

Cod fishery could harm stocks, scientist warns

'We don't know how many fish are out there.'

By Alison Auld
The Canadian Press

Some scientists are wondering if Ottawa has jumped the gun in reopening a limited inshore cod fishery in parts of Newfoundland and Quebec.

"From a scientific perspective, it's not really a defensible decision and it's not defensible because we can't assess the risk," said Jeffrey Hutchings, a biology professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax.

"We don't know how many fish are out there."

Some biologists have said the cod fishery, shut down in a regional moratorium in 1992, should remain suspended until scientific data proves that fragile stocks have recovered, or at least reveals their size.

But fishermen's groups, representing thousands of people left without work with the closure, have been pressuring Ottawa and Newfoundland to let them fish stocks they say have rebounded.

Many were thrilled when federal Fisheries Minister David Anderson announced Wednesday that a restricted fishery of 9,000 tonnes could resume off north-eastern Newfoundland and Quebec's lower north shore. The news came as many fishermen in both regions have cashed their last federal compensation cheques.

The fishery, which once yielded 170,000 tonnes for Canadian fishermen in the 1980s, will be closely monitored by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and restricted to bays.

As limited as it is, Hutchings said it could devastate cod stocks because DFO doesn't know how big the stock is and how many should be taken.

"The key question is what percentage of the cod stock does that 9,000 tonnes actually represent? Is it one per cent or 10 per cent?" Hutchings said. "It's only by knowing what that percentage is that one can evaluate the risks

of this quota."

Even some scientists from the Fisheries Resource Conservation Council, the group that recommended Anderson allow a limited fishery, said they are uncomfortable advocating a catch of 9,000 tonnes.

George Rose, a biology professor at Memorial University in St. John's, Nfld., and a council member, said the way the group calculated the recommended catch of between 6,000 to 9,000 tonnes was lacking in scientific merit.

The group, made up of industry and research representatives, looked at the amount of fish caught last year — 6,000 tonnes — and raised it to 9,000 tonnes based on increases in the sentinel catch rates on Newfoundland's north-eastern coast.

"As we stated in the report, it's not a defensible scientific process at all," Rose said from St. John's, referring to the FRCC's report that contained the recommendations.

"It was a tremendously difficult decision. It was a default decision because the information that you really needed to make such a decision was not there. None of us were happy with that."

A spokesman for Anderson said his talks with DFO scientists assured him the catch amount would not compromise the recovery of the stock.

"Mind you there are still some very important questions that remain to be answered because that whole stock seems to be changing," Andre-Marc Lan-teigne said from Ottawa. "But this is a trial for this year and we'll see how the stock reacts."

The DFO has said it will use the partial reopening to study the stock size by getting fishermen to tag cod and follow their growth and movement.

Anderson also allowed a recreational food fishery limited to two weekends this summer in Newfoundland and Quebec. That has prompted Newfoundland Tories to launch legal action against the government.

Tory Leader Ed Byrne says the restrictions mean Newfoundlanders have limited access to the fish when compared with others in Atlantic Canada.