

Conservation must trump profit; SEA-NL calls on DFO to close window on high-grading in crab fishery

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Seaward Enterprises Associations of Newfoundland and Labrador (SEA-NL) has called on the federal minister of Fisheries and Oceans to take immediate action to close a window that's been opened by processors/buyers to allow for high-grading in the snow crab fishery.

“Conservation must trump profit, which is obviously not the case with the processing sector that is out to scrape every last cent from the inshore fleet at the expense of the future health of the stock,” says Ryan Cleary, SEA-NL’s Executive Director.

For years there has been an industry-managed two-price system for snow crab in Newfoundland and Labrador — with a higher price paid for crab with a greater than four-inch carapace (currently \$2.25/lb), and lower price for smaller, but still legal-sized crab (\$1.90/lb).

The price system included a 20% tolerance — allowing an enterprise to be compensated with the higher price for the first 20% of smaller crab — and was specifically designed to reduce high-grading.

High-grading is the “intentional release of legal-size crab in order to retain crab of a higher quality and/or larger size and therefore of greater value.”

DFO has long supported the system. In fact, the 20% tolerance is specifically mentioned in the department’s Integrated Fisheries Management Plan (IFMP) for snow crab in the NL region: “This tolerance is aimed at reducing the incentive to high-grade.”

However, since the end of the crab tie-up in mid-May fish processors and buyers in the province — represented by the Association of Seafood Producers — have unilaterally eliminated the 20% tolerance.

Owner-operators themselves say the incentive to high-grade — especially in light of the severe drop in market price since 2022 — has obviously increased, and is, in fact, taking place on a widespread basis.

SEA-NL wrote federal Fisheries and Oceans Minister Joyce Murray this week urging her to take immediate action.

“It’s clear the industry-managed snow-crab pricing system — more specifically, the 20% tolerance — must be made hard-and-fast DFO policy for the sake of the long-term health of the stock,” Cleary said.

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