What We Heard

- Participants recall that Fisheries and Oceans Canada was reviewing the aquatic resource and oceans management program in 2014/15, which included talking with program participants. They asked what, if anything, was done with the results.

Getting to Know Aquatic Resource and Oceans Management Groups

"[Program] objectives are open and match our objectives – all First Nations have fairly similar visions in this regard. Don't let anyone at the Department tell you any different."

- Participants ranged from those who worked in organizations that existing long before the program began to those whose organizations were created through the program and to those who do not yet belong to a group that receives program funding.

    - Organizations that existed before the program began do not call themselves aquatic resource and oceans management groups because the program is only one source of funding for their activities and the grouping was done for departmental purposes. *"We also didn't like being referred to as a sub-AAROM group."*

- Some participants described how the program was used (or is being used) to bring communities together that were divided through the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program. *"We managed to get 18 communities together after the Cohen Commission – more about crisis management. It's a pretty easy program to get involved in."* Another common reason given for the creation of groups or to participate in the program is in response to inadequate management of fish stocks by the Department.

    - Some aquatic resource and oceans management groups are in fact starting to work together because of the mismanagement of fish stocks and as member communities are not able to meet their food, social and ceremonial needs.

- Participants note that program funding is used for core expenses, such as staff, and to hold a number of open forums throughout the year to engage and consult members. One participant reported that they did their open forums out in the field.

- Multiple sources of funding are leveraged by program participants for staffing, community engagement and reporting, and 'in the field' activities. This includes the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy, the province, academia, and other sources. *"Building partnerships with those who follow fisheries issues allowed us to significantly increase our budget. We only see this as getting better."*

Staff and Expertise

- In general, groups that participate in the program have some or all of the following staff: executive director, fisheries management coordinator, fisheries operations manager, program coordinator, communications coordinator, finance administrator, biologists,

technicians, and field assistants. Some groups have several biologists and technicians. More than one said that field assistants were summer students or temporary jobs.

Equipment

- Groups have a lot of equipment, including: digital imaging sonar cameras (ditson) to count fish, limnology equipment to study inland waters, camping gear, drones, and water monitoring stations. Groups sometimes loan their equipment to the Department.

Understanding your Services and Service Delivery Potential

"Governments are backing away from the environment and we'll step in to fill their shoes – at less expense, too, because we're here."

- Services common across aquatic resource and oceans management groups include technical 'field' activities, such as: stock assessments, habitat protection and restoration, species at risk, invasive species management, water monitoring and management, and environmental assessment. They also deliver strategic planning, communications, reporting, and education in the community.

Defining Services: Technical Capacity Needs

- Participants support the collection of baseline and ongoing data related to fish stocks, habitat, oceans/marine, and areas impacted by environmental spills. They also want to build more capacity to be involved in the study of cumulative effects, water monitoring, environmental assessments, and salmon farming impact assessments.

  - Participants are keenly interested in being more involved in emergency response including remediation work. Participants shared many examples of environmental events that had affected fish, waterways and other resources, including train derailments, the Mount Polley disaster, and the Highland Valley Tailing breach. *"We've had environmental spills over the past few years and we were asked to step in and play a role. Direct contracts should be offered to First Nations."*

  - Participants are also interested in addressing the cumulative effects of industries and major projects on fish-bearing waterways. *"They always say 'dilution is the solution' but we all know it's not true. The impacts are swept under the carpet."*

- Participants see the need for more biologists and technicians to do the work, more gear and equipment, as well as access to labs and the results of research. A few participants also see value in adding an Indigenous guardian to their staff.

- Training needs include cultural training and stewardship so Elders can pass on traditional teachings, as well as certification and training to use field equipment.

Service Delivery Funding: Needs and Options

"Fisheries and Oceans Canada is involved in so many processes and First Nations also need to be involved. But there are no new resources."

- Participants outlined salary needs for biologists and other technical staff, as well as more realistic salaries needed for existing staff and their travel budgets. They identified

potential funding sources as: own source revenue, the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy, other federal and provincial agencies, multi-agency programs (such as the Fish Habitat Restoration Initiative), and commercial fisheries associations. They also thought leveraging core funding across groups and sharing First Nations scientific equipment and technical expertise could free funds for technical capacity needs, in addition to partnering with university researchers. *"Inter-tribal resource-sharing is not really done a lot and it should be. Intra-biologists would be good."*

- One participant thought a wild salmon policy implementation fund could be created to be another source of funding. Another thought Rio Tinto Alcan should be funding some initiatives.

Understanding Relationships

"The aquatic resource and oceans management program is a nation-to-nation building tool. It's also a good body to do a lot of joint projects."

