

New Brunswick: Company Studies Ways for Fishing Nets and Whales to Co-exist

Canadian Press 8/11/19

The solutions could be in place as early as the 2021 fishing season



A North Atlantic right whale feeds on the surface of Cape Cod Bay off Plymouth, MA, on March 28, 2018.

Measures taken to protect North Atlantic right whales from being struck by ships and getting caught in fishing gear may not be doing enough to prevent more whales from being hurt or killed in Atlantic Canada, according to data contained in a new federal scientific review. Michael Dwyer / AP Photo

A glimmer of hope for the fate of the endangered North Atlantic right whale is on the horizon, thanks to the efforts of snow crab fishermen working to prevent the whales from becoming entangled in their fishing gear.

Only about 400 of these whales remain and at least eight have died in Canadian waters this year; in the past month, four more have been found entangled in ropes.

“The initiative comes from associations of crab fishermen, who have saying since 2017 that something has to be done because they did not want to lose their hauls,” explained Philippe Cormier, president of the New Brunswick-based Corbo engineering firm.

Crab fishermen had never before been confronted by the presence of right whales in their fishing territory but, in the face of this new reality, they decided to “take the bull by the horns and do something,” he said.

The Caraquet business took on the work the of identifying and evaluating solutions already on the market and of developing strategies that permit the co-existence of fishermen and whales.

For the moment, the most obvious solution is rope free traps: The absence of a rope eliminates the risk of whales becoming entangled. The trap remains underwater and the captain pushes a button that causes a buoy attached to a cable to be freed. If all goes well, the buoy appears on the surface in 60 to 90 seconds and the fishermen can raise the trap the usual way.

“It’s promising and many people are asking why we don’t use it right away — but it’s still in the scientific testing phase, with tests being done in the water and it has not yet been adapted for commercial fishing,” Cormier explained. In some trials, the buoy took up to 30 minutes to surface; in other cases it never surfaced.

“There is still work to be done as far as the reliability of the equipment,” he said. “We don’t want to create another problem — that of ghost fishing.” In ghost fishing, abandoned or lost fishing gear left in the water continues to kill marine life as gear can continue to fish for years; this can have both adverse environmental and economic effects.

Corbo is working with three companies that have similar products in an effort to make the equipment useful for fishing. The cables now used by fisherman yield when submitted to pressure of about 12,000 pounds. According to scientists’ estimates, a whale should be able to disentangle itself from a cable with a resistance of less than 1,700 pounds.

“A local business has developed cords with the same measurements and specifications as a standard cable, but which can break at weights of less than 1,700 pounds,” Cormier said. “We have done several tests in the ocean this summer and it’s the most promising thing so far.”

But for the moment, a cable with a resistance of 1,700 pounds is not strong enough to permit fishermen to raise their traps in the traditional manner.

“We are in the process of looking at how we can modify fishing techniques to make this possible,” Cormier said. “It’s really promising and we have made breakthroughs this summer.” Corbo is also looking at how fishing boat stabilizers could be modified to keep them from cutting through the cables when they hit them accidentally. “It become an even greater risk factor for the whales because we don’t know where the trap is and it becomes a ghost trap,” Cormier explained. “We are in the process of working to modify the stabilizers and we have done tests this summer.”

The company’s work is financed by the Atlantic Fisheries Fund, a federal program. Corbo informs Fisheries and Oceans Canada, the federal government’s marine department, of its progress every few months.

This collaboration between the fishermen, the private sector and government is intended to avoid a repeat of past failures. “We have seen often in the past, mostly in the United States, to try to impose on fishermen things that were not viable — and it creates nightmares: It’s not the way to work,” Cormier said.

“It’s really win-win when it comes from fishermen and we know that it will be developed properly, in a way that will permit co-existence and won’t lead to an end to fishing, something which would be to no one’s advantage,” he said.

“If we can improve fishing techniques to minimize the impact on the right whale, but also help fisherman to be more efficient, everyone would win.”

The solutions could be in place as early as the 2021 fishing season.

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