

DFO touchy about criticism 8/6/97 (By STEPHEN THORNE, The Canadian Press)

HALIFAX The federal Fisheries Department ranks public criticism by staff with fraud, assault and mutiny on the high seas, saying in documents that such actions rate discharge.

A departmental discipline guide issued by the staff relations, pay and benefits division of the department's personnel directorate classifies infractions in four groups and includes public criticism among the most serious breaches.

The lists are not exhaustive, it warns. They in no way limit the department's right to discipline.

Staff scientists and managers have met regionally to air concerns about departmental workings since publication of an article criticizing Ottawa in the Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences.

The article by three independent researchers cites Atlantic cod and West Coast salmon as examples in which the Fisheries Department manufactured consensus among staff, misused scientific studies and deliberately ignored the warnings of independent scientists when their research conflicted with its agenda.

The 12-page paper also said the department should be replaced by independent researchers who can't be silenced by policy-makers.

Bob O Boyle, head of the Atlantic region's scientific assessment process, and Trevor Platt, a senior researcher who chaired two of the staff meetings, denied the department limits the right to speak or to publish in scientific journals, though the two acknowledged some perceived they were restricted.

And no wonder:

The scientists' own collective agreement limits their right to publish, saying the employer may suggest revisions to a publication and may withhold approval to publish. Officials say this applies to policy issues, not data.

A June 18 memo to groundfish staff from department official Bernadette Fifield states that divisional manager George Lilly asked me to inform staff that you are not to comment on the two articles appearing in the (journal) regarding DFO science.

Fifield, based in Newfoundland, was apparently supposed to have issued the order verbally. As a result, a gag order was issued on her gag order.

The disciplinary measures instituted June 21, 1982, include oral reprimands for infractions like horseplay or tardiness; written reprimands or one- to two-day suspensions for absenteeism or sleeping on the job, and five- to 10-day suspensions for damaging property or falsifying records.

Group 4 infractions are the most serious and can rate firing, according to the document. Among them are fraud, assault, drunkenness and impeding the progress of a voyage. They also include public criticism of the employer.

O Boyle said Tuesday he was unaware of the guidelines and has never seen them implemented. He suggested in an earlier interview that federal scientists should put up or shut up and limit their role in public policy to their science.

Researcher Mark Hanson of Moncton agreed.

As scientists, we can give scientific advice, Hanson said Tuesday. The minister is not required to follow it.

On the other hand, the minister, at the end, is the one responsible.