Visit us at
SENA Booth 1133
A World of Seafood Awaits.
Cooke

Looking to increase your equipment sales?
Reach key farmers, globally today
Find out more
ucn undercurrentnews

Feedback

Canada’s fish minister riles eel industry with talk of shutdown to handle poaching crisis

With a potential CAD 45m season in jeopardy, the Canadian elver industry says the Department of Fisheries and Oceans has rejected its offer to pay for solutions to stop poaching

By Barb Dean-Simmons | Feb. 15, 2024 17:08 GMT

Elvers or juvenile eels are in high demand in China. Photo from Canadian Committee for a Sustainable Elver Fishery

Commercial elver fishers in Atlantic Canada say they proposed a solid idea to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) for combatting the industry's ongoing poaching crisis and protecting their multi-million-dollar legal fishery, but DFO rejected the plan.

Instead Diane Lebouthillier, Canada's fisheries minister, is talking about the prospect of shelving the season.

Because of the harassment, threats and violence "between fishers and toward fishery officers" during the 2023 season, as well as the complaints of trespassing, property damage, weapons offenses and organized crime activity, "it is my view that it is not possible to have a safe and sustainable elver fishery in 2024, and therefore the fishery should not be opened," Lebouthillier said in a letter delivered to harvesters on Tuesday (Feb. 13).

Related

Despite widespread poaching in Canada, no evidence found of illegal baby eel exports

Poachers continue to fish eels in Nova Scotia despite shutdown

US eel grower, processor gets $1.5m to support further growth

Canada to crack down on elver fishery following reports of organized crime, guns, violence

Eastern Cove
Pasteurized Crab Meat
From Huachang

Member of Parliament Diane Lebouthillier when she was named minister of fisheries, oceans and the coast guard by prime minister Justin Trudeau. Image tweeted by Lebouthillier's office.

The new regulations and a traceability system were needed to reduce illegal elver fishing but "despite the department's best efforts, these changes will not be in place to support a 2024 fishery," she said.

The letter is sparking outrage in the elver industry, Stanley King, a commercial eel fisher and spokesperson for the Canadian Committee for Sustainable Eel Fishing, told *Undercurrent News* Wednesday (Feb. 14).

DFO has had plenty of time to work on solutions for the fishery, noting the poaching problem began long before last season, he contends. The industry has been "begging and pleading" for a traceability system for the past 10 years, he said.

Commercial license holders even offered to foot the bill themselves to adopt a digital traceability system that would give the department and border agents a means to verify shipments of live baby eels.

Small quota but astronomical value

While the elver fishery quota is minimal compared to other commercial fisheries, with just 9,860 kilograms allotted for commercial fishing in Nova Scotia (NS) and New Brunswick (NB), this tiny silver fish is the most valuable by weight.

There's a high demand for elvers in Asia, mainly China, where they are grown out in aquaculture facilities to feed the sushi market. That's pushed the price per kilo into the stratosphere.

During the 2023 season, one kilogram of baby eels fetched fishers record prices of CAD 5,000 ($3,694), the equivalent of CAD 2,272 per pound. They've generated CAD 19m and CAD 49m annually for the economies of NS and NB over the past few years.

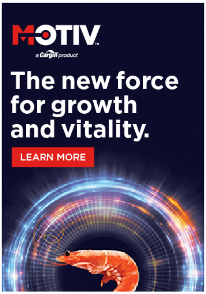
Those high prices for a fishery that's as simple as setting up a small fyke net in a river have driven a crime spree, however, with poachers flocking to Atlantic Canadian rivers to cash in on fast money.

Last year, a Canadian parliamentary committee exploring the issue of illegal, underreported and unreported (IUU) fishing heard tales of briefcases full of money, violence, death threats and even organized crime in Canada's elver fishery on a handful of rivers in NS and NB as reported by *Undercurrent.*

Legal license holders have been asking for more enforcement, higher penalties for illegal fishing, and more oversight by DFO and the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) to track eel shipments.

u read also

thaifex anuga ASIA
BEYOND FOOD EXPERIENCE
ASIA PACIFIC'S LEADING FOOD & BEVERAGE TRADE SHOW
28 MAY - 1 JUNE 2024
IMPACT
MUANG THONG THANI BANGKOK, THAILAND
www.thaifex-anuga.com



MOTIV
a Cargill product
The new force for growth and vitality.
LEARN MORE

18th INFOFISH WORLD TUNA TRADE CONFERENCE & EXHIBITION

Canadian province asks for federal help to stop illegal elver fishing

DFO announced on Dec. 8, 2023, that it would aim to have new rules in place by this March, saying the department was considering things like a new system to trace elver exports. However, as the weeks went by, King said it became apparent to commercial fishers that DFO was not moving on a traceability system.

