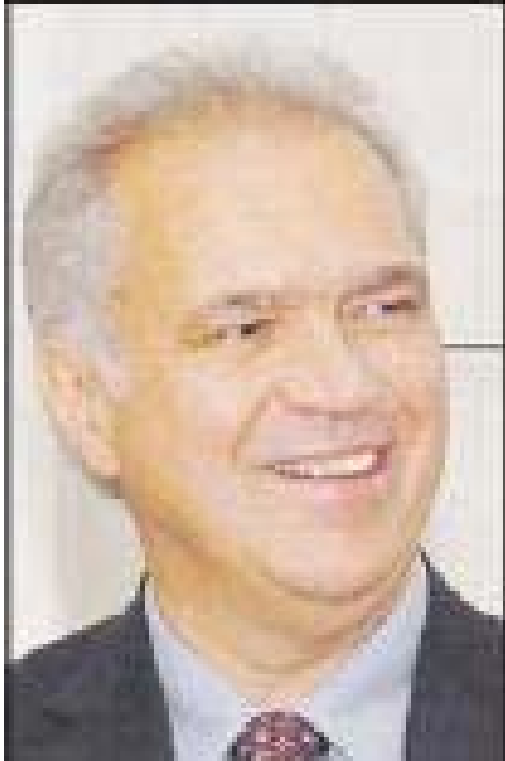


Bennett to government: show me the contract

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Jim Bennett

Liberal fisheries critic Jim Bennett doesn't trust what he's hearing from the provincial government. This week, Bennett questioned Ocean Choice International's commitment to process fish in the province, and the government's commitment to hold their feet to the fire.

Bennett said without documents that the government is holding close to its chest, it's impossible to develop a fully formed opinion. "I think that having access really is critical to a fully informed debate," Bennett said. "The debate at this point has been partially informed."

OCI has been struggling to make its redfish and yellowtail flounder operations on the Burin Peninsula viable.

It has announced the closure of the Marystown fish plant.

It is trying to get the province to grant an exemption allowing it to ship out most of its yellowtail and redfish quotas un-processed, in exchange for providing full-time, year-round processing jobs at its smaller plant in Fortune.

Many of the issues around the Marystown plant are governed by an agreement signed between OCI and the province five years ago when the company bought yellowtail and redfish quotas formerly owned by Fishery Products International.

According to a news release at the time, "the Marystown facility will remain at the status quo, with 400-500 people processing groundfish year-round," according to the negotiated terms.

The same release says, "Groundfish quotas will be held in a holding company owned by both the company and the province. As part of the contractual commitments associated with the quotas, the province will have the right to acquire the Marystown facility at fair value should the province assume control of the holding company."

The actual wording of the contract between the government and OCI has never been made public.

Bennett has been arguing that instead of dealing with Ocean Choice, the government should really be looking at taking the quotas.

However, King said in a statement that's not an option.

"The Deloitte report, which was released in November 2011, states that OCI has met the required conditions outlined in the Implementation Agreement," an emailed statement read.

"The company demonstrated that by no fault of its own it was losing money (over multiple years) on the operation of the Marystown fish plant. Therefore, OCI

has indeed lived up to its commitments and the Provincial Government is satisfied with Deloitte's assessment."

The full Deloitte report, commissioned by the government earlier this year, has never been made public either.

"The Implementation Agreement and Deloitte Report contain proprietary information in relation to Ocean Choice International's business operations. The company has requested that government not release these documents publicly," King said.

"In saying that, there is a process in place, through the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, that allows the Opposition to request copies of these documents. I encourage Mr. Bennett to submit a request and government will respond in the timeframe outlined in the access to information legislation."

Bennett said he believes the government is protecting OCI.

"If OCI is really dealing in good faith, there's no reason that this information shouldn't be in the public domain. In fact, it should be in the public domain and that would lend more credibility," he said.

"My instinct is that they entered into this agreement, and they have been too benevolent towards OCI; they have caved in too many times, maybe without validating that OCI really needed that relief."