

Nova Scotia fisheries minister blasts DFO 'inaction' on elver poaching

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Elvers are juvenile American eels - DFO handout

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Nova Scotia Fisheries Minister Kent Smith has written his federal counterpart Diane Lebouthillier stating his "extreme disappointment" with DFO's management of the elver fishery.

A copy of the letter sent Feb. 15, after Lebouthillier announced her

intention to not open the commercial elver season this spring due to concerns about rampant poaching and violence, was obtained by The Chronicle Herald.

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"... In spite of repeated calls from my Department for increased enforcement and prosecutions to curtail the poaching activities, there are no tangible results that indicate your Department is protecting the resource and harvesters, both commercial and indigenous, from illegal

activities on the rivers and throughout the black-market value chain," wrote Smith.

"Continued DFO inaction on this file, and this proposed closure, will have no impact on illegal harvesting. The only foreseeable outcome from this proposed closure is financial hardship inflicted upon our law-abiding licence-holders."

There are eight commercial licence holders in Atlantic Canada who employ some 200 people in the fishery that had a value of \$46 million in 2022.

There are also three First Nations licence holders.

A Chronicle Herald investigation showed that despite receiving more than 1,400 reports of illegal harvesting of the juvenile American eels last year on East Coast rivers, DFO only laid 60 Fisheries Act charges.

The Public Prosecution Service of Canada won't confirm whether they have prosecuted to completion any Fisheries Act charges related to illegal elver fishery within the past three years.

Meanwhile, internal DFO communications from last season showed that a biker gang has sought involvement in the fishery, unlicensed harvesters have begun carrying guns, one First Nations harvester was shot by an unlicensed harvester last year and there were multiple other violent conflicts.

Smith warned Lebouthillier that closing the commercial fishery will "have no impact on illegal harvesting" if there are no legal consequences for illegally harvesting the elvers that are shipped to China and are worth thousands of dollars a kilogram.

Importation data from the Government of Hong Kong shows that elver exports to that country went on unabated despite then-federal fisheries minister Joyce Murray closing the commercial season after only half the total allowable catch was caught.

"... Regardless of whether there is a 2024 fishing season or not, I am requesting that for the future of the elver/eel stocks, the future potential of the elver fisheries, and for the safety of Nova Scotians, there be a concerted and appreciable increase of enforcement activities on Nova Scotia's rivers starting with this year's elver season and moving forward for all future elver seasons," reads Smith's letter.

Provincial government wildlife officers, who also have authority over inland waterways, have been offered by the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables to join federal fisheries officers this spring in enforcement operations on rivers.

Smith's letter is just the latest criticism of an alleged lack of enforcement of the Fisheries Act by the federal government.

The House of Commons standing committee on fisheries and oceans held an emergency meeting last month during which DFO's top brass were raked over the coals by MPs.

The Senate also held an emergency meeting where they heard from commercial harvesters frustrated with DFO's lack of enforcement.

In his letter, Smith asked that special attention be given to protecting the East River, Chester, where a long-term study into elver and American eel abundance has been repeatedly disrupted by poachers and vandalism.

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