

PUBLIC FORUM

Fisheries Policy and Rural Revitalization _ An Integrated Approach

By Bernard Bromley, Former Publisher of the Northern Pen newspaper

Previous speakers have alluded to the fact that the economic strength of rural Newfoundland and Labrador remains the fishery and I certainly agree with them. So, it's difficult for me to imagine any significant economic recovery or revitalization in rural areas of the province in the future without the fishery being the cornerstone of that economic revitalization..

Having said that , I'd like to present a few of my thoughts and observations about the fishing industry before taking a brief look at what the economic future of rural areas of the province might be.

I've long held the opinion that the fish resource _ or what is left of it_ is not owned by fish harvesters, fish processing companies or other organizations that get quotas from time to time. To me, fish in the sea is a common property, owned by the people who populate the 500 or so communities around Newfoundland and Labrador.

Government's role is to manage that resource for the benefit of the people in these rural communities.

Those who hold harvesting licences, fish buyers' licences or fish processing licences hold, in my opinion, special privileges and with these privileges comes certain responsibilities that extend beyond the bank account of an individual harvester or a shareholder in a processing company. Ensuring that there is a sustainable resource that can be harvested by future generations is, I believe, the key element of these responsibilities.

At the same time, I acknowledge that any fishery that is to play a role in the future revitalization of rural Newfoundland and Labrador must be managed in a manner that allows harvesters to get a reasonable return on investment in fishing enterprises, processors to get a reasonable return on capital investment and communities adjacent to the resource to benefit economically and socially from the exploitation of the resource on which these communities have been founded. It must be a fishery that provides a reasonable living for fish plant workers and a fishery that is sensitive to the regional needs of the province.

Some of the previous speakers have commented on many of the problems that plague the fishing industry today. Most of these problems aren't new. In fact, they've been there long before the cod moratorium and some of them played a role in the need for a cod

moratorium. Some of the problems are as fundamental as using fishing gear that damages fish habitat and is not selective. They include inefficient and poorly designed vessels to harvest shrimp, and they extend onshore to processing plants that are located where they shouldn't be and make it necessary for raw product to be transported via road all the over the province to keep these plants supplied.

I don't like to dwell too much on the past, but I will make a couple of points. First, we, as a province, had an opportunity in the mid-90s following the moratorium, to develop a better, sustainable fishing industry. There were new species coming on stream, new harvesters and new processing facilities as we moved to shrimp to help offset some of the devastation caused by the loss of the cod fishery. Sadly, the province or our provincial politicians didn't do things the right way.

Shrimp processing licences went from three to 14 and plants that could operate 40 weeks annually, processing 18-20 million pounds of raw material, are now processing a little more than half that amount of shrimp each season. Some communities in rural Newfoundland today are paying the price for these bad political decisions..

Can you imagine a processing facility built at a cost of \$10-million and designed to operate year-round, operating 5-6 months annually? Only in Newfoundland and Labrador....

How can the return on the investment at these plants be adequate to continue maintenance and modernization which are necessary to compete in the world marketplace? And, we don't have one or two plants in one or two communities in this province with that problem....we have a dozen or more plants in a dozen or more communities.

Fishermen complain that it isn't viable for them to harvest shrimp at the prices they are offered and processors complain that their shrimp operations are "borderline". Plant employees aren't getting enough work weeks to have a reasonable income. Is anyone surprised? Did we learn anything from the cod moratorium _ anything about too many fish plants, too many fishermen, too much technology and too much reliance on the fishery to keep communities in rural Newfoundland alive? .

So here we are 13 years after cod moratorium. The question is: Are we going down the same path?. Some harvesters are fishing for 12-16 weeks, some are fishing for less. Some plant workers are getting eight weeks of employment and others are getting 28 weeks annually and we're asking why our young people don't want to be part of today's fishery?

If we could fix these problems with the fishery, if we could overcome these challenges there wouldn't be any difficulty in getting an adequate number of young people to stay in rural Newfoundland and supply the fishing industry that might be facing a human resource shortage. But, until the problems are fixed our young people will continue to leave the province to find employment and a better life.

Another point I'd like to make is that there's a need for something in the fishing industry today called "trust". I believe that until such time as there is some element of trust between fish harvesters and fish processing companies in this province - and that trust has been lacking for almost 500 years - the industry will not prosper. There will be a need for government or some other third party intervention in the operation of the fishing industry year after year as we move from one crisis to another.

Trust is sadly lacking and, because of the importance of the fishing industry and the need to get it operating on a timely basis each year, I suggest that it might be in the province's best interest for the short term to appoint an independent committee or board - not unlike what it's proposing now to overcome the RMS crisis - to deal with the problems common to the industry on an annual basis.

Before leaving the fishery, I take this opportunity to ask a question. Does anyone believe we can continue for a lengthy period to take massive amounts of shrimp and capelin out of the food chain each year and not cause problems? I don't believe we can. If anyone is watching they can see something is happening to our ocean. We can see it in the changing migrating patterns of seabirds and the failure of the northern cod stocks to recover especially in areas where there is a massive effort being put into shrimp harvesting.

What about rural revitalization? Well, there are no quick fixes for the fishery and there can be no quick fixes for rural revitalization. We have smaller communities now than we had 20 years ago, we have fewer young people, we have educated our best and brightest generation and they've gone elsewhere to put down roots. More schools are closing and there continues to be reorganization of health care and education which is negatively impacting rural communities. I believe the time for revitalizing rural communities is quickly slipping by and I see the resilience of many of our people wearing thin. But, don't turn the lights out yet; there are a few bright spots. .

I like what I see in areas where governments have granted community or regional fish quotas. Labrador Fishermen's Union Shrimp Company, the Fogo Island Co-operative and St. Anthony Basin Resources have been success stories and they have had a very positive economic and social impact on the communities they serve. There may be room for similar organizations in other areas of the province..

Designating communities as growth centres may be another part of a revitalization plan, however, it will be necessary to put a lot of thought and analysis into it. Communities that have been striving to be growth centres for the past decade or two find themselves still struggling because they don't have the population base or the financial resources needed to develop new infrastructure. The private sector hasn't been willing to invest in land developments for commercial or housing projects and governments are moving away from operating airports, wharves and other facilities. Then there's the restructuring of health care and education and, as this takes place, more professionals are drawn away

from rural areas and would-be rural growth centres to distant towns and cities where headquarters are located. Nevertheless, growth centres and maybe some form of regional or county governments are worth pursuing. Such an approach will need the support of provincial and federal governments, who must be committed to them financially as town councils and municipal governments on their own don't have what it takes to make it happen.

Opportunities in year-round tourism, fisheries research, forestry and advances in technology and transportation can all help revitalize the rural economy of the province.

But for that to happen, we must get the fishing industry in order.

We must do it now because every day a community loses another family, another graduate of our university or college system heads for Alberta, Ontario or the U. S. and the loss of these people makes it more and more difficult for rural Newfoundland to be revitalized and to survive.

It's time to get a better understanding of what fish resource is available or will be available for the immediate and long-term future. We must determine how many fishing enterprises, how many plant workers and how many communities the resource can support. There must be a regional plan and it must be followed. Along the way, we must be prepared to make some difficult decisions because we don't need a fishing industry like we have today. We need an industry that can compete in the marketplace, offer the highest quality product available and be dependable. We need a fishery that offers stability and some security to those directly involved in it and to others who depend on it to a lesser degree.

Only when we reach that goal in the fishing industry will we see some kind of rural revitalization in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Thank you.