



WHAT WE HEARD REPORT

A summary of comments from the Ministerial Roundtable on North Atlantic Right Whales

Introduction

The Honourable Dominic LeBlanc, Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, hosted a Roundtable on North Atlantic Right Whales in Moncton, New Brunswick on November 9, 2017. It was an opportunity for the Minister to listen to a wide variety of stakeholders and to find solutions to protect the North Atlantic Right Whale, a critically endangered species.

The Minister's roundtable was attended by representatives of: fishers and fishing organizations; marine transportation industries; cruise lines; ferry associations; Indigenous peoples; whale experts and scientists; and the provinces of New Brunswick, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador; and the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. All came together to have an open dialogue on how to protect the North Atlantic Right Whale (NARW).

The collective expertise, feedback and ideas gathered will help the Government of Canada develop and implement measures that aim to reduce the impact of human activity on right whales in 2018 and beyond. This roundtable is one part of a comprehensive approach to ensure these marine mammals are protected for future generations.

The following objectives were set for the Ministerial Roundtable:

- Find solutions by working together to reduce the interactions between the North Atlantic Right Whale and humans.
- Promote further dialogue to improve our shared understanding of the complex issues and shared responsibilities among stakeholders with respect to protecting and conserving the right whales.
- Identify the relationships, partnerships and governance elements required to protect and conserve the right whales by taking into account the respective roles and responsibilities, and cooperative research opportunities.

Background

During summer 2017, an unprecedented 12 NARW died in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

[Full necropsies were carried out on seven of the whales, while sampling was done on several others.](#) The Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative [produced a joint report](#) with the Marine Animal Response Society (MARS) and Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) which confirmed that vessel collisions and fishing gear entanglement were the primary factors involved in the NARW mortalities observed in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in summer 2017.

Throughout summer 2017, the Government of Canada worked with experts, industry, environmental groups, and the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to understand and mitigate the unprecedented NARW deaths. DFO implemented urgent measures to help protect the NARW in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, shutting down the snow crab fishery in the area to minimize NARW entanglements in fishing gear and implementing a slowdown on certain vessels to avoid collisions with NARW.

In November 2016, the Government of Canada introduced the Oceans Protection Plan (OPP), a historic, \$1.5-billion investment in marine safety and ocean health. As a part of the OPP, DFO reviewed the effectiveness of current management and recovery actions for three at-risk whale populations, including the NARW. DFO scientists assessed the overall effectiveness of recovery actions undertaken to date and identified areas for immediate improvement in recovery efforts and priorities for new or enhanced efforts.

A summary of this review was the basis of engagement with Canadians, Indigenous communities, government agencies, environmental groups, industry representatives and other key partners and stakeholders during summer 2017. Through face-to-face meetings and online *Let's Talk Whales* consultations, people were invited to share their views on how to best protect the three targeted whale populations, including NARW. Almost

20,000 people participated, contributing over 200 ideas in response to the question “How can we, as Canadians, take action now to reduce impacts on at-risk whales and help their recovery?”

The annual meeting of the North Atlantic Right Whale Consortium—which consists of governmental and non-governmental organizations and those who study and work to conserve whales in Canada and the USA—was held in Halifax, Nova Scotia on October 22, 2017. The goal of this year’s annual meeting was to:

- (1) clearly communicate the science behind the status of the population and concern regarding population decline and the impact of entanglement, vessel strikes and the recent mortality crisis; and
- (2) form an international working group to reduce mortality from vessel strikes and fishing gear entanglements.

The consortium released its annual report card on NARW at the meeting, which included a review of the unprecedented mortalities in 2017.

What We Heard Summary

Minister LeBlanc began the rountable noting the devastating summer it was for NARW and thanking participants for their attendance as the Government of Canada works to protect this iconic species. The Minister also expressed his gratitude to the Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative and the teams of scientists, veterinarians and others who worked tirelessly to carry out necropsies. He further thanked those who had worked hard to respond to whales in distress, especially Mr. Joe Howlett of Campobello Whale Rescue who tragically died while disentangling a NARW on July 10, 2017.

