'd like to ask our deputy commissioner to speak about it, because he can talk about the connection between the plans and what is actually happening on the ground to make the difference.

Mr. Mario Pelletier (Deputy Commissioner, Operations, Canadian Coast Guard, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): On the ground we have that the request for information that was issued last fall to bridge some gaps that we might have until we can get new vessels.

In terms of a science vessel, we know there are three offshore fishery science vessels under construction right now at the Vancouver shipyard. They will be delivered by the end of 2018. We welcome that new capacity; they're very capable vessels to conduct the work. After that, we're going to build the offshore oceanographic vessel to replace the CCGS *Hudson*, and a number of small vessels are being built as well.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): We have to stop it there.

Mr. Hardie, you have four minutes.

Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): I have an open-ended question, so I'm going hand the floor first to Mr. Finnigan for a quick question.

Mr. Pat Finnigan (Miramichi—Grand Lake, Lib.): Mr. Hardie, thank you so much. I appreciate that.

I have an example that I want to bring up with you, and I've had a discussion with Mr. Stringer on it. This past weekend, I made an announcement. It was to be a good news announcement about the bass quota this year in Miramichi. It was great until I made the announcement. People were really not happy about it, especially the people along the river, because I kept saying that we were basing our decision on science.

The number of bass increased 6% last year, with 20,000 more bass in the river. We already know that there's pressure from them, and people will say that the bass take a good chunk of the salmon smolt, which is in bad shape.

Within the river itself, they've imposed a three-week moratorium on the spawning period. That also could coincide with the Striper Cup. So if we're talking about the economic benefits, it could have an effect on that. Also, they've increased the number of fish species outside the river to two, but within the river until the spawning, it's

just one fish species. After spawning, the bass usually goes out into salt water.

They're really not happy about that, and I have a hard time explaining how we base that on science, because we've had an increase and last year we didn't have any moratorium. How can I explain that to my people in Miramichi?

Thank you.

Ms. Catherine Blewett: I'm not sure what you were talking about with Kevin, so he can feel free to jump in.

We did try to make sure that it was connected to science. The caveat we heard back from the scientific folks was that the moratorium was to ensure a bit of a break around that time when the fish were reproducing. That's the straight answer. That was the rationale.

Mr. Pat Finnigan: We could agree on that short period, but the fact is that the population increased last year by 6% even though they fished right through. It's hard to explain that to sensible people on the river.

Ms. Catherine Blewett: It is.

Jean, you can jump in on this if you wish.

However, one of the things we are seeing in a number of stocks is that there are blooms, or increases, and then they tail off. So just having open floodgates is not necessarily where we would go. The scientific advice was for a three-week halt.

Mr. Pat Finnigan: I could go on, but I don't want to take the...

If there's time, I'll leave it to Ken.

Ms. Catherine Blewett: We can get you more detail if you like.

Mr. Ken Hardie: This is more of a comment, which hopefully we'll have a longer discussion on.

So far this committee, I think, has issued eight reports, and there have been a ton of recommendations. You have the environment commissioner's report on top of it.

The question becomes, at what point do you run out of capacity to do all of this stuff? You've been sitting there very patiently. You come in front of the Spanish Inquisition on a fairly regular basis, and you nod and smile, and you go off and try to get all of this done. The concern that I'm starting to develop is that you're about an inch deep and a mile wide in terms of your capacity to actually do this. You've never really said, "Gang, we can't do any of this."

I think we are coming to the time where we need to have that discussion. It isn't just a matter of expectation of management here; it's a matter of what you can do to hit the critical mass where you're actually making a difference, and not just scraping the barnacles off the boat.

I'm going to leave it at that, and hopefully we can have that discussion in a more complete manner somewhere down the line.

Thanks very much.

• (0940)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Thank you.

I'm going to interject here, which is the chair's prerogative.

