

The Fishing Industry and COVID-19 Proposal for Federal Safety Supports

Safety Support

The Government of Canada will decide if it is safe for the fishery to open in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. If fishers go to sea and more fish plants open, all enterprise owners and plant operators will be responsible for ensuring the health and safety of workers, by following the guidance and directives of the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada and provincial Chief Medical Officers of Health.

If these fishing sector operations commence, supports will be needed for employers and employees to ensure they have a safe work environment during the pandemic. Physical distancing may be a challenge in various aspects of the fishing industry. Employees of fishing enterprises and fish processing plants, like all other employees, have the right to refuse unsafe work. If absenteeism occurs, it will result in reduced processing capacity and impact on the ability to fish on vessels.

The following guidance for a safe fishery is being provided across Canada:

- Requiring employees to stay home if they are sick;
- Requiring employees to stay home if they are mandated to self-isolate for 14 days, following returning to the province or at the direction of public health;
- Restricting visitors and limiting non-essential personnel;
- Implementing physical distancing or where physical distancing cannot be maintained, physical barriers should be installed, shifts should be alternated, or production levels should be lowered (in order to achieve physical distancing);
- Ensuring employees are frequently washing their hands and providing access to soap and hand washing stations or hand sanitizer for employees;
- Practicing proper respiratory etiquette (such as coughing into one's elbow or a tissue and immediately disposing of the tissue);
- Providing appropriate personal protective equipment, such as surgical masks, gloves, goggles and face shields, when physical distancing cannot be maintained;
- Staggering start, break and end times for employees;
- Increasing the cleaning frequency of high touch areas, washrooms and lunch rooms (e.g., cleaning twice daily);
- Maintaining the same crew for an entire fishing trip;
- Ensuring physical distancing of two meters when unloading fish; and,
- Assigning fixed shifts, where plants have more than one shift, to avoid the spread of COVID-19 and ensure easier contact tracing, if an employee was to have primary or secondary contact with the virus.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Fisheries and Land Resources offers the following recommendations on how to address the uncertainty of this situation, and support workers in the fishing industry through this pandemic.

1. Eliminate the duty on imported personal protective equipment.

Procuring COVID-19 required personal protective equipment (PPE) represents an entirely new and significant cost for components of the fishing sector. This cost is being unnecessarily exacerbated by the imposition of duties and excise tax on imported PPE. Private sector companies providing essential services, such as food, who are required to import PPE for purposes of maintaining operation during the emergency should be granted the same relief from the payment of all applicable duties and excise tax as public sector entities have been granted under Customs Notice 20-08.

Minister Byrne wrote Ministers Blair and Morneau requesting resolution to this issue on April 15, 2020.

2. Establish a funding program to cover the full cost of COVID-19-related occupational health and safety requirements for the fishery and other food processors.

This program should cover all costs incurred to safely prepare for each fisheries related operation during the pandemic. The funding needs to be sufficient to cover the actual cost of these preparations. Fishing related companies have advised the Department of Fisheries and Land Resources that some have each incurred more than \$1 million in expenses to prepare for safe operations during this pandemic. Accordingly, the federal funding thresholds should allow for grants of up to \$1.5 million per corporate entity.

Fishing enterprise owners and fish plant operators have assumed a variety of costs in readying for a potential fishery during this pandemic. These costs include:

- Occupational health and safety consultants;
- Infection control specialists;
- Procurement and supply chain advisors to assist in securing necessary PPE, hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies;
- Engineering or design costs to reconfigure work spaces, processing lines and workflows;
- Capital upgrades, such as the installation of physical barriers where physical distancing is unable to be maintained;
- Human resources, legal, health and labour consultants;
- Equipment and technology to ensure productivity as a result of work changes, including processing line and workflow modifications;
- Development of new safe work policies and procedures;
- Training of employees in new work procedures; and,
- Enhanced cleaning contracts to ensure proper disinfecting.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, this program would cover the 90 fish processing plants and 5,727 registered fishing vessels.

3. Provide supports to fishing enterprise owners and fish plant operators to procure the necessary personal protective equipment needed to operate safely.

Fishing industry partners have expressed concerns with securing sufficient personal protective equipment to operate safely. In advance of a decision on whether fisheries open, enterprise owners and fish plant operators are having to make purchases in

anticipation of a season opening. This equipment, including masks, face shields, gowns, goggles and hand sanitizer, is not readily available in the market place. Procurement supports have been and will continue to be necessary to ensure safe operations.