

It's always 1984 at DFO-sources

By **STEPHEN THORNE**
The Canadian Press

Federal fisheries officials routinely destroy memos, minutes and other records to hide politically unpalatable science and thwart access-to-information requests, say sources.

Officials at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans have even tried to discredit scientists whose findings don't jibe with political agendas, current and former employees of the department told The Canadian Press.

"The system controls very, very tightly ideas, attitudes and information flows," said one source, who did not want to be identified. "And that, if anything, is worse than it ever was. It's certainly no better."

The sources suggested some officials act like a kind of Orwellian "thought police," constantly

destroying internal orders, notations, even meeting minutes.

"It's astonishing," said a current employee. "We're an organization with next to no corporate memory."

Ottawa-based William Doubleday, head of biological sciences, said Wednesday he has no knowledge of such practices, adding the reams of documents staff go through to respond to access-to-information requests suggests the alleged practices don't exist.

"I think the concept of tight control is exaggerated," he said. "We have quite a free flow of ideas and we encourage our scientists to do original research and to publish it."

A recent journal article cites Atlantic cod and Pacific salmon as examples in which Ottawa manufactured consensus among staff, misused scientific studies and

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Source who has worked at DFO

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deliberately ignored independent warnings that conflicted with its agenda.

And a 1993 report by federal scientists in Newfoundland said research into the northern cod moratorium was "gruesomely mangled and corrupted to meet political ends."

It said department scientists were routinely gagged while "ill-informed" spokesmen publicly conveyed false information inflating stock estimates and later emphasizing the role of seals and cold water — not overfishing — in the cod collapse.

Most of the report's 184 recommendations, requested by the regional science director, were acted on, Doubleday has said. He said he knows of no case in which "factual information" was suppressed.

"Nobody falsified documents," an internal source agrees. "They optimized what they had. The politicians and the senior bureaucrats would run away, pick the very best numbers and come out and present them in the very best light.

"They would hide any negative notions — numbers, information, anything at all that took the gloss off what they presented. Any attempt by anyone on the inside to present a different view was absolutely squashed."

The minister at the time of the 1992 cod moratorium, John Crosbie, said he knows of no time in his last decade in federal politics that a minister ignored or interfered with science.

"However, the whole area is more subtle than that," he said in an interview.

"You can't discount the fact there are problems with science fitting into the government structure and that scientists may feel they have to adopt or adhere to some kind of official departmental, bureaucratic position."

Crosbie said there may have been a "collective mindset" that cod stocks were increasing more rapidly than they were and that some scientists may have felt career opportunities could be threatened if they held another view.

Attempts to quash dissenting

opinions didn't always work, say some critics. When they didn't, Fisheries sometimes exacted revenge.

The former co-chair of a U.S.-Canada working group assessing the performance of West Coast salmon hatcheries says his access to a department database was withdrawn after his controversial paper was published in a scientific journal.

Fisheries officials tried unsuccessfully to prevent publication of Ray Hilborn's 1993 paper in the *Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences*, Hilborn said. The article questioned the effectiveness of the Salmonid Enhancement Program, a \$500-million effort to boost Pacific stocks.

"They closed my account," said Hilborn, a Canadian citizen working at the University of Washington in Seattle. "It was just petty.

"They claimed they conducted a review of who needed the data and who didn't and it turned out that of 135 users or whatever, I was the only one who really didn't need the data."

Hilborn, whose book on stock assessment has been the discipline's bible for five years, said Fisheries even tried to prevent publication of his findings.

Scientist and former journal editor David Cook, now with the National Research Council, didn't identify Hilborn's article but in his last editorial earlier this year he alluded to "an unethical verbal attempt" to "subvert the anonymity of the peer-review process regarding a paper that displeased DFO."

Hilborn said no one should be surprised.

"You expect bureaucracies to want to manipulate data to their own ends," he said. "The last thing that DFO wants is (a scientist) going out and saying the official explanation for what happened isn't supported by the data."

The practice isn't unique to Fisheries, he added. Alaska pulled its scientific representatives off a chinook technical committee and replaced them with administrators because authorities didn't like their findings.

When U.S. native groups sued the state to stop its salmon fishery in 1995, their main witness was an Alaskan government scientist. They won.