



Record of Discussion

Atlantic Seal Advisory Committee

December 8, 2020 9:00 AM – 3:00 PM

Agenda Items and Corresponding Discussion Notes

	Welcome and Opening Remarks	David Whorley, Director, Resource Management, Operations
1.	<p>Highlights/Outcome:</p> <p>David Whorley, Director, Resource Management, Operations, Fisheries and Oceans Canada chaired the meeting.</p> <p>The Chair previewed the Agenda.</p> <p>The Record of Discussion from February 2020 was adopted.</p> <p>Members of ASAC suggested that regional seal advisory meetings be scheduled prior to ASAC to identify regional priorities and action items. Although supported, the Committee was reminded that regional -specific issues are not intended for discussion at the Atlantic-wide meeting, and that these issues are best addressed by regional Resource Management. Regional meetings should be held well in advance of ASAC in the event outcomes of these meetings suggest the need for uptake on the Atlantic-wide agenda. In all cases, committee members are encouraged to be mindful of deadlines to suggest agenda items, to allow sufficient time in the agenda and for staff to prepare any necessary supporting information.</p> <p>For Action: Regional committees will meet in advance of ASAC. DFO Resource Management to consider outcome from regional meetings as part of planning future ASAC agendas .</p> <p>Reference Documents: Agenda (December 2020) Record of Discussion (February 2020)</p>	
2.	Update: Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) Import Provisions	David Whorley, Director, Resource Management, Operations
<p>Highlights/Outcome:</p> <p>The chair updated the Committee on Canada’s implementation of the MMPA import provisions. The Chair informed the Committee of a recent decision from the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to provide a one-year extension until the 1st of January, 2023 until the MMPA comes into force. The Chair confirmed that the MMPA import provisions do not directly affect the directed seal harvest and that the primary focus of the MMPA is on bycatch of marine mammals in commercial fisheries.</p> <p>In keeping with the core objective of the MMPA to prohibit the intentional killing of marine</p>		



mammals during the course of commercial fishing operations, the Chair confirmed that DFO has ceased issuing nuisance seal licenses and that regulatory amendments to the *Marine Mammal Regulations* (MMR) are underway. The Chair clarified that actions to eliminate the nuisance seal licence were made to ensure continued access for Canadian fishery products to the U.S. fish and seafood market since their continued use would have been in direct contravention of the objectives of the MMPA.

Lastly, the Chair informed the Committee that new conditions of license (COL) for commercial seal licenses in 2021 will prohibit the simultaneous use of a commercial license during the course of any other commercial fishing trip. A similar COL was added to personal use seal licenses last winter.

For Action: The Chair will keep the Committee informed on the progress of the MMPA import provisions.

Reference Documents:

Presentation: U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) Import Provisions

3.

Science: Status of Atlantic Seal Populations

Mike Hammill, DFO
Science, Quebec Region

Courtney D'Aoust, DFO
Fisheries Resource
Management

Highlights/Outcome:

DFO Science presented updates on the current status of seal populations in Atlantic Canada. The harp seal population was most recently assessed in 2019 at 7.6 million animals. The model projects that the stock will increase for the next 20-25 years but will decline as ice cover declines. There have been no observations to suggest that harp seals will adapt to pupping on land under low ice conditions, with higher mortalities observed in the southern limits of the harp seal range due to poor ice conditions.

The grey seal population has expanded. The most recent population estimate, based on the aerial survey from 2016, is 424,300 animals. Unlike harp seals, a shift to pupping on land has been observed in the Gulf of St. Lawrence population which coincides with an increase in winters with poor ice conditions. DFO Science indicated new colonies of grey seals that have been discovered around Nova Scotia and the Magdalen Islands.

A dedicated photographic survey for grey seal pup production and total abundance is planned for December 2020 (Sable island and Southwest Nova Scotia) to January 2021 (Gulf of St. Lawrence and South coast of Newfoundland). Pup counts aim to be completed by the Fall, with a peer-reviewed stock assessment tentatively scheduled for the February 2022 meeting of the National Marine Mammal Peer Review Committee (NMMPRC).

DFO Science presented preliminary observations of harbour and grey seals in the Scotian Shelf



and Bay of Fundy as part of an ongoing harbour seal abundance survey. DFO Science has surveyed harbour seals in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and will proceed to survey Southern and Eastern Newfoundland as well as Southern Labrador in Year 3 (2021).

Members of ASAC expressed concern regarding the lack of quota for hooded seals beyond the Front, and no quota for harbour seals across the Atlantic region. Some representatives suggested a possible need for either a quota or bycatch limit for harbour and hooded seal, in the event of unintentional removal of these species during grey and harp seal harvests. Resource Management National Headquarters committed to explore this possibility.

