


Taxpayers on hook for \$2.5M seal hunt loan



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It may have only been a fraction of the size of the seal hunt a decade ago, but compared to the last couple of years, Fisheries Minister Darin King is calling the 2012 seal hunt an unqualified success.

In total, hunters took close to 70,000 animals this year nearly double what was taken in 2011.

"It's all positive from our perspective," King said. "I fail to find how you can call it a failure when we've grown it so much in such a short time and we see markets open up."

This year's seal hunt got off the ground in large part because the government offered up a \$3.6 million loan to Carino, a seal pelt processor, in order to allow the company to buy pelts.

The money was to be used to buy up to 100,000 pelts; since only part of that was taken, the government is on the hook for around \$2.5 million.

King said the money hasn't been paid out to Carino yet, and he expects it will still be repaid "by Christmas" as he originally stated when he announced the loan earlier this spring.

"We have every confidence that there won't be an issue with the repayment," he said.

At the same time, he made it clear the money was for one-year only, and as far as he's concerned, it won't happen again.

"I can say with certainty that when cabinet made the decision, we made the decision in the context of this as a one-shot deal," King said. "Hopefully once we get through this year, by next year this time, the markets will have opened up."

Sheryl Fink, director of the seal program for the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), dismissed King's optimism.

"We're still seeing a hunt that is much reduced from what it had been in previous years, 25 times smaller than what it was in 2006," Fink said. "I don't think this is an industry that's going to come back, and we need to help transition people away, make sure they're properly and appropriately compensated for any loss of income."

In recent years, the IFAW and some other animal welfare groups have pressed the government to bail out seal harvesters to end the hunt.

But politicians of all stripes said they believe things are turning around for the beleaguered hunt.

New Democrat MHA Christopher Mitchelmore said he believes more needs to be done to market seal products to people in the province, but he applauded the government for offering the loan to Carino.

“In terms of looking at it from last year, it is more successful than previous years,” he said. “We’re moving in the right direction. I do think the minister cares about the seal hunt and I think we’re going to see some good things in the future.”

Liberal fisheries critic Jim Bennett said as far as he’s concerned, the primary focus should be on the size of the herd and ultimately used to control the seal population.

“The herd is way overpopulated and the first thing we need to do is decide on the size of the hunt,” he said. “What is sustainable and what is appropriate? And that needs to be done in conjunction with the scientists.”

PLEASE NOTE: This story has been changed to correct a spelling mistake.

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