

■ LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Keeping track of cod

As readers well know, cod is an iconic species in Atlantic Canada. It represents the historic foundation on which our economy was initially built. The northern cod (2J3KL) stock complex off the northeast coast of Newfoundland and Labrador was once the largest cod fishery in the world; it is part of the fabric of rural society in this province.

Sadly, as we well know, it collapsed in the 1990s. That collapse is referenced internationally as a hallmark of modern fisheries mismanagement. Compounding that, recovery has been protracted due to its heavily depleted state, poor environmental conditions and excessive removals.

Recently, encouraging signs of recovery have emerged, including expanded age structure, improved ecosystem and environmental conditions, and overall improvement of stock productivity. Managed carefully, this stock has the potential for

a sustainable recovery, enabling significant harvest levels, possibly within a decade.

Given that we compete in international cod markets, it will be crucial that the future fishery be eligible for the most rigorous sustainability standards, including the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), like our competitors in the North Atlantic.

But we have work to do. The importance of maintaining low removals from the stock during this period of recovery has been well documented. That can only be done with a clear knowledge of catches, along with an effective method to regulate them.

At present, the 2J3KL cod stock is subject to three main sources of catch, including an inshore stewardship fishery and a sentinel fishery combined catch of about 4,500 tonnes annually.

There is also a recreational fishery operating with un-

known catches that are thought to be in the order of 3,000-5,000 tonnes annually.

Since 2006, an average of 40 per cent of scientific tag returns of 2J3KL cod originate from the recreational fishery (with the balance generally from the stewardship fishery). If the stewardship fishery has an estimated catch of 4,290 tonnes (believed to be an under-estimate in many circles), this indicates that the recreational fishery could be removing about 3,050 tonnes, meaning total removals for this stock exceed 7,500 tonnes when all sources are considered.

Specific to 2014, more tags were returned from the recreational fishery (54 per cent) than the stewardship fishery, suggesting that catch by the recreational fishery could easily exceed 5,036 tonnes, bringing total removals to over 9,000 tonnes.

It is unfortunate that there

are large but unknown quantities of cod being caught from a stock under moratorium, which exceeds the total allowable catch for many open fisheries in Atlantic Canada.

The fisheries world is watching closely, including important customers in cod markets that are essential for our future, as noted earlier. There is a high degree of skepticism that Canada has learned from its past mistakes, and doubts exist as to whether the recent recovery of northern cod will be sustainable.

Management measures for the 2J3KL cod recreation fishery are scheduled to be reviewed in time for the 2016 season. The time is now, therefore, for change.

We request that the new minister of Fisheries and Oceans seek to implement truly effective management measures to more accurately track the level of catch, to ensure that this harvest does not become a covert

commercial fishery, and to ensure that the catch level will not limit stock growth.

As an initial step, we envision using an area-based licence and tag system to control removals, similar to what was in place prior to 2006 (and similar to that implemented for other recreationally harvested species like moose and salmon). We look forward to its implementation.

By controlling and monitoring catch, we will significantly contribute towards the sustainability of the 2J3KL cod stock, and enhance the long-term prosperity of rural Newfoundland and Labrador.

Derek Butler,
executive director,
Association of Seafood
Producers

Bruce Chapman,
president,
Groundfish Enterprise
Allocation Council