On the striped bass thing, I very much agree with Mr. Finnigan. Having been a fisheries manager in a previous life, I know that they always tend to err on the side of not harvesting enough fish. I agree with Mr. Finnigan's amplifications that the decision to expand the fishery was a good one in principle, but I don't think you did it enough. I've read some of the reports from his region, and I may even be visiting it at the end of April.

We see this all across Canada. Biologists do this over and over again. When a stock is abundant, it should be fished somewhat hard. You should be willing to sort of push the envelope a bit, because, as Mr. Finnigan is implying, some significant economic activity will not be realized because of a decision that could easily be challenged biologically.

That's enough for the chair to say. I'm completely out of line, so I'll rule myself out of order.

Mr. Doherty has asked for one short question.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Chair, I appreciate the opportunity, and I'm adding to Mr. Hardie's comment.

Ms. Blewett, I'm glad to hear that checks and measures have been put in place since you've been in this position. We talk about fisheries management plans, and we should at this point ask for the department to come before the committee with its departmental management plan. Time and again, we've heard about it, whether it's on the report filed earlier or the disconnect in the studies we have heard about between Ottawa and the regions.

It is important that we make note that regardless of which government has been in place and what funding was in place, there are critical issues in terms of management. It has been noted on record that some of these challenges have been management challenges.

I would ask, Mr. Chair, that the department come before the committee at another time. Ms. Blewett, can you commit to doing that?

I think that is really important for us. I say this because you can throw all sorts of money at an issue, but if you have no plan to manage the resources, meaning not just financial resources but also physical or human resources, as Mr. Hardie was talking about, we'll be here 26 years from now and saying the same thing.

It is really important, if this committee is going to continue the good work that I think we have done—and I think you're starting to put some processes in place, maybe following along in the footsteps of others—that we have an update, perhaps even quarterly. I'm asking if you would commit to coming back in a short time to give us the management plan moving forward.

I think you started to tell us a bit about that today, but I'd like to get an update on that.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Say yes.

Ms. Catherine Blewett: It's yes, with a caveat.

I just want to say, though, that I read the committee's discussions with Commissioner Gelfand, and I think you asked her whether it was a matter of mismanagement or not enough money.

I want to pause on that, because we are a massive, decentralized department, and given the mandate and the responsibilities, with a dramatically cut fiscal base—

Mr. Todd Doherty: Ms. Blewett, to that comment, I'm sorry, but that is—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): We need to end this discussion.

Ms. Catherine Blewett: Okay. I'd be delighted to—

Mr. Todd Doherty: That point is great, but it has been 26 years, and we see a promise to put forth another plan and that you will do better. I think it's important that we see management changes in the strategy to move forward, regardless of what the—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Okay, I think the point has been made. I apologize for the time constraint.

Mr. Morrissey, take four minutes.

Mr. Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.): Are any of the stocks you're monitoring now in danger of collapse, from the perspective of the professional eye your department should be casting on them?

•(0945)

Ms. Catherine Blewett: We do not have a concern about a stock collapsing again.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: What's your view on Atlantic mackerel?

Ms. Catherine Blewett: We have stock in the critical zone. I'll turn to Jean, who is nervously looking at me about what I might say about that.

Go ahead, Jean.

Mr. Jean Landry: Thank you, Deputy.

We monitor mackerel annually. We do egg surveys. We made a new assessment of mackerel in March 2017. As we all know, mackerel has experienced a decline over the years, and our previous assessments were clear about the fact that mackerel was in a critical state.

I have a number of good news stories to tell about mackerel. First, following the assessment we did in March 2017, we have substantially improved our assessment in terms of the model, the source of information, and its robustness to uncertainty. We also have worked in close collaboration with our colleagues from the U.S.A. They participated in our assessment, and we will participate in their assessment of their stock in the fall.

In fact, concerning the mackerel we can say that we are in better shape to manage carefully the—

Mr. Robert Morrissey: What is the stock like?

