

Bulletin

May 2022

UFAWU- Unifor May 2022 Meeting Tour

UFAWU-Unifor is excited to announce an upcoming meeting and dock tour which will cover many areas in and around Vancouver, Sunshine Coast, Vancouver Island, and Bella Bella.

This tour will allow UFAWU-Unifor staff to connect with commercial

harvesters in a series of All Fishermen's Meetings and dock walks.

Face-to-face meetings with harvesters give Union staff the opportunity to hear directly from harvesters while sharing important Union news and activity.

Hearing what matters to harvesters provides the Union with an important roadmap — allowing the Union to prioritize the work that matters most to real commercial fishermen.

To view tour locations, meetings, and updates, go to ufawu-unifor.org.

Pinnipeds: Benign Wildlife or Impactful Predators?

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Pinniped species including harbour seals and Steller sea lions have, in recent years, reached historically high abundances. It has been known for decades that much of their diets

include commercially valuable fish species such as Chinook, coho and sockeye salmon and Pacific herring. Recent scientific evaluations of the impacts of pinnipeds on B.C. fisheries in the past decade have highlighted the potential that increases in pinniped abundance since the 1970s have contributed to declines in fish stock productivity and the lack of recovery of depleted B.C. salmon and herring stocks. A paper published in the Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences in 2019 reported that increases in harbour seal predation since the 1970s were asso-

ciated with a 74% decrease in the long-term sustainable yield of Chinook salmon in southern B.C., and data on the bioenergetic requirements and pinniped population abundances indicate that total annual biomass consumed by some pinniped species has increased markedly since 1970. For example, the total annual consumption of Steller sea lions has in recent years been over 300,000 tons, increasing by about six-fold since the 1970s, and has for the past few years exceeded the total combined annual production of B.C. commercial fisheries and aqua-

culture. However, due to uncertainties in the seasonal and region-specific diets of Steller sea lions, their impacts on particular fisheries remains poorly understood. In recent years, reductions in fishery harvest have not led to stock recoveries and fishery sectors catching species eaten by pinnipeds have expressed concerns about growing impacts of pinnipeds on their livelihoods. Despite these concerns and increasing weight of scientific findings, decision makers have ignored pinniped population growth and refrained from considering policy measures to address them...

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Up until 1972, government agencies supported the hunting and culling of pinnipeds. Indeed, the Federal Government had in place a \$5 bounty on B.C. harbour seals until then. Pinniped population controls in those earlier days were presumably based in part on the notion that high abundances of pinnipeds were damaging to fisheries. Some may ask what then led to the subsequent increases in pinniped abundance on the west coast of North America?

In the early 1970s, the Canadian Fisheries Act was changed to require blanket protection of marine mammals in Canadian waters. This measure was implemented in tandem with the US's Marine Mammal Protection Act also implemented in 1972. These measures were made in "response to increasing concerns among scientists and the public that significant declines in some species of marine mammals were caused by human activities" (www.fisheries.noaa.gov). It is unclear whether at the time, the decision makers considered also the potential ecological linkages between some marine mammals and commercial fisheries. With the new protections of marine mammals in Canada, most of the controls on pinniped populations were ended. Provisions

in the Fisheries Act remain to allow for aboriginal harvest of pinnipeds for food, social and ceremonial purposes, and the consideration of new fisheries for pinnipeds. However, aboriginal harvest of pinnipeds on Canada's west coast has remained insignificant for several decades, and until very recently there have been no new pinniped fisheries proposed.

In agriculture and forestry, the regular implementation of controls on pest species has been fundamental to maintaining levels of productive capacity sufficient to meet society's needs. In these fields, substantial research effort has, for decades, focused on pest species' biology and ecology and the design of effective pest control programs. Insect pest species can multiply rapidly, and without effective controls pest outbreaks have the potential to negatively impact crop and forestry production, national food security, and socio-economic prosperity derived from these industries. Any new national policy initiatives that had the effect of disabling controls on pest populations in agriculture and forestry could end up being catastrophic for the associated industries, particularly under climate change uncertainty. In all likelihood, if a government were to take initiatives that disabled control mea-

asures on agricultural or forest pest species, advocates from these industries (and anyone with common sense) would speak out and try to block any such destructive measures.

In contrast, when controls were removed from pinniped populations in the early 1970s, there was no appreciable opposition, and, unlike insect pest species, the resulting immediate increases in abundance of pinnipeds were scarcely noticeable. For some species such as Steller sea lions and California sea lions, abundance increases in B.C. were delayed until the mid-1980s, and could only be ascertained after many years had passed. These multi-year delays and the slow rate of pinniped population increase, the relatively scarce scientific attention given to pinniped ecology, and the incidence of other concurring changes to factors affecting fisheries production, e.g., habitat degradation, have made it challenging to reduce uncertainties over the potential negative impacts of increased pinniped abundance on Canadian fish stocks. Nonetheless, the notion that elimination of pinniped population controls in the early 1970s has led to reduced productivity for many commercially valuable fish stocks has not been scientifically refuted and

therefore remains credible.

It is the responsibility of the Government of Canada to take initiatives to maintain fisheries as a significant contributor to regional food security and socio-economic prosperity. This, the growing body of scientific evidence suggesting compromised productive capacity of fisheries due to pinniped population growth, and the above-mentioned uncertainties highlight the urgency to prioritize new research to fill critical knowledge gaps about the role of pinnipeds in contributing to reduced fish stock productivity. This research could include new investigations on (1) the seasonal diets of Steller sea lions in different coastal regions and (2) the potential feasibility and trade-offs of, and publicly acceptable methods for, reintroducing new pinniped population controls to further reduce scientific uncertainty and explore options for recovery of fisheries. Such initiatives are needed to address the growing concerns about the impacts of pinniped population growth on B.C.'s marine ecosystem and economy.



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