

April 20th, 2020

Hon. Blaine Pedersen
Minister of Agriculture and Resource Development
Room 165 Legislative Building
450 Broadway
Winnipeg, MB R3C 0V8

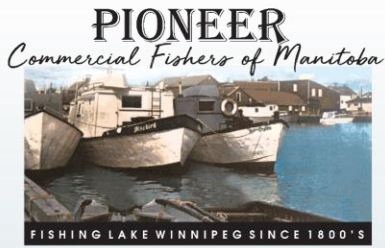
Dear Minister Pederson,

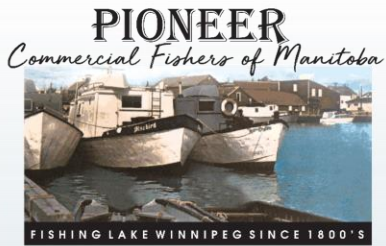
I am writing this letter on behalf of, and at the request of the Pioneer Commercial Fishers of Manitoba [PCFOM], of which I am a member. The contents of the letter reflect the concerns expressed at a recent meeting of our Board. At issue is the mesh size change which raised the minimum mesh size on the South Basin and Channel areas of Lake Winnipeg from 3" to 3 1/2". Of particular concern to us is the data that your Department has used to arrive at this decision. According to your experts this change is necessary because their data indicates that the fishery is on the verge of collapse. We certainly take issue with that assessment, and do so for the following reasons:

1. The predictions of a collapsing fish stock do not line up with fishers day to day and seasonal observations of fish stocks. There are over 800 of us who are actively fishing Lake Winnipeg and we are not seeing signs of an imminent collapse. On the contrary, fishing has been excellent.
2. In 2008 the Department of the day formed the Lake Winnipeg Quota Review Task Force to assess the status of Lake Winnipeg fish stocks as it related to quota levels. The Task Force was made up of fisheries scientists from the University of Manitoba, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and fisher representatives. In it's report submitted to the Department in January of 2011, the Task Force concluded that the assessment data being collected by the Department was inadequate, and that no decisions could be made on quota adjustments until that issue was addressed. The Task Force also recommended that a number of changes be made to the data collection regime on Lake Winnipeg, so that informed decisions could be made in regards to the future management of lake Winnipeg. None of these recommendations have been acted on, so fishers can only conclude that the data is still inadequate.

To address this data disconnect, PCFOM retained the services of the Anishinabek/Ontario Fisheries Resource Centre [A/OFRC] to help us determine if the data used by the Province in arriving at it's decision to change mesh and buy back quota was adequate, and if it's assumptions about the status of fish stocks were correct. PCFOM asked your Department to provide the assessment data used to make the decision on the mesh size change, and the assessment data that showed a collapsing fishery to A/OFRC. A/OFRC has had difficulty accessing this data in a timely manner, and is still waiting for some of the information that they need to complete their assessment.

Fishers have had a strong negative reaction to the mesh size change, because of the huge costs that they will incur in adapting to the new mesh size regulation. Most fishers will be required to purchase new nets, and may see up to 75% of their existing net supply rendered useless by this change. It also means that restaurants, retail outlets and consumers will have to adjust to larger sized fish in a traditional small fillet market. Considering the impact that this change will have on us, we want to be sure that it addresses a real stock issue, and is not being based on flawed data collection and analysis, or being done to placate lobby groups who are opposed to the very existence of the commercial fishery.





Last October, prior to the provincial election, the Board of PCFOM met with members of the Conservative Caucus in MLA Derek Johnson's constituency office in Gimli to outline our concerns with the then proposed mesh size change. Also we reviewed the actions that we had taken at our own expense, to insure that what was being proposed was appropriate. These actions included hiring Boomdonenext, a Winnipeg consulting company to help us organize and interact with government, hiring Myers, Norris and Penny to conduct an economic evaluation of the Lake Winnipeg fishery and hiring A/OFRC to determine the validity of Departmental data. Caucus members present at the meeting included Deputy Premier Heather Stefanson, Minister Jeff Wharton and MLA Derek Johnson. We asked Caucus members to defer the the mesh size change for one year so that the A/OFRC could review the data and collect information through a daily catch report to be initiated for the 2020/21 winter season. The Caucus members were supportive of our efforts and felt that our initiative was a good one. Because of the impending election they could not commit to our proposal at that time, but assured us that our concerns would be dealt with after the election. Mr Minister, we are asking you, as we asked your Caucus colleagues, to defer the mesh size change for one year so that a proper review can take place. PCFOM is quite willing to accept any recommendations that result from the A/OFRC review including the mesh size change, if the review confirms that the Department's conclusions are valid.

We have also asked A/OFRC to develop what they refer to as a fisheries enhancement project, which will eventually result in the eco-certification of Lake Winnipeg.

On another issue, PCFOM has been informed by FPMC, Presteve Foods, Olmstead Fisheries and other local fish processors, that they may not be buying pickerel for up to a year. The Covid-19 crisis has resulted in the collapse of the North American restaurant market, and the demand for pickerel. Pickerel sales are the backbone of the freshwater fishery in Canada. We are left with a limited local market here in Manitoba, which will quickly be swamped by production from Lake Winnipeg, leaving us with few options. Like many other business operators in Manitoba our opportunities are now severely limited, and our futures uncertain. In light of this situation PCFOM will be asking the federal government to provide assistance to Lake Winnipeg fishers, so that we are not forced to fish in 2020/21. There is little chance of us operating successfully in the present market place. If Lake Winnipeg fishers sit out for a year it would allow A/OFRC and your Department to work together to review the mesh size and sustainability issues we want addressed. Sitting out for 2020/21 would obviously enhance fish stocks, and should provide some comfort for your experts who believe that the fishery is collapsing.

In closing Mr. Minister, we want you to know that we are committed to fishing Lake Winnipeg in a sustainable manner, and look forward to working with you and your Department in the future.

Respectfully yours,

Einar Sveinson
President, PCFOM

CC: Hon. Heather Stefanson, Hon. Jeff Wharton, MLA Derk Johnson,
AMC Grand Chief Arlen Dumas, Dr. Kevin Reid, PCFOM Board Members