Resource Management National Headquarters provided an update on existing requests for peer-reviewed science that relate to the seal fishery. A previous request to review the timing of grey seal pupping will be reprioritized due to time limitations associated with the virtual NMMPRC meeting. A peer review of alternative methods to bleed grey seals was not prioritized in 2020-21 despite several attempts to gather a critical mass of external veterinary experts. This study by Dr. Pierre Yves Daoust will be reprioritized for a later date.

For Action:

Committee members with known locations of grey and harbour seal populations in Newfoundland and Labrador are asked to inform DFO Science Newfoundland to assist in ongoing survey work.

DFO Resource Management to consider the potential for establishing a harbour seal quota and/or bycatch limit for this species in future grey and harp seal fisheries.

Resource Management Quebec to seek Science advice on grey seal harvest opening on an ad hoc basis.

Reference Documents:

Presentation: Atlantic Seals December 2020

Science (continued): Atlantic Seal Science Task Team

Glenn Blackwood, Co-Chair of the Atlantic Seal Science Task Team, Fisheries and Marine Institute of Memorial University of Newfoundland

4.

Highlights/Outcome:

The Co-Chair of the Atlantic Seal Science Task Team (ASSTT), Glenn Blackwood, provided an update on progress to date and outlined the team's objectives. It has proven difficult for the team to meet due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Three information sharing sessions were held between DFO Science and the ASSTT to discuss current science for harp and grey seal populations as well as knowledge of the impacts of seal predation on groundfish populations in Atlantic



Canada.

A meeting is tentatively scheduled for 2021 to begin drafting the final ASSTT report based on collection and interpretation of information provided by DFO science, industry and Indigenous groups. The report will recommend priorities for DFO seal science, suggest ways to increase the fishing industry’s involvement and interaction with this science work, and identify ways for DFO to better communicate scientific findings to stakeholders. Release of the final report, originally scheduled for March 2021, has been delayed due to COVID-19.

The Co-Chair clarified that the Task Team would not influence seal harvest levels, recognizing that seal stock status is not a limiting factor to the number of individuals harvested per year. ASAC members raised concerns regarding the minimal engagement the Task Team has had with Indigenous groups as well as with the sealing industry to contribute to knowledge sharing. The Committee expressed concern that the limited scope of the ASSTT objectives would not gather the information needed for the development of an ecosystem-based approach to management of the seal harvest.

It is expected that the ASSTT report will be of great interest to the Committee, and findings of the report may inform future discussions of ASAC.

For Action:

Committee members to communicate their perspectives, comments, and concerns on the ASSTT using the provided email (DFO.SealTaskTeam-Groupedetravailduphoque.MPO@dfompo.gc.ca).

Chair to distribute the ASSTT final report to the Committee when available.

Reference Documents: N/A

Market Access: Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA)

Soraya Cheung, Senior Policy Analyst, CFIA

Highlights/Outcome:

CFIA provided an update on recent advancements in market access opportunities for seal oil. A new certificate is now available for the export of Canadian seal oil (raw, refined and encapsulated) to Norway for human consumption (end use). Certificate requirements can be found on the CFIA website: [Norway export requirements for fish and seafood](#).

5.

Requirements for the export of seal oil are strict and must be verified by CFIA before a certificate can be issued. Industry and Indigenous groups pursuing market access to Norway should reach out to local CFIA offices as first point of contact when beginning a request for certification of seal products.

For Action: Nil



	Reference Documents: N/A	
6.	Market Access: Certification and Market Access Program for Seals (CMAPS)	Richard Norena, DFO Indigenous Affairs, Commercial Programs
	<p>Highlights/Outcome:</p> <p>CMAPS presented an overview of the program including the types of activities funded, eligible recipients and a summary of program operations. It was noted that during this coming year (2021) DFO will undertake a review of the CMAPS program, looking at its objectives and the results achieved so far. As part of this program review, CMAPS is open to receiving feedback on the program structure and objectives from ASAC members.</p>	
	For Action: Nil	
	<p>Reference Documents:</p> <p><i>Presentation: Certification and Market Access Program for Seals - ASAC Presentation (December 2020)</i></p>	
7.	Safety at Sea	Rob Freake, Marine Safety Inspector, Transport Canada
	<p>Highlights/Outcome:</p> <p>In keeping with the Memorandum of Understanding between DFO and Transport Canada to keep stakeholders informed of issues with respect to safety at sea, Transport Canada provided an update on revised temporary measures pertaining to marine personnel certificates, discharge books, marine medical certificates, and general marine counter services implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. Up-to-date information pertaining to safety at sea is available through Transport Canada's Ship Safety Bulletin webpage.</p>	
	For Action: Nil	
	<p>Reference Documents:</p> <p><i>Presentation: Transport Canada Fishing Safety Regulations (FVSR) (December 2020)</i></p> <p><i>Transport Canada Ship Safety Bulletin: Revised Temporary Measures Regarding Marine Personnel Certificates, Discharge Books, Marine Medical Certificates & Marine Counter Services (oral examinations can now be administered virtually)</i></p>	
8.	Management Measures: 2020 Season review and stakeholder perspectives; Operational Discussion	Courtney D'Aoust, DFO, Fisheries Resource Management David Whorley, Director, Resource Management, Operations
	<p>Highlights/Outcome:</p> <p>Resource Management National Headquarters provided an update on the impact of COVID-19</p>	



