



# BRIEFING NOTE: Keeping a century-old fishery alive

The swordfish harpoon fleet is one of the oldest, most storied, and sustainable fisheries in Atlantic Canada. It was once a highly successful fishery. However, changing ocean conditions have made swordfish basking at the surface where they can be seen and harpooned, increasingly hard to find. Fishers are leaving much of their small quota in the water, making it harder for this sustainable fishing method to be a viable economic endeavor.

To adapt to these unpredictable conditions, this proactive fleet has proposed the addition of a new gear type to their licence, rod and reel gear, which uses a single deep-water hook and line and is a selective and low impact gear method. This helps them access fish when harpooning is not possible and could enable some fishers to offer charter trips in the future. Two years of rod and reel gear trials shows promise for increasing catch and maintaining the low rates of bycatch in the fishery.

A charter operation would allow fishers to increase revenue, value-add to their catches and stay in business while remaining within their quota. Swordfish fishing charters, led by licenced commercial fishers would provide tourists from around the world a thrilling, once in- a-lifetime experience, fishing for one of the most unique species in our region.

Decision makers need to prioritise approval of rod and reel gear for this fleet and enabling policy for new charter fishing business opportunities. Flexibility to adapt and innovate in face of changing oceans will help maintain sustainable, local seafood jobs and food sources and provide wider economic benefits for coastal communities in the blue economy of the future.

## **KEY FINDINGS:**

---

- Community survey results show clear support (89%) for the development of a charter fishery for swordfish across the province.
- If a commercial fisher were to host just three five-day trips in a season for two passengers at a time, they could generate \$61,000 (45000 USD) in additional revenue to their commercial operations.
- Community survey results show that 89% of respondents would expect to see benefits from a swordfish charter fishery.
- Regulatory barriers specifically licensing under the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) and Transport Canada requirements, present a challenge to get this venture up and running.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

---

- Add the option to fish with rod and reel gear to all 184 'A' licence holders in the harpoon fishery.
- Create enabling policy and regulations to allow swordfish charter licences for interested harpoon fleet members.
- Create a fit for purpose program under Transport Canada to help support and guide fishers through the process of meeting requirements for vessels of the harpoon fleet size class to carry passengers for charter operations. This could be similar to the 'blue decal' program which exists for smaller charter vessels.
- Create a joint DFO and Transport Canada working group tasked with drafting enabling policies and regulations to accelerate the creation of harpoon/rod and reel swordfish charter fishing opportunities. The working group should include all interested Rightsholders, and stakeholders, including NGOs and researchers with expertise.



### **VALUE-ADDING OPPORTUNITIES:**

---

The EAC assessed the potential returns to the current Nova Scotia swordfish harpoon fishery from adding a charter fishery using both harpoon and rod and reel gears.

The rate charged for a five-day trip Nova Scotia swordfish chart trip, per paying customer could be up to \$10,000 (7,500 USD), with most vessels able to accommodate 2-6 passengers per trip.

In 2021, the 99 active licence holders in the swordfish harpoon fishery caught just 7.4 tonnes of their 134.8 tonne quota of swordfish, with a landed value of \$9.82/kg and overall landed value of \$72,668. If just those 9 licence holders participated, they could generate an additional \$550,000, increasing their revenue eight-fold.

If a commercial fisher hosted just three five-day trips in a season for two passengers at a time, they could generate \$61,000 (45,000 USD) in additional revenue to their commercial operations.

There are currently 184 Harpoon A licence holders in Maritimes region of DFO, although many have not participated in the fishery in recent years. If just 25% of those (46) licence holders chose to operate charter operations, that could generate over \$2.5 million (2.0 million USD) in additional revenue across the fleet.

Wider economic benefits to the community may be possible in addition to the revenue generated directly for the vessel owner through charters. Spending by charter fishing customers in the wider community would include accommodations, transportation to and from the airport and fishing port, dining in local restaurants, and purchase of merchandise before and after fishing trips, for example.

Additionally, tapping into tourism provides the opportunity to increase visibility and education for these communities and for the fishery.

### **CONCLUSION:**

---

It is critically important to create alternatives and options to adapt for those in the fishing industry when facing challenges like reduced catches due to changing conditions. Keeping fishers in business through the addition of rod and reel and charters provides not only immediate economic benefits, but keeps a sustainable food source on the market, and has wider benefits to our rural communities.

Although there is interest in these initiatives from this fleet and many stakeholders, there are barriers which will need to be addressed and will take work from relevant federal departments, the fleet, and stakeholders to overcome.

Our vision is to see this skilled and clean swordfish fishery continue and thrive in our province for another century.

*Isnor, H. Callegari, C. and Arnold, S. Keeping a century-old fishery alive. Ecology Action centre, August 2024. <https://ecologyaction.ca/keeping-century-old-fishery-alive>*

### **CONTACT:**

---

Holly Isnor, Sustainable Fisheries Coordinator  
hollyisnor@ecologyaction.ca