

Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation

Mr. Terry Sargeant (Selkirk-Interlake): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Western Arctic (Mr. Nickerson) for ceding me the floor.

It is with a great deal of pleasure I rise today to speak in this debate concerning the tabling of documents regarding the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation.

As a member of Parliament representing many of the freshwater fishermen in the province of Manitoba, this matter is of particular importance to me. No doubt this debate will also be of great importance to all the freshwater fishermen from Thunder Bay to the Rocky Mountains.

Let me say at the outset that the New Democratic Party stands four square behind the concept and practice of orderly marketing of most foodstuffs. Needless to say, we feel the creation of the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation in 1969 was a positive step for Canadian freshwater fishermen.

I believe it is worth mentioning to hon. members present the situation which confronted fishermen prior to the FFMC being set up. Basically it was an open market, free enterprise system and, as one might well expect, the major beneficiaries of this particular arrangement were not the fishermen or the small local processors, but the large, well-organized American importers. The result was that both the fishermen and domestic processors were receiving inadequate—indeed some might have said subsistent—prices for their catch.

Just this morning in committee the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans (Mr. LeBlanc) made the comment that one of the reasons the FFMC was set up was to protect fishermen in remote or small communities. This is very true, but similar protection was required also for fishermen in larger and not so remote areas. Indeed, in my home town of Gimli there were many fishermen who suffered because of the practices of these private enterprises. Typically, at the beginning of each fishing season the companies which give advance payments to the fishermen so they could buy nets and other equipment necessary, would quote a price for fish at that time. Invariably at the season's end the final price would be lower than the initial quote with little or no final payment coming to the fishermen. In many cases the company owned a man's fishing boat, and in some communities they even owned the house in which he lived. One is reminded of the old coal miner's song about owing one's soul to the company store. This is indeed what the companies in Manitoba and in much of the prairies wanted.

I well remember as a teenager in Gimli talking with friends whose fathers were fishermen. For many years my friends' fathers fished as independent operators. By the mid-1960s most of these fishermen had been reduced to the status of underpaid, indebted employees of these fish companies. At this time in the late sixties it was widely rumoured that there were only two completely independent fishermen left on Lake Winnipeg. I believed the rumour at that time, and I still do.

It was with this background that this legislation was passed in 1968-69. It represented a response by the federal government to a request from the central provinces, led by the government of Manitoba. Rather ironically the minister lead-

ing the battle for Manitoba was Sterling Lyon, now the premier of that province, who last fall led the battle attempting to dismantle the FFMC.

The need at that time was for unification of the trade in freshwater fishery products. The perception was that economic distress among primary producers was attributable to fragmentation of assembling, processing, and the exporting operation. In 1969, after discussions dating back to 1964, the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation was established by federal statute. Its area of jurisdiction is the three prairie provinces and for a while some of Ontario and the Northwest Territories. It was the exclusive responsibility of the FFMC to market fish originating in this area in interprovincial and export trade. The objectives of the corporation were defined as follows: one, marketing fish in an orderly manner; two, increasing returns to fishermen, and three, promoting international markets for and increasing interprovincial and export trade in fish.

Over the ten-year period in which the corporation has been in existence, freshwater fishermen have seen the price per pound they receive for their catch increase by as much as 150 per cent. As the previous speaker has mentioned, the final payments, or total payments, to fishermen last year amounted to \$17.2 million. In 1970 they were a mere \$7.7 million. That is a substantial increase, and it has meant a substantial increase in the quality of living for the fishermen in the prairie provinces.

I believe it is fair to say that the marketing corporation has been a modest success over its ten-year history and, as well, it has brought some stability to freshwater fishermen's incomes. However, having said that, I think it must be said that fishermen and processors in western Canada are facing some problems.

In the last six months my office has dealt with dozens of fishermen who have been placed on unemployment rolls, or forced into accepting welfare. The problem in Manitoba is not that they cannot make a living fishing Manitoba's lakes and selling their catch to the corporation. The problem is that the provincial government last October decided to change the rules as they pertain to fishing licences. The result was that fishermen who had for years made their living fishing Lake Winnipeg, Lake Manitoba, Winnipegosis, Cedar Lake and many others have now found they do not qualify for a licence under the new regulations.

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During December, and January of this year, the fishermen in the various communities discussed these new regulations proposed by the provincial government. There was near unanimous consent that these new rules were not in the best interests of freshwater fishermen.

Discontent grew to such a level that in January the Conservative government, fearing that this unfavourable program would affect the chances of federal Conservative candidates in the affected communities, ordered the suspension of the proposed guidelines. However, by that time much of the damage