

State of the NL fisheries

Written by Gus Etchegary

Sunday, 19 December 2010 13:44 - Last Updated Wednesday, 12 January 2011 11:19

(Editor's Note: Re Gus's call for a Judicial Inquiry you can discuss this by clicking on "Join the Conversation" on the top bar above.)

Those who have been involved in the Newfoundland and Labrador fisheries — especially since the moratorium of the early 1990s — will be painfully aware of the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans' almost total abandonment of its responsibilities regarding management of our vital groundfish fisheries.

Documented evidence shows groundfish stocks in Norway, Iceland, Alaska and other fishing nations have been managed and conserved to a very healthy state, providing employment and good incomes to harvesters and processing personnel and contributing to their national economies.

A good example is the healthy state of cod, haddock and caplin fisheries in the Barents Sea north of Russia, providing employment for thousands of participants in Norway and Russia.

The 2010 cod quota alone was set at more than 600,000 tonnes.

Yet, after 18 years of a moratorium that stopped Newfoundlanders and Labradorians from fishing — but permitted member countries of the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) to continue — there is virtually no sign of recovery of migrating fish stocks on the Grand Banks.

Worse, there is no DFO rebuilding plan. Federal politicians and fishery bureaucrats have virtually wiped our fishery "off the slate." Not only has Ottawa abandoned its responsibility, it has allowed federal science capability in this province to deteriorate to the point where it's impossible for the skeleton staff to carry out stock assessments.

As a result, we know practically nothing about the current state of our fisheries. The three research vessels we once had are either permanently tied up or are maintained so poorly they

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are unreliable for research survey activity.

Fully qualified fishery scientists retiring in recent years have not been replaced, DFO's science budget has been "gutted" year after year since 1995, and we now have far too many unqualified fishery science personnel assuming important positions within the federal department.

Meantime, politicians, bureaucrats and political appointees who have taken on demanding responsibilities in Ottawa and St. John's continue to make misleading statements, supporting DFO's abandonment of the Newfoundland and Labrador groundfish fisheries, and making every possible lame excuse for the incompetent bureaucracy and its political leadership.

A classic example of the continuing barrage of misleading statements came in recent days from federal Fisheries Minister Gail Shea. Questioned why information on fishing activities outside Canada's 200-mile limit isn't released to the public, Shea responded: "Sorry, Canada cannot release this information because of confidentiality agreements and the commercially sensitive nature of the information."

Remember that the minister is referring to a "common property resource" owned by the people of Canada — not the minister or the Canadian government.

And we are not entitled to know what's happening to our bread-and-butter industry?

Apparently not, a state of affairs that is ridiculous and insulting to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians.

Such responses and other misleading statements regarding NAFO — a cancerous international entity — are often supported by political appointees, who also adhere to an anti-rebuilding theology concerning our groundfish fisheries.

This past week we listened to Gerard Chidley, newly appointed chair of the Fisheries Resource

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Conservation Council (FRCC), a federal advisory board, make misleading statements concerning rebuilding of groundfish stocks — not just cod, but all groundfish. It would be very useful if the chairman realized that flounders (American plaice, yellowtail, and greysole), as well as other species such as redfish and turbot, represented 80 per cent of the production through south-coast plants from Trepassery to Isle Aux Morts for 25 years before the moratorium was declared.

Chidley made other statements on the *Fisheries Broadcast* that must be challenged.

First, he stated that whiting and pollock had replaced cod in the market, insinuating that cod is no longer in demand around the world. He is dead wrong, and I suggest he investigate how well countries such as Norway, Iceland and others are actually doing in the market.

For example, Norway exported \$460 million (Cdn.) worth of cod products during the first quarter of 2010. I have visited those markets in Europe and South America and can provide the prices they are receiving in those markets.

Furthermore, the FRCC chair makes the erroneous statement that before the moratorium the only cod sold was in the form of frozen block. That may have been the case on the Southern Shore, but I can assure you it wasn't the case in many other plants in the province.

Chidley made another statement that is baffling, to say the least. Everybody knows or should know we have a five- to six-week crab fishery at best, with thousands of plant workers and fishermen finding themselves short of UI eligibility. Yet he decries a rebuilt cod fishery that provides, in his opinion, just two months work in plants?

Go figure.

It's high time participants in the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery wake up and take steps to clean house in DFO — here and in Ottawa — and remove the current crop of political appointees. There is a crying need for change and new blood in all sectors of the fishing industry: government, union and processing.

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We need strong, competent leadership in every level of government — people with vision for a modern rebuilt industry to compete with Norway, Iceland, Alaska and others. We need a strong marketing arm to replace the once very effective, 50-year-old arm of Fishery Products Incorporated, which was allowed to be snatched away from the province by Clearwater, and is now in the hands of NatSea. Government should never have committed that terrible blunder, despite the stupidity of the union and the fish processors in not accepting former premier Danny Williams' offer to purchase the arm, which they refused.

Federal and provincial elections are coming soon. Fishermen and plants workers — including the 80,000 who have been forced to leave the province since the fishery collapse — should combine to bring about major changes in fisheries management.

Newfoundlanders and Labradorians should make every vote count and make certain every politician elected makes a full commitment to demand rebuilding the groundfish fishery, without which the province will “die on the vine” soon after oil and minerals are gone.

The MOU process will never solve the inherent problems in our fisheries that have developed as a result of Ottawa mismanagement over the last many years. The course of action is to establish a judicial inquiry, a means to guarantee exposure of the real problems, solutions and actions required to rebuild a modern, internationally competitive industry. The forthcoming elections will provide the ideal platform for all fishery participants and the general public to join hands and demand such an inquiry.

Gus Etchegary, Portugal Cove-St. Philip's

TAGS: Gus Etchegary, Newfoundland and Labrador fisheries, moratoria, NAFO, government policy failure, Gerard Chidley, FRCC, DFO science cuts, groundfish fishery, rebuilding, sustainable, fishing, fisheries, politics and the fishery

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