

A new 200-mile fishing zone won't solve all the problems for Maritime fishing industry

By Bruce Little

For Financial Times News Service

HALIFAX, N.S. — After years of lamenting the decline of the fishery, denouncing foreign fleets for causing it and pressing for a 200-mile limit to reverse it, the Atlantic provinces are finally getting what they want — a fisheries management zone extending 200 nautical miles out into the ocean.

The fishing zone comes into force Jan. 1. For many in Eastern Canada, it is only now beginning to sink in that, despite the chauvinistic rhetoric of the last few years, Canada's right to manage the fish will not be a cure-all.

Canada is taking over a massive amount of territory — 500,000 square miles on the East Coast and 130,000 square miles of the Pacific Ocean.

"We are acquiring jurisdiction over an actively fished area which approximately doubles our present total maritime territorial responsibility," says Dr. Lloyd Dickie, director of the Institute of Oceanography at Dalhousie University, Halifax.

That responsibility puts the job of managing the fisheries zone squarely on Ottawa's back, and the fishing industries of a dozen countries as well as Canada will be sizing up the government's performance.

Move unilateral

Technically, Canada's take-over was unilateral: The Law of the Sea Conference has yet to produce an agreement. But in practice, Ottawa had persuaded the five countries whose fleets account for nearly 90 per cent of foreign fishing here to accept Canadian control even before it announced the extension of fisheries jurisdiction.

Far from solving the fishing industry's problems, the 200-mile limit has simply created more of them and each will be the subject of fervent controversy in the next few years.

Maritimers have a tendency to blame the ills of the industry entirely on the invasion of foreign fishing fleets whose ships scour the ocean with ruthless efficiency. But the industry had problems long before the foreigners came.

Since the Second World War, it has faced collapse every six or seven years. The latest crisis was all the more vicious because of its suddenness. In 1973, the groundfish industry was enjoying one of its best years, despite declining fish stocks. In 1974, the roof fell in as rising costs and evaporating markets squeezed the industry.

Ottawa responded first with a series of Band-aids that pumped \$131 million of extra money into the industry and second with an over-all strategy to get the fishery back on its feet.

The strategy served notice that the government plans to intervene more and more in the industry to get it back on its feet. It also plans to maximize the social benefits of the fishery rather than allow pure economics to dictate development.

That approach is bound to bring Ottawa into conflict with portions of the fishing industry. James Morrow, vice-president of National Sea Products Ltd., Halifax, for one, is worried about too much interference from Ottawa.

Industry in jeopardy

He wants the government to lay out a long-term plan that would allow depleted fish stocks to recover. Within that framework, fishing companies

could maximize their catch in the most efficient way. Such a plan, he argues, would also permit a steady shipbuilding program which would bring new boats into use as the potential catch grows.

Mr. Morrow wants Ottawa to focus first on rebuilding cod stocks. He is worried that by the time other fish species recover there may not be a fishing industry left to save.

A basic requirement of good fisheries management is solid information about fish stocks but good research is lacking.

"Research is absolutely crucial," says Kenneth Lucas, senior assistant deputy minister who runs Environment Canada's fisheries and marine service.

"There are at least 60 stocks out there in Atlantic waters — a glittering national asset — and we simply do not know enough about them."

Numbers misleading?

Some argue that Canada can use figures gathered by the International Commission for the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries. Others say those numbers — based on catches reported by fishermen — are misleading. The solution, they say, is more research ships and more time.

So far, the environment department has been doing most of the work setting up the administration for the 200-mile fishing zone. Now there is pressure in Ottawa to put the management unit in this part of the country.

"When they try to manage from Ottawa, they get into a real mess," says Mr. Morrow. Dr. Dickie goes further, urging as much local input as possible from smaller communities that depend on fish.