Mr. Jean Landry: Based on the new assessment of the biomass, the stock is still in the critical zone. The biomass is about 40,000 tonnes. The limit reference points we have identified is 103,000 tonnes but we can see that the stock has started to slightly increase compared with its lowest level in 2012, which was 20,000 tonnes. There's a slight increase. As you know, we have reduced the TAC substantially over recent years, and we'll see what happens in the future. We continue to monitor it regularly.

Mr. Robert Morrissey: Often we politicians hear that fish buyers are buying a greater quantity than DFO statistics record. From time to time within the mackerel fishery you'll hear that there's a discrepancy between the numbers posted and what fish buyers cumulatively buy. Usually they're buying more than the numbers show. How is that happening, and what are you doing about it?

Mr. Kevin Stringer: I'll start, and Jean may want to add.

Jean said we are seeing some encouraging signs in mackerel, but we remain very concerned. It's at a low state. There is a commercial fishery, a recreational fishery, and a bait fishery. We've talked to the industry about needing to improve our monitoring. Marc talked about the catch monitoring policy we're working on for this year. We actually are strengthening it, particularly in the bait fishery, to make sure we have a good handle on it.

It's enormously important. In our meeting with the PEIFA last week, they talked about being ready to take on tougher, stringent measures, because they know we're serious about it because of the state of the stock. We are not going to let it go further, and so we are putting more stringent measures into ensuring that we're accounting for all fisheries.

In terms of there being more bought than is recorded, there's our dockside monitoring, our observer coverage, and our logbooks, etc. A big part of our compliance is in making sure that people are accounting properly. We charge people when we find out they're not doing so.

We don't think there's a huge issue there, but we constantly have to be vigilant to make sure that the reporting is appropriate.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Okay, that's fine, so thank you.

We have Mr. Donnelly for four minutes.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Going back to the environment commissioner's report, she mentioned that in 2010 DFO began a transition to less frequent stock assessments for most fisheries. However, the audit found that DFO had not identified the triggers specific to each stock that would signal that a full stock assessment would be needed sooner than scheduled.

How is the department addressing this issue?

• (0950)

Ms. Catherine Blewett: Jean began to provide an answer in a previous comment around the triggers, so, Jean, maybe you want to elaborate on that.

Mr. Jean Landry: We have implemented that recommendation from the commissioner's report since its release last October. The

way it will work is that from now on, each time we have a full stock assessment, the meeting's terms of reference will make it mandatory to look at this issue. We have already started to identify triggers for a number of stocks since last October, for example, Atlantic halibut in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and also the northern Gulf cod stock. We even identified triggers before the release of the report. For northern cod, as I mentioned previously, we identified triggers in the winter of 2016, so it has been implemented, but it will take time because we have committed to do that when the full stock assessment comes.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Is that information now all publicly available on the website?

Mr. Jean Landry: For the northern cod, yes, but for the ones I mentioned that were produced over the last months, I think the reports are not on the web yet. They will come—

Mr. Fin Donnelly: They're coming, okay. Thank you.

Switching gears for a second here, there was a recent World Conservation Congress at which delegates from around the world passed a resolution that at least 30% of the ocean be protected.

Ms. Blewett, I'm wondering if Canada supports this goal. Obviously, the department is focused on 5% by the end of this year, and by 2020—

Ms. Catherine Blewett: That's 10% by 2020.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: So 30% obviously would be a stretch goal. Other countries are already achieving and surpassing this. Is this something Canada is going to move towards?

Ms. Catherine Blewett: We are very focused on achieving our marine conservation targets. I think you had a session the other day and heard about where we're going in terms of our 5% and 10%.

I wouldn't presume to know where the Government of Canada will go in terms of that broader target.

It's a robust conversation that's happening around the globe and we're focused on achieving the mandate that we have at the moment.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: Okay.

In my remaining time, I'll move the motion that I've given notice to the committee of. It's germane to the discussion today. I don't know if it needs to be circulated, but it will be.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): It's in order.

