

Officials try to dispel seal 'myths'



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CORNER BROOK The Newfoundland and Labrador seal hunt, when conducted correctly, is as safe a method of killing as any other. This was the message from Ron Burton, regional coordinator for the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

Ron Burton, the area chief of conservation and protection for western Newfoundland and southern Labrador, said the current harvesting practices on the ice flows are safe.

The enforcement official told members of the Rotary Club of Corner Brook Thursday that sealers throughout the province have adopted a humane approach to sealing — striking, checking and bleeding. He said approximately 2,000 fishermen have been trained and there is a significant buy-in to the approved humane approach.

Like any hunt in the world, there are times when illegal sealing occurs, Burton said. However, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans has a strict enforcement program in place — including monitoring via vessels and planes, such measures as the “black box,” and

He said fines in the thousands of dollars and annual prohibitions from sealing and/or fishing is a significant deterrent.

The seal hunt is the target of protests, which has impacted the worldwide market for pelts and other products. Burton said he understands the opposition's arguments.

“We do not kill whitecoats, and we haven't for years and years and years,” he said. “That is one of the false information out there.”

“The approved techniques are rifles, shotguns — under a certain type slug — clubs and hakapiks. They are all approved under the Marine Mammal Regulations. While, over 95 per cent of the seals killed in the northern gulf and ‘The Front’ are collected on the ice and when they retrieve the animal.”

There are many videos surfacing showing seals getting struck with hakapiks or being clubbed, and Burton said the public should see a viewing of humane practices.

After being shot or struck with a hakapik, a seal sometimes goes through what is referred to as “swimming reflex.” This movement can occur even after the shot successfully crushes both hemispheres of the skull — a required regulation. The seal lashes around on the ice, resembling a struggling seal, however has already been killed.

“The animal is not suffering,” Burton assured his audience. “Yes, it may look like it, but it is not.”

He educated Rotarians on the life cycle of the seal, and how the approximately nine million seals are counted.

He also provided a personal perspective on the future of the industry. Although fewer sealers are heading to the ice this

currently not as strong as it once was, Burton believes there will be a bounce back.

"There are some challenges internationally, but they are working through those," he said. "I feel confident myself, act through those. We have certainly done a lot of work to prove to the rest of the world that it is a humane harvest."

Burton said the \$27 sealers are getting per pelt could increase substantial as new products and markets arise. He said pericardium and heart valves of seals for transplant testing. Evidence thus far, he said, demonstrated it far exceeds

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