

Fisheries officials say poor ice in Gulf may affect this year's seal hunt

Published: Tuesday, March 20, 2007 | 5:40 PM ET
Canadian Press

CHARLOTTETOWN (CP) - Federal fisheries officials are urging seal hunters to be patient as they decide whether there are enough seals and ice in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence for a hunt this year.

Fisheries Department spokesman Phil Jenkins said Tuesday the ice is poor in the southern Gulf around the Iles de la Madeleine and there's higher-than-normal mortality of seal pups.

"It's unusual and it's giving us concern," Jenkins said in an interview from Ottawa.

"The minister (Fisheries Minister Loyola Hearn) is holding off on management measures until he has a good handle on all the information."

Although the most recent seal count from 2004 estimated the harp seal herd on the East Coast at around six million, several consecutive years of poor ice and high pup mortality is taking a toll on the population.

Newborn seals cannot swim in the first few weeks of life and require ice for survival.

Last year's total allowable catch was 335,000 seals. Most of them - about 70 per cent - were taken off the northeast coast of Newfoundland and Labrador in an area called the Front.

Jenkins said the poor ice and high pup mortality makes it uncertain a hunt can take place in the southern Gulf, which is the area that traditionally gives rise to the most controversy because it is accessible to observers and seal hunt protesters.

The total allowable catch in the Gulf last year was about 97,000 seals.

Jenkins said ice conditions are better in the northern Gulf of St. Lawrence and in the Front.

Normally, the federal Fisheries Department has set catch limits by this time of the year. The hunt traditionally is under way in the southern Gulf by late March.

"Our advice to the industry is be patient," Jenkins said.

"The minister wants to do the right thing for the herd and make sure it's there for generations to come as abundant as it has been in the past."

One seal hunt protest group, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, has already called for the seal hunt in the Gulf of St. Lawrence to be cancelled due to poor ice conditions.

"It's absolutely unbelievable," said Sheryl Fink, a researcher with the animal welfare group.

"Our surveillance flights are reporting that there is not a single harp seal to be found in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence."

Fink said a recent scientific report by the organization found that in nine of the past 11 years, average ice coverage has been well below the norm for the past 37 years.

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