

*Government Orders*

workers. Through absolutely no fault of their own, many older workers are out of a job and their prospects are slim to none for getting another one. This is the problem that Bill C-30 addresses. Canadians want us to show compassion for these individuals. We are showing compassion. We are bringing in positive measures to address this unprecedented crisis. The government is approaching this problem through a component of the Atlantic groundfish strategy which will involve income support for older workers. It is a program that will be negotiated, financed and implemented with the provinces.

• (1320)

However there are some workers who cannot be helped under the current legislation. I am referring to those workers who are under the age of 55, who were at least 50 years of age on May 15 of this year and who are eligible to participate in the Atlantic groundfish strategy. They do not qualify for older worker adjustment assistance under current legislation. That is the reason why Bill C-30 is so important, it addresses their plight.

Hon. members have given valuable input to this legislation. Last week Bill C-30 was studied by the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development. The committee gave careful consideration to the issues raised by hon. members opposite. For the benefit of the House I would like to address some of those concerns.

There is always justifiable apprehension that with a new program, tax dollars earned through the sweat of Canadian workers are going to end up in the pockets of people who do not qualify for the program. I can assure my hon. colleagues that will not happen with this program. To be eligible for benefits first an individual must be determined eligible under TAGS; the individual must be a fish plant worker or a trawler person; he or she must have a long term attachment to the groundfish industry; the person has to be out of a job because of a permanent reduction of the workforce at the fish plant and that permanent reduction has to be the result of a decline in fish stocks.

So that this is absolutely clear, the only people we are talking about here are older fish plant workers, including trawler persons. All told we estimate that involves about 1,200 men and women. Of that number about 700 will have reached the age of 55 during their entitlement period under TAGS by May 16 of this year when the Atlantic groundfish strategy came into effect.

We estimate there will be an additional 500 workers who would reach the age of 55 during their entitlement under TAGS. It is those 500 dedicated men and women that the passage of Bill C-30 is designed to help.

Some members have said that if we are going to help older workers who happen to be out of a job because of fish plants closing, then should we not also help older workers who have

lost their jobs because of restructuring in other industries? That analogy does not hold here. The groundfish industry is not just one of many industries in Atlantic Canada, it is its lifeblood, and in those communities which are dependent on the fishery there really is no alternative source of employment for older workers.

The demise of this industry will lead to the demise of entire communities unless we help these hard working men and women deal with the crisis. Simply put, there are few options available to older workers in this situation.

Yet there is a legitimate question about the ramifications of the decline in the groundfish industry for the rest of the Atlantic economy. I am sure that hon. members realize that these adjustments do not take place in a vacuum. There is a domino effect that spreads throughout the entire Atlantic seaboard. In Newfoundland alone there are some 1,300 communities affected by the groundfish industry. Of that number, 800 depend solely on economic activity from groundfish. The government would be remiss not to take this into account. We are taking it into account.

Hon. members will recall that the budget provided \$800 million for the strategic initiatives program. Projects under this program will be funded on a 50:50 basis with the provinces and territories. They will explore innovative approaches to training and getting people back to work. In Atlantic Canada the program will complement TAGS by helping men and women who are not directly employed by the fishery.

Since the major downturn in the fishery has taken place in Newfoundland, that province will be the first to receive assistance under the strategic initiatives program.

• (1325)

Last Thursday the Minister of Human Resources Development, along with the minister of fisheries of the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador and ministers from the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador announced funding of \$20 million for projects in Newfoundland under the strategic initiatives program.

I realize that this debate on Bill C-30 is not the place for details of strategic initiatives but I can tell the House that these projects will provide financial incentive to encourage students to stay in school. They will help recent graduates to find jobs and they will encourage entrepreneurship outside the fishery.

The funds will also provide employment and training opportunities for unemployed and underemployed individuals on social assistance or at risk of moving on to social assistance. It is a partnership, co-operation among all levels of government, the private sector and community organizations to ensure that programs such as TAGS and the strategic initiatives address the