

Overfishing, not seals, killed cod buried Fisheries report reveals

Former fisheries minister Brian Tobin helped cover up study

BY STEPHEN THORNE
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HALIFAX — The federal Fisheries Department tried to kill a scientific report suggesting seals were not the villains in the collapse of northern cod stocks, the authors say.

Groups seeking copies of the 24-page report by federal and other scientists were told by then-minister Brian Tobin the paper didn't exist — even as his own officials issued memos trashing its methodology and calling it an embarrassment.

"No written document was made available at the time," Mr. Tobin wrote Liberal MP Brenda Chamberlain in a letter dated Oct. 20, 1995.

In fact, his department had prohibited the scientists from distributing the report at a September, 1995, symposium in Dartmouth, N.S., the authors say.

"At first the report was not allowed to be presented verbally or written," said co-author Ransom Myers, a widely published researcher now occupying the Killam Chair of Ocean Studies at Dalhousie University.

"Then they reneged and said: 'Okay, you can present it verbally but you can't present any written document at the meeting.'"

The primary author, Alan Sinclair, still working with the federal department in New Brunswick, concurred with Mr. Myers and suggested he was discouraged from continuing his line of research.

"I must say I was fairly intimidated by the reception that the article received at the time from within the department," Mr. Sinclair said.

The report remained unfinished

while Mr. Tobin approved a 1996 increase in seal quotas based in part on the premise the animals threatened the recovery of fish stocks.

A 1993 survey of federal scientists in Newfoundland said research into the northern cod moratorium that cost between 35,000 and 41,000 jobs was "gruesomely mangled and corrupted to meet political ends."

The survey said department scientists were gagged while "ill-informed" spokesmen publicly conveyed false information, inflating stock estimates to defend high quotas and later emphasizing the role of seals and cold water — not overfishing — in the cod collapse. Sources have said the practices continue.

The federal director general of science, William Doubleday, said this week "the concept of tight control is exaggerated."

"We have quite a free flow of ideas and we encourage our scientists to do original research and to publish it."

Save Our Cod — Eat a Seal, say buttons distributed by the Canadian Sealers Association. But Mr. Sinclair's paper questions their role in the cod's downfall.

Entitled Seal Predation: Is There Evidence of Increased Mortality on Cod? the report said "there is no evidence that increased seal predation of juvenile cod led to the recent decline and subsequent closures of several cod fisheries."

It said there appeared to be a decline in adult cod simultaneous with juvenile cod, but noted adults don't make up a significant part of seals' diets.

"The most likely cause of increased adult mortality is fishing," said the re-

port. "That the research vessel surveys can distinguish fishing effects on mortality but not seal effects suggests that fishing has been a more important factor in determining total mortality of cod than seal predation."

The authors included a caveat cautioning that with the surveys they used, it would take a relatively large impact by seals for the data to detect it. They suggested the issue required more research.

They never got the chance.

In a memo issued five days after the symposium, Mr. Doubleday told regional scientists the paper was "skeptically received and ... the power of their test was low."

In a response written Sept. 21, 1995, and obtained by The Canadian Press through third-party sources, co-author Jeffrey Hutchings of Dalhousie University challenged some of Mr. Doubleday's assertions.

Mr. Hutchings also said Ottawa had tried to prevent presentation of the findings days before the symposium.

As a result, he wrote, "the strengths and weaknesses of our work will not receive the same scrutiny accorded all of the other papers presented at the symposium."

"These actions are an insult both to the [department] and to other scientists as they question both the integrity of our research and the ability of international and national scientists to evaluate it," he said.

"The idea that [federal] research ... cannot be presented in a professional or academic forum simply because it seems at odds with bureaucratic policy will be condemned and ridiculed by the scientific community."