

NEWSPAPERS



• [LOG IN](#) | [REGISTER](#)

- [Home](#) •
 - [NEWS](#) •
 - [BUSINESS](#) •
 - [SPORTS](#) •
 - [ENTERTAINMENT](#) •
 - [LIFESTYLE](#) •
 - [HEALTH](#)
- [Best of YouTube](#) ◦ [Gaming](#) ◦ [Science](#) ◦ [Internet](#) ◦ [Tech-Biz](#)

No sea ice for seals? They'll adapt and go elsewhere, feds says

By Jordan Press, Postmedia News May 11, 2012

- [Story](#)
- [Photos \(1 \)](#)

Like

70 likes. [Sign Up](#) to see what your friends like.



Fisheries and Oceans was prepared to shoot down questions about a study connecting climate change to higher seal pup mortality rates.

Photograph by: Seal Hunt , Seal Hunt

OTTAWA — The Department of Fisheries and Oceans was ready to dismiss questions about a [study](#) connecting climate change to higher seal pup mortality rates when the department prepared to face reporters in announcing the launch of the annual seal hunt.

[Documents](#) released under an access to information request show the government wanted to play down any environmental questions about the annual cull and instead focus on the current population of the herd, which the government says is just fine.

The Duke University study found higher seal pup mortality rates during years when the ice conditions were bad.

Harp seals use the sea ice to give birth and take care of their pups, even electing to give birth on bad ice instead of on land.

"If seals just went where there was good ice, then we wouldn't have a lot of seal mortalities in lighter ice years," said David Johnston, a researcher at the Duke University Marine Lab.

"I haven't seen any data that (seals) are packing it up and not coming to these places."

Johnston, who grew up near Guelph, Ont., said there is still a lot of uncertainty about whether the seal population is adapting to climate change, but other marine animals have modified their behaviour due to changes to their environment.

The peer-reviewed study, which was sponsored by an animal rights group — a fact the government didn't overlook in its media lines — noted that one of the unanswered questions from the research was whether the seals could adapt long-term to changing ice conditions.

"The department's scientists have actually been studying the potential impacts of ice conditions on harp seals for many years. The current population remains abundant and is not at risk," reads a set of media lines from Jan. 18, 2012, drafted ahead of the early February announcement.

"While it's true that harp seals require ice for giving birth and rearing their young, without access to stable ice, these seals may simply modify their behaviour accordingly over time."

No one from the department was available Friday to explain the science behind the statement.

The department's website says that some ongoing monitoring is showing some seals are going to non-traditional congregating areas farther north where there are better ice conditions.

The Duke study found that increases and declines in seal populations were closely linked to sea ice conditions. While the population has increased in the past four decades — fourfold since the 1970s, according to Fisheries and Oceans Canada — it hasn't made up for previous losses, the study argued.

This year, the federal government set the quota at 400,000 harp seals. However, as of May 10, only 68,206 seals — about 17 per cent of the quota — had been harvested, according to Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

Sea ice conditions were not good this year, and Johnston said sea ice is expected to continue to decline.

Animal rights groups have long sought to have the seal hunt killed, and efforts have been increasing in recent months after news came out that Russia, which accepted 90 per cent of seal exports from Canada, had closed its doors to Canadian seals.

Last year, the government signed an agreement to export seal products to China, an untapped market the government believed could be a boon for the industry. Data from Statistics Canada show that since the signing of the agreement, about \$642,000 worth of edible seal products have been exported to China, about 20 per cent of the annual \$3 million in edible seal exports.

Overall, the seal industry in Canada is worth about \$10 million in exports annually.

Pro-sealing organizations — four of which Fisheries and Oceans Canada listed as recommended media spokespersons, according to the documents — say the hunt still brings in income for 6,000 Canadians.

A bill currently before the Senate calls on the government to officially end the commercial hunt, but it is likely to be defeated because the Conservatives and Liberals oppose it, with the latter party even distancing itself from the Liberal senator behind the proposal.

jpress@postmedia.com

[Twitter.com/jordan_press](https://twitter.com/jordan_press)

© Copyright (c) Postmedia News