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Dhaliwal says \$13-M spent to control illegal fishing should have gone to natives

It cost the federal government \$13-million to control illegal native fishing in two hot spots in the Maritimes last year.

Fisheries Minister Herb Dhaliwal told the Commons fisheries committee last night that he would rather have spent the money helping the natives of Burnt Church and Indian Brook, Nova Scotia.

The largest share of the money was spent in Burnt Church where conflict between fisheries officers and members of the first nation occurred almost daily last summer.

"I'd rather spend the money in helping aboriginal people," he said after the two-hour meeting.

The extra enforcement cost was covered by a \$160-million special budget Ottawa allocated for dealing with the Marshall decision, a 1999 Supreme Court ruling that gave Mi'kmaq and Maliseet bands the right to earn a moderate livelihood from year-round fishing, hunting and gathering.

It was the minister's first appearance before the fisheries committee since last year's fishing agreements expired on the weekend. There were deals with 30 of 34 Mi'kmaq and Maliseet bands in the Maritimes and Quebec

considered to be the modern beneficiaries of 18th century Peace and Friendship treaties.

Mr. Dhaliwal told the committee he's working to sign new deals with the region's natives and in the interim the old agreements will be honoured.

He also confirmed that about 3 per cent of the inshore fishery has been transferred to the native bands, and added that there was more to be done to combat poverty on the reserves. He later told reporters that the government has no target share of the fishery it plans to transfer.

The committee members mostly concentrated their questions on how to reel in native fishing, from a challenge to the government's legal interpretation from Alliance MP John Cummins to a question about native abuse of the food fishery from Beauséjour-Petitcodiac Liberal MP Dominic LeBlanc.

Mr. LeBlanc said he's heard a lot of evidence from fishermen in his riding about abuses of the food fishery, which is meant to provide only for consumption and not to be sold. Mr. Dhaliwal vowed that the department would punish any abuse.

In the audience, Noah Augustine, an advisor to the Assembly of First Nations, predicted conflict on the seas again this summer; and Ovide Mercredi, the former AFN chief who is acting as a special advisor on Marshall, blasted the committee members for being "anti-Indian."

He said it was impossible to tell the difference between Liberal and Alliance members, citing Mr. LeBlanc's comments on the food fishery as proof.

"They are saying we are getting too much, and now you have that new Liberal MP, the former

governor-general's son, saying that our people are abusing the food fishery and they are turning it into a commercial fishery. Where is the evidence for that? Why is he making allegations that way? Maligning our reputation as a people?"

In all his years of watching Parliamentary committees, he said he has never seen such a display. "This is disgusting."