on the 2020 harvest. Where the commercial harvest in Newfoundland and Labrador region did not open in 2020, due to safety concerns in light of the pandemic, commercial license holders in this region were permitted to apply for personal use licenses. It was emphasized that the lack of harvest has severely diminished product supply and that the impact of an interrupted supply chain will be observed into, at least, 2021. Under restricted product availability, Canadian customers will be prioritized over international purchasers. COVID-19 did not impact harvests in Quebec, Maritimes, or the Gulf.

The Committee called for a significant policy shift in the management of Atlantic seal stocks, from a precautionary approach to an ecosystem-based approach, consistent with broader DFO direction, in order to ensure sustainability of commercial fisheries in Atlantic Canada. Such a shift would consider the size of Atlantic seal herds and the magnitude of their predation impact on other commercial fisheries in the region.

Members of the Committee suggested scientific resources be reallocated towards studies on predator-prey dynamics within marine ecosystems, with a focus on the interactions between seals and other key commercially harvested species, specifically groundfish stocks in the Gulf region. A shift to an ecosystem-based management approach would see seal harvest objectives aligned with science available for other species, where TAC levels would consider conservation objectives for all species in the shared marine ecosystem.

Members of the Committee requested that a working group of ASAC be struck to explore alternative policy and management strategies for Atlantic seals centred on adaptive and ecosystem-based management. These alternative approaches would have the objective to reduce Atlantic seal populations in order to ensure the sustainability of the overall marine ecosystem. This working group could draw insight from ecosystem-based management approaches currently being applied in other commercial fisheries managed by DFO and work to develop a practical approach to implement an ecosystem-based management approach to seal fishery removals.

For Action:

DFO Resource Management to strike a working group of ASAC to explore policy and management strategies for Atlantic seals centred on ecosystem-based management. The Chair will prepare a call for interest among ASAC members.

Reference Documents: Nil

Management Measures: 2021 Total Allowable Catch (TAC): harp, grey and hooded seals

David Whorley, Director,
Resource Management,
Operations

9. Highlights/Outcome:

The Committee reviewed preliminary landings data from 2020. It was clear that harvest levels continue to be well within sustainable removals identified by DFO Science and that TAC levels that respect the current management objective have not limited the harvest.



The Committee supported maintaining the current approach to not announce TAC for harp, grey or hooded seals for the 2021 season. Recognizing the number of animals harvested in recent years represent a small fraction of previous TAC levels, the Committee supported monitoring harvest activity as a rollover of last announced TAC levels from 2016. Accordingly, the Department would monitor landings relative to previous TAC levels of 400,000 harp seals, 60,000 grey seals, and 8,200 hooded seals. Some members supported announcing the TAC in the future, with the accompanying narrative that harvest levels are consistently well within sustainable limits.

The Committee remained critical of the most recent grey seal science advice recommending to lower the TAC from 60,000 set in 2016 to the level consistent with scientific advice provided in 2016 of 34,500 animals (specifically 30,000 animal harvest in the Scotian Shelf and 4,500 in the Gulf of St. Lawrence). Some members of ASAC opposed the splitting of TAC between the two areas and stressed that any limit on removals should be Atlantic-wide. It was recognized that any increase in the TAC, with the goal of reducing Atlantic seal populations, would not likely be achieved under current harvest levels.

Committee members were reminded that DFO science continues to provide advice on maximum sustainable removals for a 5-year period that satisfy the current management strategy. Updated Science advice on grey seal removals following the January 2021 survey is expected in spring 2022, subject to prioritization.

For Action:

DFO Officials to ensure the Minister receives the Committee's views regarding TAC for the 2021 season and other related items noted above via receipt of the Record of Discussion

Reference Documents: Nil

Closing Remarks

David Whorley, DFO
Resource Management,
Operations

Highlights/Outcome:

The Chair encouraged industry to stay engaged with regional Resource Management offices on policy and program matters throughout the year to allow time for analysis and any necessary consultation for implementation of management measures in the 2021 and future fisheries.

10.

The Chair committed to circulating a draft Record of Discussion from the meeting for comment. A draft Record will be shared as part of a memorandum to the Minister regarding 2021 management measures for Atlantic seals.

For Action: DFO Resource Management to prepare a Record of Discussion for circulation.

Reference Documents: Draft ASAC Record of Discussion December 2020