This past year there has been a fair bit of publicity about lobster gluts in the Maritime provinces resulting in lower prices to fishermen. The lobster industry -- worth about $580 million in the region -- has been battered in recent years, with prices dropping by a third within the last three years. According to the Lobster Council of Canada, prices are around $3 per pound, down from $4.50 per pound in 2009.Nonetheless, fishermen have been reluctant to make changes to the way the fishery is conducted that would limit their catch and prop up prices.

Last week former federal Fisheries Minister Gail Shea who hails from PEI where the lobster fishery is vitally important stuck her neck out by suggesting that
it's time the lobster fishery looked at boat quotas in response to slumping prices at the wharf. While there seemed to be a willingness in PEI to discuss this option, reaction from southwest Nova Scotia was more negative with comparisons made to groundfish quotas and congestion at the wharves as catches were monitored against quotas.

In essence what Minister Shea was suggesting was a form of supply management. Supply management systems exist in the Canadian dairy and agriculture sectors. As applied to the lobster fishery the idea would be to protect prices by controlling the quantity of lobster made available to the market at a given time. This would give the fishermen some leverage in dealing with buyers and the big purchasers at the market level.

The supply management system in the Canadian dairy/agriculture sectors has been under attack in various free trade negotiations. Given that it is interesting to see a Conservative cabinet minister float the trial balloon of quotas in the lobster fishery to regulate the flow of supply to the market.

TAGS: sustainable, fisheries, sustainability, Canadian lobsters, lobster glut, lobster quotas, Gail Shea