

Update on the Great Slave Lake Commercial Fishery Revitalization

Mr. Speaker, the revitalization of the Great Slave Lake Commercial fishery has been a goal of the Government of the Northwest Territories since it was first proposed in the 2014 NWT Economic Opportunities Strategy.

This goal continues to be supported by our own government's mandate to: increase food security through locally produced, harvested, and affordable food.

Central to our efforts has been the construction of a new fish processing facility in Hay River capable of processing and packaging Great Slave Lake fish for market.

I am happy to advise Members today that this new plant is now in the final stage of construction and commissioning. I can confirm that the building envelope is completed and all processing equipment is installed. Plumbing, painting and electrical elements are being finalized including freezers and filleting equipment.

Meanwhile, specialized technicians are setting-up and calibrating processing equipment using various species from the Great Slave lake, and training for plant operators and fish processors is anticipated to begin later this month.

Notwithstanding delays due to fire evacuations, the plant will be in operation for the 2023 open water season. The Department of Industry, Tourism and Investment will be collaborating with the Freshwater Fish Market Corporation and relying on their expertise to move things forward this summer.

An agreement is in place that will see the Freshwater Fish Marketing Corporation operate the plant for a three-year period of transitional training and capacity-building with the intention that the facility will ultimately be run as an independent, northern-based business. In order to arrive at that goal, we need to start strong. Therefore, the immediate goals are to ensure the plant gets operational, to hire and build local capacity and to operate the plant with a plan for a systematic phased transition.

To ensure the plant receives sufficient product volume there are several actions that have been identified, under the revitalization strategy, and are being implemented to support increased production. The strategy includes plans to open remote receiving stations in the North Slave region, the training of new fishers and helpers, investing in new technologies as well as in summer and winter fishery development and also in longer-term recruitment efforts for new fishers.

A winter fish training program was delivered in March both in Hay River and Yellowknife. The program gives new fishers the skills and knowledge to have successful winter harvests and presents an opportunity to expand fishing operations year-round once fishers get established. Summer training programs are scheduled in June for Hay River, Fort Resolution and Yellowknife.

Mr. Speaker, once certified, the Hay River Fish Plant will increase the reach of territorial fish products to southern markets in addition to being a local and secure source of nutritious and culturally significant food within the territory.

The Department of Industry, Tourism and Investment is also working on a plan to generate higher returns for fishers. This will include finding viable markets for by-catch such as fish fertilizer, roe, collagen, and canning.

In the short term, increasing fishing production levels will be the essential driver of the plant's long-term profitability.

That means supporting fishers. So importantly, we also continue to work with the Tu'cho fishers cooperative and have recently identified a list of action items to support our shared goals around fish production and towards raising the price of fish for NWT fishers including opportunities to speak with one NWT voice to another key player in the success of this industry, the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

During this transition period, the Department of Industry, Tourism and Investment and Freshwater Fish Market Corporation will monitor operating costs, revenues and expenses to ensure that maximum value is returning to Great Slave Lake fishers.

The Department of Industry, Tourism and Investment is also currently revising the Commercial Fishery Support Program and considering additional programs that might contribute to the growth and modernization of the NWT's commercial fishery with funding and incentives.

In all of this, Mr. Speaker, the development of the Hay River fish processing plant, is representative of the commitments that our government has made to addressing concerns about food security and economic development. I look forward to seeing the Hay River processing plant eventually support the sustainability of the fishing sector, improve the livelihoods of fishermen in the NWT, and increase local food production, and economic value for the territory.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.