

*Freshwater Fish Marketing Act*

of its fishermen, a group which we tend to ignore, given our preoccupation with the East and West Coast fisheries.

We are not the first to be concerned about these matters. For many years people with the best interests of the fishermen at heart debated the problems of fish marketing on the Prairies. It was a major question in terms of people, of profits, and of political will. When six governments finally joined to set up the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation, they knew they were making a fundamental change.

What brought them to that point? Perhaps we should look back for a moment to see what was on the minds of the federal, provincial, and territorial Governments at the time. Why did they want this corporation and how has it worked out? Their decision to set up the corporation followed many years of discontent and recommendations for change. For example, the 1933 Commission of Inquiry into Manitoba fisheries concluded that fishermen were in a most unfavourable position. American capital largely controlled the fish distributing agencies and it was said that racketeers had entered the business. The uneconomic competition between distributors for fish and markets was hurting the fishermen rather than helping them.

The 1933 commission called for collective action on behalf of the fishermen. It called for better co-ordination of the industry, better quality, better inspection, and for a fish-clearing house, another way of saying single-desk selling. The idea, of course, is that single-desk selling can give the producers more power in the market and can give the buyers a better availability of supply.

In 1938 the Manitoba Government again commissioned a thorough report. The author, H. C. Grant, said that "the most apt description of the fisherman in Manitoba is that he is a labourer working for a piece rate wage. For all practical purposes, the local packer or exporter provides the only source of credit available to the fisherman". The author linked the fisherman's lack of independence and his inability to sell his own fish with his discontent and suspicion about the whole marketing set up.

After the war, similar complaints persisted about market weakness, the strength of American buyers, and dirty deals. The Saskatchewan Government found it desirable to set up a fish marketing board and then a system of co-operatives. This helped, but American importers still had the upper hand and, by and large, exporters and dealers passed the risks and losses back to the fishermen.

A national conference on fisheries in 1964 brought matters to a head. The Manitoba Government presented a brief that said in part:

Disorderly marketing is a central problem in the inland fishing industry. Local packers and shippers, apparently unable to bypass the American broker, force rapid changing prices f.o.b. the packing shed, and must therefore broaden their margin to offset losses caused by sudden devaluation of inventory. Consequently, the fishermen receive a lean share of constantly fluctuating prices. The packing-shipping firms tend to concentrate on shrewd marketing to earn occasional windfall profits rather than industrial engineering to economize on collection and handling costs . . . Handling and packing facilities are characterized by poor equipment and low quality control facilities—

The brief continued:

At this time the Province of Manitoba knows of no better alternative than the establishment of a regional marketing board to meet the marketing problems of the industry.

Out of that conference a federal-provincial committee on Prairie fisheries recommended an export monopoly with monopoly single-desk selling. This recommendation led to another and very thorough study by Commissioner George McIvor in 1965. Mr. McIvor talked to the various Governments. Among Prairie provinces Manitoba produces the most fish. Manitoba's Minister of Mines and Natural Resources, the Hon. Sterling Lyon, repeated the same arguments the province had made to the 1964 conference about the need for a marketing board. All the Prairie provinces and the Government of the Northwest Territories favoured an export monopoly.

Exporters and dealers had most to lose from a marketing board. However, even among them, Commissioner McIvor found an awareness that marketing of Prairie fish needed some form of re-organization and rationalization. In his travels and hearings, he found that the fishermen urgently wanted a changed system of marketing. The McIvor report said that prices were weak because of too many exporters selling to a few American importers. Some exporters only amounted to agents of U.S. importers. If the importer suffered a market setback, or took some risk that backfired, he had the power to pass the losses back to the Canadian exporter and the exporter passed the loss back to the dealers who passed it back to the fishermen.

McIvor discovered once again what previous studies had stated; the weakness of exporters linked up with a series of underlying weaknesses in the industry. The 35 or so exporters—too many—did business with 200 or so dealers—far too many for the amount of fish handled. There was no standardization of brands and no co-ordination of supply. The system created losses in efficiency, quality, and profits. All of this weakened market prices. Even when the export market took an upturn and exporters raised prices to their dealers, McIvor found that the dealers failed to pass the increase back to the fishermen. He investigated the sales of the two major products, white fish and pickerel, in 1965 and found that fishermen got less than half the export price. For Prairie fish in general, depending on the specific fishery, they got only 45 to 60 per cent of the price. However, the fishermen never knew what the market price was. Often they never even knew what price they would receive from their own local dealer from day to day.

Many of the fishermen worked on credit with the dealers and never got out of debt. Fully 25 per cent of them were completely dependent on the dealers credit, totally under the dealers' control. The commissioner's report said that "under these circumstances, the fisherman is essentially an indentured labourer for the fish companies. It is self evident that fishermen in this situation do not negotiate a price. There is no bargaining. The fisherman's prime concern is existing".

In short, if the exporters were weak, so was the whole system and especially the fisherman. McIvor added that "in