So, the fishers decided to seek a solution themselves, finding companies able to provide traceability software.

"We went out and found the vendors, the companies that could actually make the software, and they said they could do it for this (2024) season," said King.

One of the companies they contacted was BlueFin Data, which provides the traceability system for the elver fishery in the US state of Maine.

That state had a similar problem with elver poaching, King noted, but it "closed the door on illegal elver fishing by imposing high fines and tracking what was going through the export chain."

read also

America's lone eel farmer seeks to displace shady imports

However, when the harvesters suggested the Bluefin system to DFO last fall, officials said there would be a problem with using the US vendor because the company doesn't store its data in Canada, King recounted.

The harvesters also approached Veritech, a Canadian company that's developed an electronic logbook (e-log) system that's already being used by some commercial fish harvesters in Canada in preparation for 2024, when DFO is expected to make that system mandatory to replace paper logbooks, as recently reported by *Undercurrent*.

read also

Testing of Canada's Fisheries app in progress as DFO eyes e-logs

King said Veritech told his group it could adapt its software and have a traceability system for the eel fishery before the season starts in March.

"They said time was running out, but 'we could still do it if you guys jump on this now,'" King said.

He said either of those systems would cost about CAD 50,000 to implement, and the commercial fishers were willing to pay the entire cost. But DFO did not bite.

With the government unwilling to consider those options, King said the elver industry could not go further.

"So the government would rather shutter a $45 million industry than spend $50,000 for traceability," he said, summing up the situation.

Shutdown would make illegal fishing easier to spot

News of the potential shutdown of the 2024 elver fishery led to some testy exchanges in a parliamentary committee hearing on Wednesday.

Word of Lebouthillier's letter to harvesters came just hours before the emergency meeting of the fisheries and oceans panel to hear from department officials on plans to prevent violence on the rivers this season.

The committee exploring IUU fishing in Canada adopted a motion the previous day to call the minister, or her deputy and other high-ranking officials, to testify specifically about the elver fishery.

Advancing Blue Transformation, Sustainable Development and Innovation through the Global Tuna Industry

20-22 MAY 2024

Shangri-La Hotel,
Bangkok, Thailand

Jointly organized by:
INFOFISH
TTIA
www.tuna.infofish.org

Norwegian fresh salmon sales drop across most main markets

Trade insights: India's shrimp exports flatline in 2023

Chinese company to invest $10m in Vietnam shrimp feed production

Nordic Aqua set for maiden commercial salmon harvest at Chinese RAS facility

read also

Despite widespread poaching in Canada, no evidence found of illegal baby eel exports

With the commercial fishery just weeks away -- the season usually runs from April to June -- the committee wanted to find out whether DFO had made any progress on its Dec. 8 commitment to adopt new regulations for 2024.

Lebouthillier did not show up, but deputy minister Annette Gibbons did, flanked by assistant deputy minister Adam Burns, regional director general for the Maritimes Doug Wentzell, and acting director general for conservation and protection Brent Napier.

Rick Perkins, a Conservative member of Parliament from Nova Scotia, who introduced the motion for the emergency meeting, asked Gibbons to explain how shutting down the legal fishery would curb poaching.

read also

Canadian eel harvesters challenge federal re-distribution of quota

Gibbons responded that it's difficult for enforcement officers to determine who is abiding by the rules and who is breaking them on the 200 rivers in NS and NB

"At present, where there is an authorized harvest, there is a mixing of the authorized harvest and the unauthorized harvesting.. which makes it very difficult to know what is the authorized portion and what is not," Gibbons said. "That makes it very easy for those acting illegally to carry on their activity."

"That's just bunk," Perkins shot back. "Every licensed harvester is assigned to a specific river, with a specific DFO license number on their net. Everybody else is a poacher. It's easy to identify poachers."

A history of shutdowns

If Debouthillier shuts down the elver fishery this season, she won't be the first to do so. The fishery has been closed in mid-season twice in the last four years, most recently in 2023, by former minister Joyce Murray, because of rampant illegal fishing.

Perkins contends those decisions accomplished nothing.

"In 2020 you (DFO) said this (closing the fishery) would help, and poaching doubled," he told DFO officials at the committee hearing.

He said that poaching increased again in 2021 and "quadrupled last year" even though the minister shut down the legal fishery midway through the season.

Gibbons, though, held to the logic that a complete shutdown would "provide clarity," adding that "any harvest will be illegal. Anything that our officers see would be subject to enforcement."

