

## **A fisheries MOU for Newfoundland and Labrador**

By E. Derek Butler

Ray Johnson's recent letter to the editor ("A fisheries MOU, but for whom?" July 31) is wrong in its premises, logic and conclusion. It is the old lament that harkens to revive an industry that can sustain hundreds of outport communities, when the reality is coldly different.

The entire premise of his piece is that the fishery belongs to more than the participants in the memorandum of understanding (MOU) process (the participants being harvesters, plant workers and producers, rather than those hundreds of communities). It also touts community-based solutions.

Sounds good, but let's insert a dose of the real world here.

When Community X says the plant must stay, but the resource goes, what then? And when Community Y sees resource coming over the wharf trucked away to a plant where workers already barely qualify for EI, with no local plant, what then?

Well, we are brought back to making difficult decisions in an industry overcapitalized in both harvesting and processing.

Overcapitalized? It means building a hotel for 300 guests a night, when the market can only supply 25 guests. It means a super-ferry to Bell Island, suitable for 500 cars, when a good ferry for 50 or 100 can do the job.

In the fishery, it means snow crab plants in Newfoundland and Labrador that can produce five times the world quota,

all operating for two or three months instead. It means 65-foot enterprises carry a fraction of the fish back when they could fill their holds - all because we have too many boats on the water, and so the resource is shared around; boats that fish on average 45 days year.

Ultimately, the fatal flaw in Johnson's piece enters into a slippery-slope kind of argument. He suggests that the MOU process be expanded, so that all the stakeholders - communities most notably - are included in the discussions and decisions.

Why? Why can the participants in this industry - harvesters, plant workers and processors, who derive their living from this industry, who every day risk their lives on the water, work long hours in our plants, make countless investments and take the curve balls of resource and market swings that fate supplies us - not engage in our discussion about what we deserve from this industry, and about what we owe this industry in return, to all its participants?

The sly suggestion is that the Association of Seafood Producers (ASP) and its members don't care about Newfoundland and Labrador, a place where we have made our homes, where we have invested in our communities, where we live and appreciate as much as anyone what the stakes are. No one has a monopoly on that.

And it's our nickel invested, just as it is with harvesters. We, the industry participants, deserve to make better livelihoods from this industry.

We have, for too long, shared the poverty in the fishery, and that's not good enough anymore. Are those with the greatest stakes in this industry condemned to carry everyone's expectations, or can we get on with making this

industry work for us, for our skills and risks and investments?

The problem has been studied and identified for 30 years. Status quo is no longer acceptable, we said.

As for the characterizations of myself, the ASP and how the association is run, I'll leave that for now, just as Mr. Johnson might if I was so bold as to suggest how he should play his music (which I greatly appreciate).

But I will tackle one insinuation, that ASP has undermined the legitimacy and overall intent of the MOU process, and the statement that keeping me and the association in the process undermines its legitimacy and intent.

With all due respect, Mr. Johnson, you're not the judge of that. ASP is the leading producers association in the province.

Our members produce probably two-thirds or more of the entire value of the industry. We have, for years, employed thousands of plant workers, bought millions of pounds of product, diversified from groundfish to handle an entirely new industry (shellfish, and what's more, made the private sector investment required to do that), and sold that in markets the world over.

What is more, we negotiated and signed this MOU. We are participating actively in all its sessions. Again, we care about both this business and this province. We are proud to work in this industry, proud to contribute to its renewal and better livelihoods and incomes in it, and ultimately a better and stronger Newfoundland and Labrador.

So, in short, if you've got ideas, put them on the table. You

don't need some new forum or a table to do that. But a word of caution from those of us in this business: we tried one approach for 30 years. The evidence is with me.

It's failed.

We have the lowest birth rate in the country, high outmigration from rural areas of the province, and our young have voted with their feet. The fishery has not saved rural Newfoundland and Labrador - we put it on life support and said that was good enough. We owe ourselves something more.

Employment maximization has been the driving motivator for fisheries policy for too long. For that we all pay the price, the fish included (as when as one harvester said recently, we use the last fish in the sea to pay the next bill).

And as someone else once said, "If you don't like change, you'll like irrelevance a whole lot less."

The MOU process is meaningful and worthwhile, and it is for Newfoundland and Labrador.

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