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Southern Labrador Lobster: Assessing Fishery Opportunities in a Changing Marine Environment

There are major and exciting improvements in the lobster fisheries in Newfoundland and Labrador. The most recent stock assessment showed that biomass indices have increased to time series highs in all assessment regions in recent years (DFO 2023). That assessment used data up to 2021 and stated that recruitment levels appeared to be at their highest in the time series on the South and West Coast regions.

Since the 2021 fishing season, there have been increased reports of improved catch rates and recruitment from northern 3K in the Northeast Coast lobster assessment region, and from northern 4R in the West Coast region. Harvesters reported record high lobster catch rates in the 2024 fishing season.

Harvesters from southern Labrador approached the FFAW with interest in completing a survey in southern Labrador waters, with the expectation that lobster are moving north because (1) increased water temperatures in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and (2) high catch rates in adjacent lobster fishing areas both in Quebec and in Newfoundland and Labrador. There is interest in determining is the waters off southern Labrador, particularly in the Labrador Straits communities of L'Anse au Loup, L'Anse au Clair, and Forteau, are now prime lobster habitat.

With funding from the Fisheries Research Grant Program (FRGP) of the Sustainable Fisheries and Oceans Policy Division, of the Provincial Department of Fisheries, Forestry and Agriculture, FFAW is proposing an initial survey of lobster distribution and catch rates in southern Labrador. The funding is to support lobster survey charters using modified lobster traps in different communities in southern Labrador, such as L'Anse au Loup, L'Anse au Clair, and Forteau.

In each community, chartered harvesters would set and haul modified lobster traps using 24 h soak times and over a range of depths. We would target 5 setting events in each community. With each harvester setting 10-15 modified traps. Modified traps are simply commercial lobster traps with the escapement vent closed. Modified traps are used to document a broader range of lobster lengths, including undersized lobster or incoming recruitment. Moreover, modified traps are not used in a commercial fishery, underlining the difference between charters (this project) and fisheries.

Carapace length and sex of all lobster captured will be recorded consistent with the data collection protocols used in the long-term lobster monitoring project. All captured lobster will be returned to the water to best ensure post release survival, as will any incidental catch from the lobster pots. Data would also be recorded for all incidental catch or bycatch in addition to lobster abundance, length frequencies and sex distribution. Data summaries and project report would be provided to the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as to DFO Science (NL region) and, of course, to southern Labrador harvesters.

This work will help support ongoing discussions and decision-making for the expanding and lucrative lobster fishery in the province and will, potentially, help harvesters adapt to changing marine environments and species distributions.