OCEANA Protecting the World's Oceans

# Stop Overfishing Capelin in Northeastern Newfoundland and Labrador

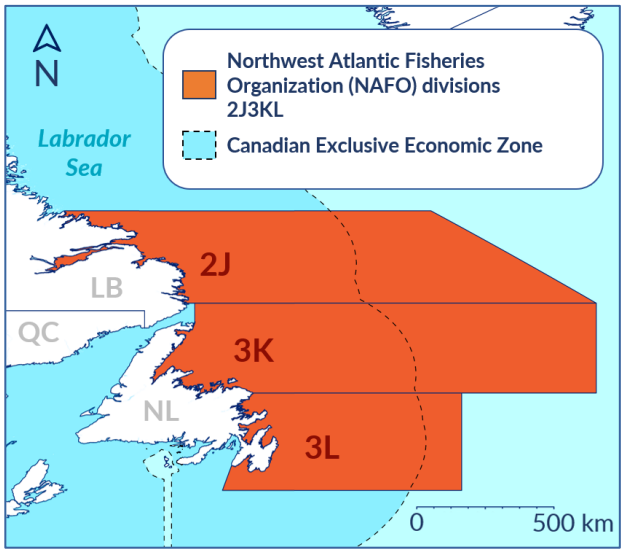
Capelin (*Mallotus villosus*) are a small schooling fish living in the waters of northeastern Newfoundland and Labrador. As a keystone species, capelin feed many other animals in the ecosystem, including humpback whales, Atlantic puffins and other fish like cod.

Capelin in NAFO areas 2J3KL do not have reference points, the benchmarks used to determine the size of the population and how much can be harvested without overfishing. Without reference points, capelin is labelled by Fisheries and Oceans Canada as having an uncertain health status. New analyses by Oceana Canada in 2022 shows that the stock is in fact heavily depleted and would be considered in the critical zone.

According to Oceana Canada's analysis, 2J3KL capelin are **overfished** and **overfishing** has been happening for the past 30 years. This stock has a dire outlook for the future, which would be devastating for the Atlantic Ocean and coastal communities. To change course, a significant management shift is needed that prioritizes a return to abundance.

## Oceana Canada Recommendations

The capelin fishery is not sustainable and threatens the health and well-being of other species and the wider ecosystem of northeastern Newfoundland. It is up to Fisheries and Oceans Canada to make the right decision to close this fishery and invest in capelin research that will inform a rebuilding plan to bring the population back to healthy levels.




To allow capelin to rebound and to sustainably manage a future fishery, Oceana Canada recommends that Fisheries and Oceans Canada take the following actions:

1. **Immediately close the 2J3KL capelin fishery.**
2. **Invest in capelin research programs and develop a rebuilding plan for the stock as required for critical zone stocks under the amended *Fisheries Act*.**
3. **Develop and implement a fisheries management plan that accounts for capelin's role in the ecosystem and with adequate monitoring, prior to resuming the capelin fishery.**

Fisheries management plans should adhere to the Precautionary Approach and contain:

a) A minimum stock biomass below which commercial harvesting is prohibited, and;
b) A maximum harvest cap to reduce the probability of overfishing in years when environmental conditions are poor.

## The Time To Act Is Now

Fisheries and Oceans Canada has the opportunity to stop overfishing capelin and manage the stock in a way that rebuilds capelin to abundance for the long-term health of the ocean and the coastal communities that depend on it. This government can make a difference by closing the capelin fishery – before it's too late.

## Critically Important, Critically Depleted

As a forage fish, capelin eat plankton and in turn are eaten by larger fish, seabirds and marine mammals, like humpback whales. They play a crucial role in transferring energy through the food web. Capelin, like other forage fish, are sensitive to the environment around them and can have wide fluctuations in their population over time. These two factors require capelin management to account for both their unique life history and the many species that rely on them.

Oceana Canada conducted new research in 2022 to assign a provisional health status to capelin. According to this assessment, capelin in NAFO areas 2J3KL are overfished and would be considered critical under the Precautionary Approach. The critical zone indicates that serious harm is occurring to the stock and the Precautionary Approach dictates that conservation become the preeminent concern.

In addition, this assessment showed that capelin are actively being overfished and have been for decades, as fishing pressure has been too high for the population to withstand for the past 30 years.

## Capelin Fishery Targets Eggs, Impeding Future Growth

Despite capelin in northeastern Newfoundland being critically depleted, fishing pressure has been allowed to continue. This fishery targets the roe (or eggs) of female capelin, removing not only adults from the water, but potentially billions of larvae before they can hatch and contribute to the next generation, further hampering the population's ability to recover. **The 2021 quota for 2J3KL capelin of approximately 15,000 metric tonnes could represent a loss of up to 21 trillion eggs**.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## Canadians Want Rebuilt Fisheries

Polling conducted in April 2021 by Abacus Data for Oceana Canada found that 97 per cent of Canadians think it is important that the government work to rebuild fish populations to healthy levels, and 95 per cent of all Canadians — 99 per cent of Atlantic Canadians — say it is an important part of our post-pandemic economic recovery. Furthermore, 81 per cent of Canadians believe that the government of Canada has a responsibility to protect Canada's oceans and marine life.

We know that rebuilding fisheries is possible. Between 2010-2020, the United States government successfully rebuilt 26 fish stocks under strong rebuilding regulations within the Magnuson-Stevens Act. In the same 10 years, Canada has rebuilt none.

## About Oceana Canada

Oceana Canada was established as an independent charity in 2015 and is part of the largest international advocacy group dedicated solely to ocean conservation. Oceana Canada has successfully campaigned to end the shark fin trade, make rebuilding depleted fish populations the law, improve the way fisheries are managed and protect marine habitat. We work with civil society, academics, fishers, Indigenous Peoples and the federal government to return Canada's formerly vibrant oceans to health and abundance. By restoring Canada's oceans, we can strengthen our communities, reap greater economic and nutritional benefits and protect our future. Oceana.ca

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