

Fisheries policy

Own and operate

In the year 2000, owner-operators should become the cornerstone of our fishery, says the Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters

The Department of Fisheries and Ocean (DFO)'s decision to review its Atlantic fishery policy is good news for fish harvesters. The Atlantic Fisheries Policy Review is an ideal opportunity to turn the spotlight on the importance of owner-operator fleets to our fisheries.

When the Federal Government extended its fisheries jurisdiction to 200 nautical miles in 1977, it also supported an ambitious expansion of corporate fishing and processing capacity. In response to concerns in Atlantic Canada about corporate concentration of fishing privileges, the government developed what became known as the 'fleet separation' policy.

Under the fleet separation policy, the government guaranteed that, in certain fisheries, the fishing fleet would be kept separate from fish processing operations. In other words, fish processors would not be allowed to own fishing licences or to establish vertically integrated operations.

The fleet separation policy has kept traditional inshore fisheries like the lobster fishery in the hands of independent owner-operators, and ensured that the benefits of this fishery would be shared broadly up and down the coast.

In Atlantic Canada and Quebec, harvester organizations also lobbied successfully for additional protection for independent fish harvesters by having 'owner/operator' clauses added to licensing policy. That is to say, fishing licences could only be owned by individuals who **owned** and **operated** fishing vessels for their livelihood. The owner/operator policy was designed to keep licences from falling into the hands

of corporations, absentee investors or 'slipper skippers' with no attachment to the coastal communities.

The owner/operator and fleet separation policies are essential tools for keeping control over access to Canada's fishery in the hands of small family enterprises and sustaining the economic vibrancy of hundreds of coastal communities.

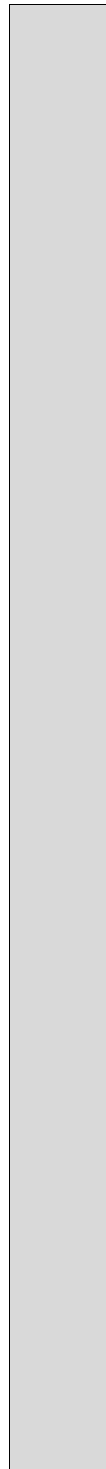
Unfortunately, the fleet separation and owner/operator policies are not airtight. Loopholes in the regulations have allowed companies and non-harvesters to buy up licences and quotas through under-the-table deals.

The Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters is concerned about this drift towards corporate concentration in the fishery. We firmly believe that access to licences and quotas should be strictly reserved for owner-operators and crew members who meet the professional standards developed and accepted by their peers.

We know that nearly half of today's fish harvesters will be retiring from the fishery over the next 10 to 15 years. Under current conditions, without a clear overall policy in favour of owner-operators, a good number of their licences could end up under the control of the processors.

Economic backbone

That can not be allowed to happen. Small owner-operator fishing enterprises are the economic backbone of many coastal communities. The viability of these businesses is, to a great extent, dependent on their control over fishing licences. These licences are part of the wealth of these coastal communities, and must be protected at all costs. The future of our communities depends on it.




The public consultations to be undertaken by DFO as part of its review of the Atlantic Fishery Policy are an excellent opportunity for fish harvesters, municipalities, community development organizations and concerned individuals to put forward clear proposals in favour of a strengthened owner-operator fishery.

We need to eliminate the legal loopholes in the fisheries regulations that allow fish processors and 'slipper skippers' to own and control licences and quotas.

We also need concrete measures to encourage and support the new generation that will enter the fishery and take over existing owner-operator fishing enterprises over the next 20 years.

We need solid support from the government for professionalism so that the new generation of fish harvesters can meet the challenges of globalization and an industry that is constantly having to adapt and change.

Above all else, we need reforms guided by a vision that makes owner-operators the cornerstone of our fisheries. 

This piece is by Danier Bernier (ccpfh_b@fox.nstn.ca) Executive Director, the Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters