

SEA-NL questions what Furey government has against fishermen; digging deeper into fishery crisis

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Seaward Enterprises Association of Newfoundland and Labrador (SEA-NL) says for the second year in a row the Andrew Furey government has announced a review of the fish price-setting system that does not include direct consultations with the inshore fleet.

“What does the Furey administration have against talking to licensed skippers? questions Ryan Cleary, SEA-NL’s Executive Director. “Does his government not realize that enterprises live and die by the price of fish, and the owner-operators might have something to say about it?”

On Wednesday, Labour Minister Bernie Davis announced a three-person committee to review this province’s final-offer selection system of fish pricing. The committee is to submit a report, and formula-based framework for fish-price setting by Oct. 12th in just over six weeks.

SEA-NL had requested a meeting with the premier in mid-August to discuss the price-setting system, but his office passed on the request to Elvis Loveless, the Fisheries Minister.

Earlier Wednesday SEA-NL wrote Premier Furey to urge him to order an independent investigation of the failed pricing system — including widespread accusations of anti-competitive and punitive behaviour by the processing sector against the inshore fleet.

“The mandate of this review is too narrow, and will only skim the surface of what’s wrong with pricing and the severe lack of competition in the inshore fishery,” Cleary says.

Seafood prices dictated by the panel this year and in 2022 failed to get commercial fisheries up and running, leading to industry chaos with fleets either refusing to fish for panel-set prices or processors refusing to buy.

The province ordered a review of the pricing system following the 2022 season, but the three-month exercise essentially recommended the status quo, as advised by the union and processors.

This year's snow crab fishery was delayed seven weeks when the inshore fleet refused to fish for the panel-set price of \$2.20/lb that even the panel warned was not the "correct" price.

In the case of lobster — the province's second most valuable fishery after snow crab — the price is set by a long-standing agreed-to formula that the panel reiterated again this year may be obsolete.

While seafood markets around the world are obviously beyond Newfoundland and Labrador's control, the pricing system is solely in the province's hands.

"That means in the absence of a free and open market it is the province's responsibility to ensure the inshore fleet is delivered a fair-market return for their fish," Cleary said.

A fair market return to the inshore fleet has yet to be defined, but if the bar is set at even 50% the inshore fleet is underpaid for most species.

In August, SEA-NL compared DFO's landed-value data with NL seafood prices on the Urner Barry seafood index and found the inshore fleet has a 9% share of the U.S. market price for cod; 29% share of the snow crab price (a huge drop from 2022's 51% share); 43% share of the halibut price; and 58% of lobster.

From SEA-NL's perspective, any pricing system that does not include actual market receipts is open to manipulation.

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