- Participants interact with many staff at Fisheries and Oceans Canada; most often, Aboriginal program administrators and resource management. They report very little interaction with departmental scientists or the Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat, and no contact with the aquaculture program. While participants interact with the province and non-governmental organizations, they do not have much dealings with other federal agencies (except Parks Canada). *"There is a complete disconnect – a big gap – with science. We need to fix that."*

- There is some collaboration with the Department on stock rebuilding and restoration, as well as habitat restoration, but as one participant put it, *"Knowledge brought forward is on the Department's time. It's reactive, not proactive, and we need to change that."*

- Participants report that they have to re-educate departmental staff whenever their staff contact changes. *"This should happen at the Department, not in the community."*

Participation in Decision-Making Processes

"We asked for a record of substantive decisions made by First Nations in departmental documents and we haven't seen it yet."

- Participants are unanimous that they lack a true voice in decision-making. *"We can no longer invest in the Integrated Fisheries Management Planning process; we have to develop our own process. Where are the real decisions being made that affect us?"* They want to influence government policy on fish stock management and to be able to review policy and track progress. *"Restoration is the only way to be involved in fish management right now. We want to be involved in the policy and politics of it, but budgets don't allow that."*

- Participants also point to the disparity between decision-makers at the Department and the authority of First Nations leadership, as well as the lack of consultation and input of First Nations regarding decisions. *"It's predetermined before it gets to you. There's no real discussion or negotiation and limited flexibility for changes. The viewpoint of First Nations is not an administrative convenience."*

- Not one participant thought their input was reflected in fisheries management decisions (or habitat management decisions) even though their data is sent to the Department *"We're told to be precautionary, yet decisions that come from Fisheries and Oceans Canada don't follow this."*

Awareness-Raising

"First Nations used to speak with a convoluted voice. But we've gathered together in many places to deal with issues. We need to keep doing that in more areas."

- Participants would like more information-sharing amongst inland and marine aquatic resource groups to know more about research done on open-pen fish farms and major projects occurring near the mouth of the Fraser River. *"What studies took place before the container and port activities started? We need to expand to these things as well as the ocean and estuary area."*

- They also see a great need for communications and education related to habitat restoration, species at risk, invasive species, environmental spills, and many other projects or issues taken on by aquatic resource and oceans management groups. *"We need to do the research to get communications tools and this takes the right people. We need to understand the impacts of incidents on fish health and food health and report back to communities. Not one comes back to report on incidents."*

Indigenous Knowledge and Input

"The knowledge is there. Even before contact, we had communication along the river and we managed salmon successfully that way."

- Participants are unanimous that it is time for governments to recognize Indigenous knowledge is as important as western science (if not of more value). They also expect to see their knowledge reflected in decisions and programs. *"We worked with the Department years ago to standardize our data collection and it went in the trash. Now we attach it to our program agreement. It's time for its value to be recognized."*

- A few participants shared examples of how some of their fish health or other project data is now being requested by the Department. Participants also shared stories about how Indigenous knowledge was ignored by the Department during field activities. *"There is a cultural disconnect that must change."*

"We do habitat programs year round, based on the knowledge of First Nations peoples, not Fisheries and Oceans Canada or the Province."

Making Program Improvements

"How would the program look if it were run only by First Nations?"

- Participants shared some insight as to where program had gone wrong in the past and where it still needed improvements. For example:
    - The money received through the program arrives too late in the year: often in November or December, rather than in April.

- The program's requirement for groups to be aggregated created some problems; especially, at the community-to-community and nation-to-nation levels. However, there is strong support for collaboration amongst groups to discuss fisheries management and other issues.

- The program has not been adequately funded over the years. *"We need more every year, no excuses."* It has not kept up with salary increases and groups now use program funding as only the basis for salaries: *"There's a real shortfall for the going rate of employees nowadays. Lack of funding impacts our ability to recruit and retain the best and brightest. It's institutionally handicapping us."*

- There is also insufficient funding to keep up with ongoing stock assessments and to put some of the technical equipment to use. In fact, one participant noted that projects are sometimes cancelled because groups cannot find other sources of funding to pay for them. *"Fisheries and Oceans Canada has us over a barrel. We know we need other funding sources."*

- In addition, there are overlaps between the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy and Aquatic Resource and Oceans Management programs. For example, participants who are not yet involved with an aquatic resource and oceans management group pointed out the similarities of projects funded by the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy. *"We prepared an aquatic resource and oceans management program proposal a few years ago, but it sounds like I'm already doing a lot of this work through the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy. We have technical staff and summer students who help with our programs."* These participants shared the results of their 'ghost net removal' and 'fish tanks in schools' program, as well as their successful fishing and hunting camps.

Defining Success

"Success is when we achieve an agreement with Fisheries and Oceans Canada that ensures a meaningful role for us in management decision-making."

- Participants believe the success of the program will be realized when there is enough fish to sustain their communities. Their top priorities for the program include: competent leadership, the staff necessary to do the required work, community participation in their activities, and self-sustained funding to carry out their projects. They also prioritized ongoing succession and strategic planning, including professional development and retention strategies, as well as communications, public and media relations, and education.

"All of the project we complete should become a success story."

Measuring Performance

"We're less interested in government metrics and more interested in our own metrics."

- Participants evaluate their performance using annual and five-year strategic plans. They also see a need to track progress at the Department regarding the program in order to assess what is working and what is not on an ongoing basis.