Mr. Fin Donnelly: I move:

That the department and agencies of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and the Canadian Coast Guard, that have been subject to a performance audit by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada provide a detailed action plan to address the audit recommendations which have been agreed to, including specific actions, timelines for their completion, and responsible individuals, to the Committee and to the Office of the Auditor General of Canada, within six months of the audit being tabled in the House of Commons;

That the department and agencies that are invited to appear before the Committee to discuss the findings of an audit should, when feasible, provide an action plan to the Committee prior to the hearing; and

That the departmental action plans and progress reports received by the Committee be published on the Committee's website.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Given that time is so very tight, if we have an extensive discussion we simply will not have the time to have a vote.

Mrs. Bernadette Jordan: Call the vote.

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. Todd Doherty: Mr. Chair, I just want to quickly say that the conversation has been very good today and we really appreciate the witnesses who are here.

I wonder if I might seek, again, only if it's okay with our witnesses' time, an extension of our schedule for just 10 minutes, as it would perhaps allow each side three or four minutes more of questioning. We are at 9:55 right now. Might we have 10 more minutes just to continue?

Again, I would ask the group.

• (0955)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Keep in mind that our guest is supposed to be here at 10, and we need to have a five-minute in camera session.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Even five minutes, I think, is important.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Is that the committee's wish?

A voice: Yes.

Mr. Todd Doherty: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Go ahead, Mr. Arnold.

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

I want to follow up a little on Mr. Morrissey's question on the mackerel catch data and so on. I was contacted by a fisherman in Nova Scotia last fall, who provided me with DFO's catch data for the last five years for the gulf, which was zero for those five years. Yet, he had legally purchased a million pounds of mackerel. A second person there had purchased half a million pounds of mackerel for bait.

Why is there such a discrepancy between DFO's catch data and what these buyers were able to buy legally? Can you explain that discrepancy?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Be very quick, please.

Go ahead, Deputy.

Ms. Catherine Blewett: I'd like to get more information on that, if that's okay.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): So you'll be able to report back?

Ms. Catherine Blewett: Yes. Does that work?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Okay, good. Go ahead for two minutes

Mr. Ken McDonald: I have a quick statement that will only take probably 30 seconds, and then Mr. Finnigan can go.

A big thank you to the group for appearing today. I'm delighted with some of the information you've shared with us. I think back to my getting elected in October 2015 and getting involved in the fisheries committee, where we find out things, see things, and hear things.

As an MP from Newfoundland and Labrador, to know what has happened with our cod fisheries since 1992, and probably before that, it is somewhat embarrassing representing people and trying to explain to them why there is no plan yet or why the cod fishery hasn't returned to a sustainable commercial level, especially now when we see, as Mr. Stringer mentioned, things happening in the shellfish industry that are beyond anyone's control. We have people who have millions of dollars invested in enterprises who waiting for the codfish to return, and one won't balance off the other when it does return. The transition is going to be very difficult for people.

To do that right and to have a plan in place, I think, is very important.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Robert Sopuck): Thank you, Mr. McDonald.

Staff, you are aware, and the department is aware, that this committee did extensive work at looking at revising the Fisheries Act. We are very eager to receive the department's response. We know you have 120 days from when it was tabled. I think I can speak for the committee when I say that we're requesting a response as quickly as possible, because that's such an important piece of work.

We hope you found our cod study and the salmon study very helpful. We very much enjoyed conducting the studies ourselves, and we operated in a very collegial manner. We all feel so strongly, regardless of political stripe, about the importance of these fish stocks. We're pleased to see movement, as Mr. Landry talked about, dedicated Atlantic salmon work. Hopefully our report had a little to do with that. In spite of the shortcomings of the striped bass issue, there was a major expansion that I think was partly due to the work this committee did. We very much appreciate what the department has done.

With that, I will adjourn the meeting, and we will go in camera for just a couple of minutes.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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