

Plan to cull 70,000 grey seals gets Senate panel's approval

Gulf of St. Lawrence plan makes no sense, Dalhousie biologist says

The Canadian Press

Posted: Oct 23, 2012 9:18 AM NT

Last Updated: Oct 24, 2012 3:23 AM NT

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The Senate's fisheries committee has endorsed a contentious cull of 70,000 grey seals in the Gulf of St. Lawrence over a four-year period, in a bid to conserve cod stocks.

The Senate's standing committee on fisheries and oceans began hearings last year to respond to a Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat call for an experimental — and unprecedented — cull of grey seals.

On Tuesday the committee released a report that acknowledged "the ecological risks raised by some witnesses" but nevertheless supports "the logic of the proposed experimental reduction of grey seals in this area."

There were an estimated 104,000 of the animals living in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence as of 2010, the Senate committee said in a news release.

The report also recommends setting up a bounty system to compensate hunters, but it didn't say how much the bounty should be. There is no market for grey seal pelts.

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) blames the seals for preventing cod stocks from recovering in the Gulf.

Acting fisheries minister Gail Shea is under pressure from the fishing industry to do something about the stalled cod recovery in the Gulf, where there's indirect scientific evidence suggesting hungry grey seals are to blame.

But critics say that plans for a cull have been driven by politics, not science.

A group of marine biologists at Dalhousie University in Halifax issued an open letter last fall that said a cull could produce unintended consequences, including further depletion of the cod.

The letter said the proposal couldn't be justified by existing scientific evidence and was biased because it focused only on the negative impact of grey seals.

Jeff Hutchings, a biologist at Dalhousie University in Halifax, said that a cull of grey seals could not be expected to save cod.

"It's not a two-species ecosystem. It's a multi-species ecosystem," said Hutchings, who appeared before the Senate fisheries committee.

EU ban reduces seal market

Hutchings said the available science does not support a cull.

"One cannot credibly predict from a science perspective whether a cull of grey seals would have a positive

impact on cod or negative impact on cod ... or no impact whatsoever," he said.

Grey seals represent only a small percentage of the annual seal hunt in Eastern Canada, with harp seals by far dominating the traditional market.

However, that market has collapsed in recent years, in the wake of a European Union ban against Canadian seal products.

The Senate committee isn't the first group of legislators to recommend a cull of grey seals. In May 2007, an all-party Commons committee recommended that Sable Island be opened up to a grey seal hunt, but that recommendation was ignored.

Although the Fisheries Department says seal hunters can kill up to 60,000 grey seals annually, only a few hundred have been killed since 2009.

Frank Pinhorn, executive director of the Canadian Sealers Association, said trying to turn a grey seal cull into a commercial venture could be a hard sell.

"The price would have to go up, because it would have to be worthwhile for sealers to go and harvest these animals in order to make it worthwhile for them to do so," he said.

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