

# Red rating ignores FIP progress in Canada's second-largest snow crab fishery

*'We were not consulted at all. They didn't reach out. They don't know what we're doing. We haven't had a [whale] mortality or entanglement in five years' - Katherine Morrissette*

By [Jason Huffman](#) | Sept. 15, 2022 18:21 BST

The Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program didn't contact anyone in the fishery improvement project (FIP) created last year by the snow crab industry in Canada's Gulf of Saint Lawrence before lumping it in with other fisheries to receive a red "avoid" rating, asserted FIP manager Katherine Morrissette in an interview with *Undercurrent News* on Thursday (Sept. 15).

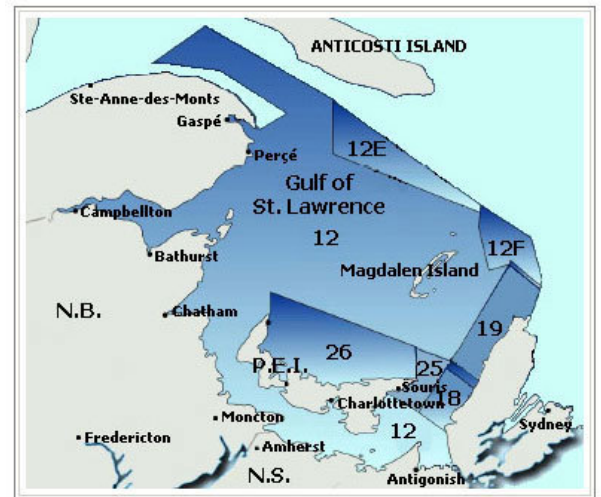
If it had, she said, she would have shown the seafood rating service how the sector has been working tirelessly for several years to reduce the risk of endangered North Atlantic right whales getting snared in trap lines and given lots of examples of steps taken.

"We were not consulted at all," she said. "They didn't reach out. They don't know what we're doing. We haven't had a mortality or entanglement in five years."

Much of the attention regarding Seafood Watch's recent rating changes has gone to the North American lobster (*Homarus americanus*) sectors in both Canada and the US, with direct-to-consumer giants HelloFresh and Blue Apron declaring that they would no longer offer lobster on their menus. Morrissette, a food industry lawyer, mediator, arbitrator and the founder of MKM Global, in Quebec City, Quebec, said she's happy for snow crab to be largely ignored by the media.

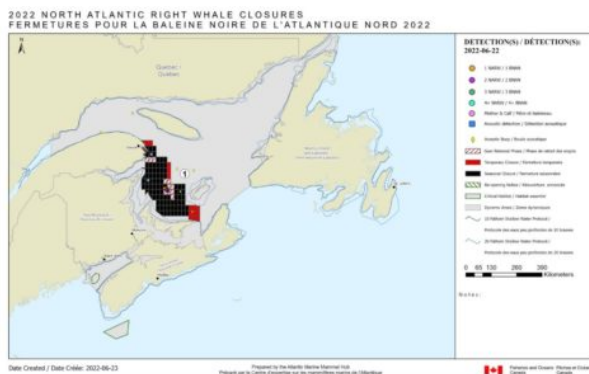


But her group, which includes 15 processors in the provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick as well as several big wholesalers and harvester groups, won't hide its disappointment, she added. The FIP's sponsors include such heavy hitters as Beaver Street Fisheries, Eastern Fish, Whitecap, Groupe MDMP and International Seafood and Bait to name just a few. It's had support also from the major US retail chain Publix.




The group announced its "Canada Gulf of Saint Lawrence snow crab pot/trap FIP" in June 2021 after the fishery had its Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification suspended in 2018 over right whale entanglement concerns. It later withdrew the fishery from MSC but has been working and making progress toward reapplying for certification in 2024, she said.

Canada's southern gulf snow crab (*Chionoecetes opilio*) fishery, which includes the big crab fishing area (CFA) 12, had its total allowable catch (TAC) increased by 34% to 32,519t for the 2022 season from the 24,261t permitted in 2021 after receiving a good science report from Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), as earlier reported by *Undercurrent*. That's second only to the snow crab fishery off the coast of Newfoundland & Labrador, which had its TAC increased by 32% to 50,470t from 38,186t, for the 2022 season.



However, the southern gulf season, which started in mid-April, ended on June 30 with roughly 18% of the fishery off limits to harvesters due to closures resulting from right whale sightings. DFO reported as many as 376 whale sightings in the region during the season.

 The June 23 update of a snow crab closure map maintained by Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

Simultaneously, the whole Canadian snow crab sector has been dealing with plummeting price 

since early in the year, though, as reported this week by *Undercurrent*, prices appear to be slowly bouncing back.

One of the changes made by DFO to better protect whales has been to trigger a 15-day closure in as many as nine adjacent seven-by-10-nautical mile quadrants or grids any time a whale is sighted. If another whale is sighted between days nine and 15, that could lead to season-long closures of quadrants, based on the new rules.

But that change is just one of the many made in the southern gulf snow crab fishery. Morrissette's FIP also has successfully argued for an earlier season start to get in as much fishing as possible before the whales migrate into the area. That has involved de-icing ports, harbors and channels

Harvesters in CFA 12 were among the first to trial ropeless systems. As many as 24 have been cleared to drop some 50 ropeless gear traps each in areas that are otherwise closed to protect right whales. As much as CAD 20 million (\$15.2m) has been spent as part of the Whale Safe Fear Adoption Fund.

In areas where gear is not ropeless, harvesters have begun using weaker rope that can break more easily. Also, as much as CAD 8.3m is being spent annually retrieve and recycle ghost gear.

Aircraft have logged over 13,500 hours scouting for whales in the gulf, while assisted also by drones, underwater gliders and acoustic devices.



📷 Snow crab pots in Canada. Photo by Tim Moffitt.

Morrissette said she has yet to hear of any retailers or food service companies dropping snow crab in response to the Seafood Watch rating change, so she's not sure how much sleep should be lost by her group. She pointed to the danger of boat collisions as a greater threat to the whales.



"If you want to think like that, we should stop buying any product that's being taken as cargo in vessels traveling in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence," she said of the ratings change.

Also, she added, that the problem is not going away soon. "North Atlantic right whales will be critically endangered for the rest of our lives," she said.


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