

Statement

Minister for  
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NOTES FOR A PRESENTATION BY

THE MINISTER FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE,

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TO

THE FOREIGN PRESS ASSOCIATION

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I am here to speak to you about a crisis in the conservation and management of fish stocks in the international waters in the Northwest Atlantic. The deliberate policy of over-exploitation of the precious fishing resources of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland is threatening to have serious economic, social, ecological and, in the context of Canada-EC relations, political consequences.

While the overfishing problem takes place 4,000 kilometres from European shores, it occurs on Canada's doorstep. Canada attaches the highest priority to this issue, because we bear the worst effects of such practices. But the point I want to stress here today is that overfishing practices which endanger the health of vital fish stocks is a common problem which must now be resolved.

Canada has witnessed the consequences of relentless overfishing before. From the 1950s to the 1970s, fleets from Europe and Asia ravaged the fisheries resources of the Northwest Atlantic, severely depleting fish stocks. While these distant water fleets suffered great losses with the resulting precipitous decline in catches, the harshest impact was felt by those in Canada whose livelihoods were crippled or destroyed by this foreign overfishing.

Those were the days of the three-mile limit and later the twelve-mile limit. With developments in the Law of the Sea, Canada and other constant states extended fisheries jurisdictions to 200 miles in 1977. For almost all states, a 200-mile zone includes their entire coastal fisheries. For Canada it does not, because the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, which are Canada's most important fishing grounds, extend beyond 200 miles in two areas, popularly known as the Nose and Tail of the Banks. As well, there is a nearby area of shallow water known as the Flemish Cap.

Important fish stocks on the Grand Banks, principally cod and flatfish, migrate across the 200-mile line for part of the year. These are called "straddling stocks" in the language of the UN Law of the Sea Convention.

With respect to straddling stocks, the Law of the Sea sets out certain rights for the coastal state and certain obligations for nations operating distant water fleets. States are to cooperate for the conservation and rational management of straddling stocks through the means of an international organization established for the purpose. The Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) was founded in 1979 for this purpose.

NAFO has 12 members, including Canada (as the coastal state), the EC, the Soviet Union, Norway, Japan and seven others. While Canada manages fisheries within 200 miles, NAFO manages the straddling stocks on the Grand Banks and the fish stocks on the Flemish Cap (which is entirely outside 200 miles). A fish stock is a discrete body of fish, one that does not mingle with other fish stocks or does so to a very limited degree. By management of a fish stock, I mean setting a total allowable catch (TAC) for the stock, assigning quotas for catches and other conservation measures.

After establishment of the 200-mile limit in 1977, Canada drastically reduced catches within its 200-mile zone to allow fish stocks to rebuild. NAFO similarly reduced catches as part of a conservationist approach, again to allow regeneration of fish stocks and to provide for a long term sustainable fishery.

No one would claim that either Canada or NAFO have been models of perfection in fisheries management. There is always a degree of uncertainty and some mistakes have been made. But until 1986, there had been a genuine and often painful commitment by all NAFO members to conservation and good resource management.

However, since 1986 and the accession of Spain and Portugal to the EC, major problems have developed in NAFO. In 1986, the EC broke with its pattern of supporting and adhering to NAFO conservation measures. Instead, it began setting its own quotas, contrary to any principles of conservation; consider the 1988 unilateral EC quotas for American Plaice on the Southern Grand Banks which was almost 18 times its NAFO quota.

This overfishing by the EC has led to major declines in fish stocks, an important example being the three flatfish stocks on the Southern Grand Banks. In 1986, the TACs set by NAFO on the basis of its collective scientific advice for these stocks totalled 75,000 tonnes. For 1990, the total of the TACs for these stocks is only 34,900 tonnes. That is a reduction of more than 50% in only four years.

Since 1986, when the EC began its practice of overfishing, it has received quotas from NAFO for 78,200 tonnes of fish. During that period, it set quotas for itself totalling 540,000 tonnes and has caught a total of 410,000 tonnes, almost seven times its NAFO quotas.

The NAFO scientific council, whose findings represent a consensus of all members including the EC, has found that NAFO-managed flatfish stocks and the Southern Grand Banks Cod show signs of serious decline. They have noted that heavy fishing of flatfish by the EC now takes place in key nursery areas.

The excessive level of the EC catches is part of the problem, but the relentless harvesting of juvenile stocks in recognized nursery areas is making things worse now and potentially disastrous in the future. For example, a random sample taken last month from the hold of a Spanish trawler contained 275 fish with a total weight of 113 pounds or 51 kilograms; the average weight of the fish was 6.6 ounces or less than 0.2 kilograms and the average length was 6.8 inches or 17.3 centimetres. These were immature fish. This is how you slaughter a fish stock.

What the EC is doing in the Northwest Atlantic is wrong for four principal reasons.

First, the present EC practices are the major impediment to the proper operation of the vital international conservation and resource management organization, NAFO. The resource simply cannot be properly managed with the EC constantly opting out of NAFO decisions.

Second, the EC's overfishing in the Northwest Atlantic is damaging an important resource, thereby harming fishermen in Canada, in other NAFO member states and, ultimately, harming their own fishermen.

Third, overfishing by the EC in the Northwest Atlantic is clearly inconsistent with the Community's Common Fisheries Policy which it applies and enforces in the waters of its member states. While the EC applies the principle of relative stability in allocating quotas in the waters of its member states, it has abandoned this principle by its unilateral decision to set higher quotas for its own use in NAFO regulated waters.

And fourth, as a more universal concern, the commitment of all responsible nations to the principle of sustainable development is being ignored by the EC both in terms of the excessive level of its catches and the targetting of juvenile fish in recognized nursery areas. This sets a very bad example for countries which are being pressed by the EC, as well as Canada, to adhere to the principles of sustainable development with respect to the tropical rain forest, desertification, rivers management, the ozone level, and other environmental concerns.

What we want the EC to do is simple, to adhere to NAFO conservation measures to end what is little more than an unrestricted fishery in the Northwest Atlantic.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that nations in such terribly straitened circumstances as Poland are committed to conservation and good resource management under NAFO. The same is true of the USSR, Japan, Norway, Cuba, the German Democratic Republic, Denmark on behalf of the Faeroes Islands and Greenland, as well as Canada.

The World Commission on Environment and Development, the Brundtland Commission, defined sustainable development as:

"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The EC is compromising the ability of present as well as future generations to harvest these fisheries resources in a sustainable way.

Canada has undertaken a political dialogue on this issue with the European Commission and the member states. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, Secretary of State for External Affairs, the Right Honourable Joe Clark, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, the Honourable Tom Siddon and I have raised this issue with the Commission as well as European Ministers, and we will continue to do so until it is resolved. I will be taking Canada's message to Ministers in France and Germany, where I will be next week.

Today, I am seeking to broaden that process, to inform those who analyze, comment and report on European policy about the gravity and urgency of this issue.

At the most recent NAFO meeting, the EC, for the first time, abstained rather than simply voting against NAFO quotas. Within the next 60 days, the EC must indicate whether it intends to comply with the conservation measures accepted by all of the NAFO members or will once again set unilateral quotas for itself. The worsening situation in the Northwest Atlantic fisheries demonstrates that the time for the EC to return to the NAFO fold is now.

We are committed to the principle of sustainable development. The EC says it adheres to the same principles and seeks to provide leadership to the world in addressing environmental concerns. What we ask is that the EC join with us and the other members of NAFO in practicing what we and they preach in the conduct of the fishery of the Northwest Atlantic.