Minister LeBlanc also thanked the Honourable Marc Garneau, Minister of Transport, for implementing a mandatory speed limit of 10 knots for vessels over 20 metres in the western Gulf of St. Lawrence, and thanked ship captains for respecting the new rule in the interest of avoiding collisions with NARW.

An overview of the overall state of the NARW was presented by DFO Biologist Matthew Hardy to provide context on the challenges facing this species. In the past, when the right whales arrived in Canadian waters, most remained in the Bay of Fundy. However, in summer 2017, over 100 NARW were spotted in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, an area of significant human activity. Whale scientists and conservationists in both Canada and the United States are working to understand NARW distribution changes. While these whales are expected to embark on a long, slow migration back to warmer waters off Florida, Georgia and South Carolina, in a few short months, these whales will once again turn north in pursuit of their summer feeding grounds off the eastern United States and Canada.

Mr. Hardy indicated that the main threats faced by NARW are entanglement in fishing gear and vessel strikes. He summarized the Government of Canada’s response to the NARW presence and deaths, which included extensive surveillance efforts and changes to fisheries and marine transportation measures.

A robust discussion ensued. Participants stated that there is a need to act now, even as scientific understanding evolves, and to use adaptive management to adjust as more is learned. Participants also indicated that the Government of Canada must show leadership, act quickly, streamline processes and think outside the box.

Participants raised the need to advise the fishing and tourism industry as soon as possible so they can adjust and prepare accordingly. As any decision will have an impact on stakeholders, both short-term and long-term strategies should be developed, shared widely, and revised as needed. For example, participants shared that changes to regulations and gear modifications would come with possible market impacts and additional costs for fishers and these impacts should be researched and mitigated as much as possible by Government. It was also shared that while the financial impact on the tourism industry this summer was significant, finding a way to safely co-exist with the NARW could lead to the tourism industry benefitting from whale watching increased tourism like in the Bay of Fundy.

During the meeting, the following measures were proposed and discussed to minimize risks to right whales:

Modify existing fishing gear

- Consider a minimum amount of floating rope, changing the colour of rope, biodegradable or whale-friendly rope, ropeless gear, using weak-links, reducing the number of traps, allowing buoys.
- Impose strict guidelines and enforcement of gear identification (i.e. clear identification and control of gear going into and out of the water to identify type of gear used and reduce amount of lost gear in water).
- Test new gear technology quickly through research/pilot projects (eg. ropeless gear, salvage tags, acoustic monitoring devices etc.)

Adjust fishing seasons

- Consider special planning, zoning, standardized fishing fleets and vessels.
- Early opening of the snow crab fishing season could reduce gear interactions (However, DFO would have to break ice in harbours to allow for an earlier fishing season.)

Recover lost and abandoned fishing gear

- Clean up lost and abandoned gear on the sea floor. (There are an estimated 700-1,000 traps.) A project was already submitted for Zone 12 through the Atlantic Fisheries Fund.
- Impose mandatory reporting of lost traps with fines in cases of failure to report.

Improve whale sightings information

- Real-time reporting on whale sightings and positioning available across all sectors through a common, user-friendly program (eg. interactive map/early warning whale alert system).
- Gather and coordinate whale sightings to better inform fishing and shipping industries in real-time.
- Establish a phone line to report sightings.
- Monitor North Atlantic Right Whale positions and take temporary measures, when warranted, to limit whale-vessel interactions.
- Work with partners to patrol the coast to monitor and assess any reports of dead or distressed whale sightings.

Seasonal speed restrictions in target areas and adjustments to shipping lanes

- Consider separate vessel traffic lanes away from whale habitat, as research has shown that this is more effective than slow downs.
- Continue imposing speed limits when required and increase fines for non-compliance. There is a willingness to slow ship speed, as results are proven in the U.S. and we have the means to implement in Canada.
- Reconsider static zones which may not be ideal given that whales move.
- Have a dynamic system to align the slowdown measures with the presence of the whales.
- Regulate boat engine capacity as a means to reduce speed.

