

OCTOBER, 1997

Conning the Fishing Communities

ISLE MADAME, NS –

Nearly two billion dollars showered on the hapless east coast! And no results. Cod almighty, where will it end?

In 1994, the federal government pledged to spend \$1.9 billion over five years on The Atlantic Groundfish Strategy, intended to help Atlantic fishing communities "adjust" to the collapse of the cod fishery -- which scientists and fishermen had long predicted, but which government had ignored. Three years later, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans is dismayed that little adjustment has been achieved, while the Auditor General says that although the program was supposed to reduce fishing overcapacity, "groundfish harvesting capacity was not significantly reduced through TAGS measures."

Another Atlantic failure. Right?

Wrong. The failure is in Ottawa. The concept was intelligent -- supporting incomes while inducing 50% of the workers to leave the fishery. Applicants had to create personal "action plans" to qualify for other work; the budget included \$782 million for such "active measures" as retraining for other jobs, and \$50 million for community economic development to create those jobs.

But TAGS was designed for 26,500 people -- and nearly 40,000 qualified. As one wonder-struck provincial official noted, "not only couldn't the feds count the fish, they couldn't count the fishermen."

The government could have salvaged the program by increasing its budget or by narrowing its focus. Instead, it repeatedly "reprofiled" the same budget, siphoning funds from "adjustment" components and increasing income support from \$708 million to \$1.45 billion.

"The program changed so rapidly that people couldn't keep up," says a union official. "They couldn't plan. They never knew where they stood." Trainees who had used their TAGS support to begin literacy, basic education and even college studies were shifted to other programs, but those who hadn't started were informed that TAGS would not support their action plans.

"Adjustment" did work here in Isle Madame -- but only because this community foresaw the crisis and had a redevelopment plan in place a year before TAGS. More than half of its 350 fisheries workers have left the industry, and others are currently re-tooling their lives. When TAGS cut off all adjustment measures in August, 1996, most of Isle Madame's workers had already moved on.

The Auditor General says TAGS was hastily conceived and poorly planned. It was. The government never grasped, for instance, that the core of TAGS had to be community economic development. You don't start with training; you start with jobs. "Retraining" for non-existent work simply breeds cynicism. "Fool School," people said. "Training for what?"

The CED budget in TAGS amounted to less than 3% of the total, and the money rarely reached the affected communities. Instead, it was handed over to provincial governments who tucked it into their own development schemes, putting a TAGS label on projects which happened to take place in fishing communities.

So, with \$1.9 billion sloshing around the region, Isle Madame's feisty young development workers found themselves scrambling for dribbles of funding and often working as unpaid volunteers. Yet last week an assistant deputy minister told a Commons committee that Isle Madame was one of thousands of TAGS' unpublicized CED success stories. Codswallop. TAGS helped, but Development Isle Madame has operated largely on volunteer effort and funding from other sources.

CED requires an integrated long-term strategy. Consult with the community, identify opportunities, create the new enterprises, and then train the workers. CED works, but it demands careful planning and a long-term, flexible commitment from government. TAGS never provided that.

Worst of all, TAGS was a moral failure, rooted in mendacity and defended by lies. Take the \$1.9 billion. Closing down a major industry means a heavy drain on programs like unemployment insurance -- so most of the allocated funds were going to be spent anyway.

How much? The Auditor General doesn't say. (He has lots of advice about fishing, though.) TAGS administrators claim they don't know. They lie. A January, 1996, internal report reveals that most of the funding -- just over \$1 billion -- was old money. Calling TAGS "a \$1.9 billion adjustment program" simply reinforces ugly and misleading stereotypes.

Today TAGS is merely a welfare system. To stay within budget, it will probably end a year early. It will do nothing further to advance communities, individuals or the industry. But it could have done so much more.

"We did what they asked us to do, and then they just dropped us," says one of the program's most dedicated workers. "The government really doesn't want us to be independent -- because then they'll lose control over us."