

Regional/provincial

Still no access to OCI contract

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TC MEDIA

ST. JOHN'S — Liberal fisheries critic Jim Bennett is continuing to push for details of a deal signed between the provincial government and Ocean Choice International five years ago.

Bennett believes the FPI Implementation Agreement, which has never been released publicly, could allow the government to take control of the shuttered Marystown fish plant and associated redfish and yellowtail flounder quotas.

"The government needs to hold their feet to the fire, and I think it's my job to hold the government's feet to the fire, until they do the right thing," Bennett said.

In 2007, parts of Fishery Products International were sold by the government of Newfoundland and Labrador to OCI.

The FPI Implementation agreement was never publicized, but government news releases at the time give some indication of what might be in the agreement.

According to a news release from 2007, OCI would be required to keep employment levels at the Marystown fish plant between 400-500 year round workers.

That never ended up happening.

"The agreement carries some fairly significant financial — I won't call them penalties, I'll call them disincentives — it says \$2-5 million for closing down a plant," Bennett said. "It says depending on size, and Marystown is by far the biggest plant, so you would have to conclude that Marystown is the one that the \$5 million would apply to."

On Monday morning, in a letter to Fisheries Minister Darin King, Bennett was also asking about a provision in the 2007 news release saying that a "compliance evaluation panel" would be created to make sure OCI was following the terms of the contract.

In statements to TC Media, King has repeatedly said that OCI is not in violation of any part of the agreement. An independent audit by Deloitte has apparently confirmed this, although the full audit has never been released publicly either.

A spokesman for the Department of Fisheries said that the panel does meet, but it's job is just to make sure that OCI is properly landing fish in Newfoundland.

Fisheries union president Earle Mccurdy confirmed that the evaluation panel has a narrow mandate.

"All the panel was ever set up for was to be a forum if there was an allegation that they hadn't landed in the province. It was a really really limited role," Mccurdy said.

Mccurdy also lamented the fact that they've never been able to see the FPI Implementation Agreement either.

"The company has claimed to have met (it's obligations), for the life of me, I can't see it," he said. "How do you get to the bottom of it when the documents are kept secret?"

The Telegram