Collaboration, coordination and awareness across industry sectors, governments and non-governmental organizations

- Continue with the Government of Canada taking a leadership role in consultations and communications with key stakeholders and partners.
- Improve ongoing education with a focus on awareness for fishers (eg. right whale identification and appropriate response when located).
- Establish small working group to advise the Minister on measures to protect the NARW.
- Consider a centre of expertise on marine mammal entanglements that would encompass research, testing and monitoring.
- Provide additional funding to support marine mammal response networks for all species.

The Minister said that all of these initiatives will be considered as part of the suite of options, during the 2018 and future fishing seasons. The Minister also highlighted that opportunities will be sought to test the application of new gear technologies, to help reduce the amount of rope in the water and therefore lower the risk of entanglements, including through DFO-led studies and industry-driven practical pilots.

Minister LeBlanc closed the meeting by noting that the Ministerial roundtable was part of a sustained dialogue and a shared sense of urgency to take concrete action to protect the North Atlantic Right Whale. The Minister said he heard the need to provide Canadians with access to relevant real time, reliable and transparent data. The Minister also noted that concerns raised at the roundtable would be shared with the Minister of Transport.

Minister LeBlanc indicated that the day's discussion was profoundly helpful in creating a better understanding the options available to better protect the remaining right whales in our waters. Resources and investments such as the Government of Canada's Oceans Protection Plan and the Atlantic Fisheries Fund will continue to support solutions. More work on dynamic and adaptive measures continue moving forward.

Next Steps

DFO is committed to working developing a long-term plan to mitigate threats to these endangered whales. It is clear that having experts, fishing and marine transportation industry representatives, scientists and Indigenous communities participate in these meetings brings a more diverse and complete understanding of the situation.

Moving forward, the Government of Canada will continue to work with partners on proposals that were discussed throughout the day, including:

- Actively exploring opportunities to adjust existing fishing gear immediately to reduce the risk of entanglements;
- Testing new gear technologies that would reduce the amount of rope in the water and lower the risk of whale entanglements;
- Adjusting fishing seasons to avoid periods when right whales congregate; Implementing measures to reduce lost fishing gear that poses a risk to whales and other species;
- Enhancing whale sighting and detection information, and timely sharing of this information among all those concerned;
- Considering seasonal speed restrictions in target areas and adjustments to shipping lanes based on accurate and timely whale sightings information; and
- Improving the collaboration and coordination across industry sectors, governments and non-governmental organizations to leverage the expertise on the protection and recovery of the North Atlantic Right Whale.

The Government of Canada now has a more diverse and complete understanding of the situation. It was clear all participants understood the urgency and the need to take concrete actions to protect the North Atlantic Right Whale.

Appendix: Participants and Observers

The Ministerial Roundtable brought together 32 participants from all levels of government, academia, non-governmental organizations, industry, and Indigenous communities.

