

Fisheries Resource
Conservation Council

Conseil pour la conservation
des ressources halieutiques

Ottawa, Canada
K1A 0E6

May 19, 1995

Honourable Brian Tobin
Minister of Fisheries and Oceans
200 Kent Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0E6

Dear Minister:

Re: Georges Bank Haddock and Cod, Subarea 5Zjm

In its November 1994 report to you, the Fisheries Resource Conservation Council (FRCC) expressed concern with respect to haddock and cod on Georges Bank and also noted the considerably different views on the status of these stocks being expressed by scientists and fishermen. For both stocks, the Council recommended **"...that the fishery be closed until June 1995, prior to which time the Council will provide a definitive recommendation with respect to the 1995 TAC."** You accepted that recommendation and it is reflected in the 1995 Groundfish Management Plan.

The FRCC has now reviewed the recent scientific assessments of Georges Bank haddock and cod together with recently received conservation recommendations from the Gulf of Maine Advisory Committee, a joint DFO/industry committee. The Council has been impressed with the positive conservation oriented nature of the management measures being contemplated.

The new information provided by scientists and industry indicates that there has been some improvement in the haddock stock, further deterioration in the cod stock and an emerging yellowtail flounder fishery which deserves your consideration. As well, there is evidence of a general closing of the gap between scientists and the industry in their assessment of stock status and the need for and commitment to a stock rebuilding strategy.

A concise summary of the 1995 scientific information is attached to this letter and some key highlights are presented below.

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Canada

The stock assessment report indicates that the increase in haddock biomass is due primarily to the recruitment of one year class, that of 1992. Further, the management measures that were implemented by the industry and DFO in 1994 resulted in improved protection of these age two fish. Canadian catches in 1994 were 2,400 tonnes. Fishing at the $F_{0.1}$ level (reflecting a Canadian catch approaching 2,500t) in 1995 is projected to result in an increase in the biomass even when taking into account the uncertainty associated with these types of calculations.

In the case of cod, the scientific assessment indicates that the stock continues to decline and that it is currently at its lowest level in recent times. Recruitment has been poor, as recent year classes have been much below average. Canadian catches in 1994 were 5,000t. Fishing at $F_{0.1}$ level in 1995 (a total United States/Canada catch of 2,500t) is not projected to result in any increase in biomass in 1996 and is therefore not an appropriate re-building strategy.

A Canadian yellowtail flounder fishery on Georges Bank has developed recently, being prosecuted by only 10 vessels in 1993 and increasing to about 40 vessels in 1994, when catches were in excess of 1,000t. Recent United States surveys point to the stock being in a depressed state. An approximate $F_{0.1}$ level of harvest on the Canadian side of Georges Bank (where about 68% of the biomass occurs) would be in the order of 435t.

The Council has considered fully this new information, including current management measures by the United States, and has reviewed the briefs presented at the public consultation in the fall of 1994. In addition to the specific recommendations below, there are two important matters that the Council wishes to highlight.

We commend your efforts to promote bilateral consultations with United States interests with the objective of undertaking equitable and appropriate management actions to rebuild these transboundary stocks. These approaches appear to be making progress and should be continued. Similarly, the Council notes the continuing positive bilateral scientific cooperation.

The Council would also like to draw your attention to the positive results being achieved in this area by the new approach of DFO Science which involves industry to a greater extent in the stock status review process. Similarly, the Council is encouraged by the implementation of management measures which have had positive conservation effects, a case in point being the reduction in harvest of age two

haddock during 1994. Measures such as mandatory hailing, mandatory square mesh, a small fish protocol, hook size requirements and mesh size requirements in the gillnet fishery implemented by Canadian managers and fishermen seem to have had some positive conservation effects for these stocks. These efforts have to be continued.

The Council recommends that:

- 1. the 1995 Canadian TAC for 5Zjm haddock be set at 2,500t;**
- 2. there be no directed fishing for 5Zjm cod in 1995 and that by-catches be limited to less than 1,000t. The Council is concerned about potential discarding of cod, particularly when vessels are restricted by small percentage or ceiling amounts of by-catch per trip, and recommends that more effective conservation approaches with respect to cod by-catch be devised;**
- 3. the Canadian catch of 5Zjm yellowtail flounder in 1995 be limited to 435t and that measures be taken to minimize the harvest of small fish; and**
- 4. bilateral consultations towards the objective of undertaking equitable and appropriate management actions to rebuild these transboundary stocks be continued.**

Minister, the FRCC believes these recommendations constitute an appropriate conservation approach for the particular Georges Bank stocks in 1995 and trusts that you will find this advice useful.

Sincerely,

H.M. Clarke
Chairman

Attachment

Summary of 1995 Scientific Information

Haddock - 5Zj,m

Haddock catches by Canada and USA varied between 3,800t to 6,400t in the late-1980s and early 1990s but declined to about 2,700t in 1994, close to the lowest level observed. The 1995 Stock Status Report points out that haddock in 5Zj,m continues to increase from the levels observed in the early 1990s, which were near the lowest recorded. Indications are that the 1992 year-class is comparable to the 1983, 1985 and 1987 year-classes which were of moderate strength. Other year-classes since 1991 are more abundant than the very weak year-classes of the late eighties but remain weak. Exploitation rate has been higher than the target since the late seventies, with a marked increase in the early 1990s; while the highest level ever observed was reached in 1993, there was a marked decrease in exploitation rate in 1994 as a result of the introduction of more stringent management measures. As the Council noted last year, the increase in biomass is due primarily to the recruitment of one year-class, that of 1992. Scientists warn that "conservation efforts such as low exploitation and fishing practices which permit recruits to realize their growth and reproductive potential are needed to rebuild the population biomass and to expand the age structure".

Cod - 5Zj,m

Catches of cod by Canada and USA declined sharply in recent years, from 21,000t in 1990 to less than 7,300t in 1994, the lowest value observed. The 1995 Stock Status Report indicated that the total and spawning biomasses are at the lowest level observed since 1978 when observations began. Exploitation rate has been much higher than the target throughout the 1980s, with a marked increase in the early 1990s to the highest levels ever observed; while the exploitation rate declined somewhat in 1994 as a result of the introduction of more stringent management measures, it remains much higher than the target level. Recruitment has been poor as recent year-classes have been below average and the 1993 and 1994 year-classes are the lowest observed. Scientists are concerned with the level of the spawning stock biomass, which they qualified as being extremely low, and with the lack of recruitment since 1990.

Yellowtail Flounder - 5Zj,m

A directed Canadian fishery has developed only recently, with less than 10 vessels in 1993 and about 40 in 1994. Landings by Canadian vessels in 1994 were in the order of 1,000t. Catches by U.S. vessels have been in the order of 2,000t since 1985. The Stock Status Update produced in the fall of 1994 indicated that this stock has been stable at a low level since the mid-1980s, with an indication of increasing abundance in the Canadian portion of Georges Bank in recent years. Scientists believe that present harvest levels are high and that removals on the Canadian portion of this stock should not exceed 435t.