Late-season EI changes increase risk for inshore harvesters: SEA-NL

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Seaward Enterprises Association of Newfoundland and Labrador (SEA-NL) is calling on Ottawa to revisit late-season changes to Employment Insurance eligibility requirements on the grounds they expose the inshore fleet to greater risk at sea.

"Like fishing schedules that tell the inshore fleet when to fish, changes to EI late in the fishing season pressure boats to fish in weather and conditions they might not ordinarily fish in," says Merv Wiseman, an outspoken search and rescue advocate and member of SEA-NL's board of directors.

"The 2023 fishing season has been particularly hard given the price of snow crab and the tie-up, and the late-season EI changes put even more pressure on inshore harvesters to take risks in the fall when the wind and seas are up."

The EI goalposts changed earlier this month when the provincial unemployment rate outside St. John's dropped, raising the minimum qualifying criteria to 490 hours for regular claimants and $18,912 for fish harvesters, whose benefits are based on fish sales.

SEA-NL has warned that trip limits and fishing schedules in the snow crab fishery can pressure owner-operators to fish in dangerous conditions, and are an accident waiting to happen.

"Owner-operators often find themselves fishing in dangerous conditions," said Wiseman. "They should never be pressured into those dangerous conditions."

In the spring of 2022, SEA-NL called for an inquiry into fishing vessel safety and search and rescue in the province on four fronts — fisheries management, Transport Canada Regulations, safety and sea, and search and rescue."

"EI changes can now be added to that list," Wiseman said.

Six fishermen have been lost off Eastern Canada to date in September — including three this week when their fishing vessel, the *Silver Condor*, went down off Quebec's Lower North Shore, and three more earlier this month when their vessel went down off Fleur de Lys.

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