Roundtable participants

Allen, Carl, President, Maritime Fisherman's Union – Union des pêcheurs des maritimes
Arnold, Shannon, Ecology Action Centre
Asaro, Mike, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration – Federal
Bernard, Chief Patricia, Wolastoqey Nation in New Brunswick (Maliseet Nation in New Brunswick)
Bourque, Denis, Chef D'escale, Escale Îles de la madeleine
Brown, Moira, PhD., Canadian Whale Institute/ Campobello Whale Rescue Team
Burrows, Bruce R., Chamber of Marine Commerce
Buy, Serge A., Canadian Ferry Association
Cameron, Doug, PEI Snowcrab Fishermen Inc.
Campbell, Tommy, Area 19 Snow Crab Association
Clemence, Corryn, Charlottetown Harbour Authority Inc
Côté, Daniel, Mayor, Ville de Gaspé, QC
Daoust, Pierre-Yves, University of PEI
Doucet, Serge, Regional Director General, Gulf Region, Fisheries and Oceans Canada
Duguay, Gilles, Alliance des pêcheurs du Québec
Gionet, Joel, Association de crabiers acadiens (ACA)
Hardy, Matthew, Director, Aquatic Resources, DFO
Jenkins, Bobby, President, Prince Edward Island Fisherman's Association
Kelly, Brianne, World Wildlife Fund - Canada
LeBlanc, Leonard, Managing Director, Gulf Nova Scotia Fleet Planning Board
McCloskey, Shane, Minister's Office, Transport Canada
Office of the Minister of Transport
Noel, Martin, Association des pêcheurs professionnels crabiers acadiens (APPCA)
Norsworthy, Peter, MSC Snow Crab client group
Paul, Chief Terry, Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq Chiefs (Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn)
Pelletier, Mario, Deputy Commissioner – Operations, Canadian Coast Guard
Sainte-Croix, Stéphane, Escale Gaspésie
Simard, Sonia, Director, Director Legislative and Environmental Affairs, Shipping Federation of Canada
Sonnenberg, Melanie, Canadian Independent Fish Harvesters Federation
Trépanier, René, Croisières Saint-Laurent
Ward, Devon (for Chief Ginnish), Mi'gmawe'l Tplu'taqnn Incorporated (MTI)
Werner, Tim, Consortium for Wildlife Bycatch Reduction
Wimmer, Tonya, Marine Animal Response Society
Winger, Paul, PhD, Director, Memorial University

Observers

Amirault, Jerry, Lobster Processors Assoc. NB & NS
Anderson, Kevin, Regional Director General, Newfoundland and Labrador Region, DFO
Aylward, Joey, PEI Snowcrab Fishermen Inc.
Balaban, Mihai, Compliance & Enforcement, Transport Canada
Beaton, Gordon, Maritime Fisherman's Union – Union des pêcheurs des maritimes
Bliss, Doug, Regional Director, Science, Gulf Region, DFO
Boyd, Mark, Area 18 Crab Fishermen's Association
Brewer-Dalton, Kathy, NB Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture & Fisheries
Brilliant, Sean, PhD., Canadian Wildlife Federation - Dalhousie University
Burns, Adam, Acting Director General, Fisheries Resource Management, DFO
Chatman, Tracy, Transport Canada
Chiasson, Steven, Area 19 Snow Crab Association
Comeau, Reginald, Maritime Fisherman's Union – Union des pêcheurs des maritimes
Conway, Jerry, Campobello Whale Rescue team
Couillard, Jean-Pierre, Association des Capitaines-proprétaires de la Gaspésie
Gallant, Brenda, Tourism PEI
Gillis, Sheldon, Office of the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard
Haché, Robert, Association des Crabiers Acadien
Hurley-Corbin, Mary-Anne, Director of Communicatio, Member of Parliament for NB Southwest
Lang, Denise, Atlantic Fisheries Fund, DFO
Lavigne, Kevin, Office of the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard
Levi, Olivia, Assembly of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq Chiefs (Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn)
Ludwig, Karen, Member of Parliament for New Brunswick Southwest
MacEwen, David, PEI Department of Agriculture, Fisheries & Aquaculture
MacInnis, Andrea, Gulf NS Fleet Planning Board
MacPherson, Ian, Manager, PEI Fishermen's Association
Mallet, Martin, Maritime Fishermen's Union
McIntyre, Alexis, Office of the Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard
Mouffler, Kevin, CEO, Tourism Industry Association PEI
Mowatt, Anne, Regional Director General, Transport Canada
Murison, Laurie, Grand-Manan Whale Institute
Quinn, Frank, Regional Director, Fisheries and Aquaculture Management, Gulf Region, DFO
Scott, Paul, Special Advisor, East Coast Vessel Strategies, Transport Canada
Stevenson, Aaron, Saint Mary's University
Valkenier, Mary-Ellen, Regional Director General, Maritimes Region, DFO
Vincent, Patrick, Regional Director General, Quebec Region, DFO
Whitman (Bill), William, NS Department of Fisheries & Aquaculture