



We need to enhance Atlantic Canada's fisheries

By Paul Lansbergen

Demand for Canada's seafood exports should continue to grow dramatically, as Asian markets remain strong and European markets open up under the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with the EU. Yet many leaders in the seafood industry in Atlantic Canada fear fisheries policies may be adapted in a way that creates instability in the industry and compromises investment and economic growth.

In a speech last summer in Nova Scotia, Fisheries Minister Dominic LeBlanc hinted at far-reaching changes to licensing rules. Specifically, he questioned existing policies that offer "near-indefinite access to the fishery by virtue of automatic (license) renewal and re-issuance." Mr. LeBlanc was not more definitive about how licensing policy could change, but his speech hinted that the federal government might rescind or transfer licenses to new holders after a fixed period of time. Based on my experience in the forest products industry, such words send ice chills down the backs of owners, managers and investors. Tenures in that industry are similarly the foundation for investment in processing.

To his credit, Mr. LeBlanc also stressed in his speech that "changes to (Canada's) licensing regime may have a major impact" on fishery operations. He went on to say that further consultations are important. "We need your input to get it right." The Fisheries Council of Canada (FCC), the national voice of the industry, welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on behalf of its members and the industry in general.

To begin with, we would say that it's hard to imagine that a single license holder in Atlantic Canada would endorse a policy change that places a time-limit – or best-before date- on fish licenses. As the Minister knows, many inshore fishermen work for years to pay off the debt attached to their licenses, their vessels and their gear, and rightly see the value they have accrued in those assets as their only pension plan. To suggest that these licenses could be held too long, or that they are (to quote the minister) "overvalued", is unfair and untrue.

For larger fishing companies, meanwhile, licenses to harvest Canada's seafood are the collateral which justifies and enables investments in the tens of millions of dollars – investments in gear, equipment and market development that are the best guarantee of the ongoing success and stability of this important export industry.

Fishermen and industry leaders will point to the myriad of challenges of competing in global supply chains, in the face of climate change impacts on fish species and then ever more restrictive environmental expectations and regulations. We need to pause and put our feet in their shoes to truly understand what it takes to be successful – for themselves and their communities. Our industry requires a stable policy environment to invest with confidence, and to provide the fishery jobs that are the foundation of the economy in so much of rural Atlantic Canada, including Mr. LeBlanc's own riding in New Brunswick.

Our advice to Mr. LeBlanc is clear then: Please tread carefully in introducing anticipated amendments to the Fisheries Act, and ensure that this industry is enhanced, not undermined, by any legislative or regulatory changes.

By working collaboratively with the fishing industry, the Canadian government can continue to effectively manage Canada's fisheries resources, protect its marine environment, and sustainably grow its vital seafood industry. To help achieve these goals, the Fisheries Council of Canada looks forward to ongoing engagement with the Minister, other Parliamentarians, and the government more broadly.

Paul Lansbergen is President, Fisheries Council of Canada

-30-