That logic did not win over Perkins.

"This department and six ministers in eight years have mismanaged this fishery," he said, adding the elver industry "told you how to fix this, and the department has done nothing since then."

Legal fishers say they're being sabotaged

If DFO wants a game plan to follow for the management of the elver fishery, it should consider how the US state of Maine beefed up its elver fishing regulations, King said. While some poachers have been charged and fined in Canada, the fines are insignificant compared to the penalties in that state.

"If you get caught once, it's a US 25,000 fine. If you get caught a second time, you go to jail," he said.

In Canada, the fines are about CAD 500, if charges even lead to convictions, he said.

read also

Elvers at center of dispute between Nova Scotia First Nation, DFO

Maine also requires elver exporters to notify the state's Marine Patrol 48 hours before preparing to ship eels. It allows the officer to witness the weighing and packing of the eels and to mark the package with a seal that must remain unbroken until the shipment reaches its destination.

The state also uses a monitoring system that records the weight and value of every sale to ensure no one exceeds quota.

In Canada, we need a traceability system, and we need real penalties for illegal elver fishing, said King.

"But the government just doesn't listen," he said. "Seems they would rather let the criminals have our jobs and our tax dollars and our natural resources."

King figures elver poachers made away with CAD 100m of baby eels for the black market last year.

Meanwhile, he said, Lebothillier has "sabotaged" legal fishers with her letter indicating she won't be issuing commercial licenses for 2024.

While the department's official line is that the minister will consult with the elver industry and First Nations participants over the next 10 days, the Feb. 12 letter to individual elver fishers suggests to many that Lebouthillier has her mind made up.

18
17
Stanley King
WITNESSES

Stanley King, acting president of the Canadian Committee for a Sustainable Elver Fishery, addresses the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans on Dec. 7. Photo screenshot from video

King said the 10-day consultation period publicly announced by DFO the same day as the minister's letter holds no meaning.

"She (Lebouthillier) has explicitly stated her intention to shut down the fishery, and I believe, as a bureaucratic step, they have to say they will 'consult,'" he said.

"She's just saying, tell me what you think in the next 10 days. And then she's going to go ahead and do what she wants anyway. So I don't think it's real, genuine consultation," said King.

Based on the minister's letter and the committee testimony this week, King draws his own conclusion.

"They're just gonna let the poachers have at it this year and keep the legal fishermen on the sideline."

Black eye for Canada

The impact of a fishery closure won't be felt just in the local economy, with the loss of up to CAD 45m, King added.

Ultimately, he said, DFO's inability to bring the hammer down on elver poaching is damaging Canada's reputation as a global leader in the fight against illegal fishing.

Just last year DFO inked a deal with a Canadian company to provide satellite tracking of fishing activity around the Indo-Pacific region, as reported by *Undercurrent*.

u read also

Over 3,000 illegal shark fins discovered in Canada-US surveillance operation in North Pacific

"They've given tens of millions of dollars to curb IUU far away in the Pacific, but that does not help the 1100 people they just put out of work here," said King.

For the 2024 season, King said, Canada's fisheries minister had a choice to make.

"The choice was to support a regulated, safe, elver fishery by providing adequate enforcement or to let a transnational organized crime ring steal the jobs of Canadians, the tax dollars of Canadians and our natural resources.

"It's embarrassing to say she seems to be going with the second option."

ucn prices **Seafood commodity prices at your fingertips** Find out more ucn undercurrentnews

---

Contact the author barb.simmons@undercurrentnews.com

Comments (0)

POST COMMENT

Stay on the pulse

Get recommendations, data, editor's picks, and the latest news from around the seafood world straight to your in-box.

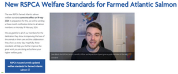
Sign up to UCN's newsletters

Email address

SUBSCRIBE

Will be used in accordance with our Privacy Policy

Read more


New RSPCA Welfare Standards for Farmed Atlantic Salmon

CCTV mandatory for salmon slaughter under UK welfare charity's new standards

Red Lobster introduces contest to welcome back Lobsterfest but with limits

Bellingham
Everett
Seattle
Spokane
Tacoma
Olympia
Washington
Yakima
Pasco
Columbia
Pendleton

Washington state wholesaler charged for not reporting sea urchins, Dungy crabs

Aquaculture America day one recap

ucn undercurrentnews
SEAFOOD BUSINESS NEWS AND DATA

© 2024 Undercurrent News. All rights reserved. Use of this site constitutes acceptance of our User Agreement and Privacy Policy and Cookie Statement (updated as of 1/1/21) and Your California Privacy Rights. The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with the prior written permission of Undercurrent News.