



## Responsible Seafood Summit: “Some Fails But Overall Success” With Ropeless Gear In Snow Crab Fishery

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“Ropeless is hopeless.” It’s a phrase that many snow crab and lobster harvesters can likely relate to following the declaration of the unusual mortality event for North Atlantic right whales in 2017.

Martin Noël, a snow crab fisherman and Captain of the FV Jean-Denis Martin in New Brunswick, has been fishing for 29 years. And on the “Close To Home: Innovation and Adaptation Amongst Canadian Snow Crab and Lobster Fisheries” panel at the Global Seafood Alliance’s Responsible Seafood Summit, he was the first to say that he thought “ropeless is hopeless.” But after participating in some trials with ropeless or buoy-on-demand, Noël’s perception has changed.

Kathryn Novak, the Biodiversity and Nature Director with the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership, moderated the panel in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada. She was joined by Noël; Katherine Morrisette, the MKM Global, Implementer for Southern Gulf of St. Lawrence Snow Crab FIP; Stephen Jones, Chief Business Development Officer at Ashored Innovations; and Elizabeth Vézina, Fisheries Engagement Specialist and Field Program Lead for the CANFish Gear Lending Program.



Noël opened the conversation amongst the panel by talking about how 2017 was supposed to be a special year for the snow crab fishery due to its largest quota. But everything changed when that first North Atlantic right whale was found dead in their zone. The season was shortened, creating a lot of frustration amongst fishermen. They needed a solution fast. And by 2018 Noël was involved in some of the first trials with ropeless or buoy-on-demand gear.

“It worked,” said Noël, explaining that there have been “some fails but overall success.”

Speaking about the challenges, Noël said that a big issue was the switch from fishing with trawls instead of singles – something that lobstermen are used to but not snow crab fishermen. Another issue encountered was not being able to see other fishermen’s gear. However, the introduction of an app trap tracker has allowed them to know where others are.

“Never imagined I would use a smart phone to go fishing,” Noël laughed.

The introduction of whale-safe gear has definitely been a collaborative project, with people like Stephen Jones, a gear manufacturer, conducting a lot of trials in the Bay of Fundy in order to make the fishing process more efficient for harvesters. But initiatives like the CanFISH Gear Lending Program, which began just last year, is what’s really benefiting the industry.

The CanFISH Gear Lending Program from the Canadian Wildlife Federation has 175 on-demand units in inventory for lending. To date about 350,000 lbs of snow crab have been landed to date, with more than 500 buoy lines removed from the fishery and more than 200 lobster and snow crab harvesters licensed to fish with on-demand gear in areas closed to traditional fishing gear.

As Elizabeth Vézina explained, there are still a lot of barriers for these harvesters – a main one being the very high cost as the gear is still in development and very experimental. CanFISH is aiming to alleviate some of these barriers by providing gear for free, as well as training and ongoing support for anyone who has been impacted by the closures due to North Atlantic right whales. The goal of the program is to make sure that the gear works to build confidence in the gear for harvesters, as they don’t want the industry to invest their own funds until things are final.

And while the gear still has a little ways to go, as Noël said, “at the end of the day success changes perception...we’re on the right path.”

But for Katherine Morrisette, it’s important to educate people – specifically retailers – about the time and money that is going into this gear.

“We all have to work together to make this viable,” said Morrisette.

*SeafoodNews is reporting live from the Responsible Seafood Summit in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada. Check back for more coverage.*

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Amanda Buckle

Urner Barry

1-732-240-5330

[abuckle@urnerbarry.com](mailto:abuckle@urnerbarry.com)

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