

What We Heard

Getting to Know Communities and their Fisheries

“When DFO tells us we can’t fish, we exercise our right to fish – and sometimes, when we are told to fish, we decide the time is right to conserve.”

- Participants included members of two Tribal Councils and a Fisheries Commission that serves the members of a third Tribal Council. Combined, these participants represent 21 First Nations/Indian Bands.
- Communities primarily fish sockeye, chinook, coho and spring salmon. In the past, they also fished steelhead. Fishing methods include dip-netting, beach seine, rod and reel, and *“gillnets suspended on poles slung over back-eddies.”*
 - For some communities, nature signals the timing of communal harvests: sagebrush buttercup indicates spring salmon, rosehip fish indicates chinook, and the sound of grasshoppers indicates sockeye. Others use both natural indicators and western science to determine their fishery.
 - One said the timing of fisheries has changed with declining fish stocks. *“Our fishery used to be done by August, but people are still fishing in September now.”* Another said their fishery moves with the strengths and weaknesses of the runs. *“We are as conservationist as possible. We do a lot of sharing.”*
- Some communities have designated persons to fish for their members, while in others all members fish. One participant said the number of people fishing depends on the health of returning stocks: *“It could be as high as 300 people or very few.”*
 - Fish is dried, canned and frozen for distribution to members. One said their communities had a good system of volunteers to process fish for members. Another said distribution was primarily within the family, and to Elders and single parents.

Understanding Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Agreements

“Whatever we sign on to has to be consistent with title and rights. That’s why we never signed a full Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy agreement.”

- Every participant either has an Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy agreement or has member communities with an agreement.
 - One has a contribution agreement for catch monitoring and data collection through the program, but not a comprehensive fishing agreement, because it presents jurisdictional issues. *“When the program first came out, we didn’t support it. Eventually, we agreed to sign it so it would support our fisheries programs.”* Another said one of their communities withdrew from the program because it did not provide enough money to do the work required in their agreement.

- There are different ways that program funding (and agreements) work among participants. For one, program funds are tied to an aquatic resource and oceans management agreement and flow through it to member communities. Another switched from having an aquatic resource and oceans management program agreement to an Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy agreement.
 - One said these programs negatively impacted the historical inter-tribal fishing treaty along the Fraser River. *“Some communities in our Nation signed watershed agreements and some did not. It separated our Nation.”*
 - Another said alignment is needed between the two programs. *“It states in our agreement that we are the technical authority on all projects, yet we don’t take any money from the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy flow through to communities.”*
- Participants note a lack of changes to their agreements both in terms of the funding amounts and the activities being funded. One also thinks that the Department is not involved in many of the data collection activities that they should be.

Understanding Food, Social and Ceremonial Needs

“Bottom line is: assert right and exercise right but, ultimately, protect it.”

- Participants note the importance of fishing for the community. *“Fishing is a communal time for families, children and Elders.”* They also report that food fisheries are not meeting the needs of communities.
 - There is some interest in resetting the catch numbers because participant say they are based on years of conservation, not historic numbers.
 - More than one expressed concern about how catch data collected from community fisheries are (or may not be) used by the Department. *“I make sure coho is in the data because DFO can think that if you don’t record catching something, then you don’t need to catch it.”*
 - One would also like to revisits licensing rules because licence changes have impacted their members. *“Changing to 8-inch mesh affected our people because many couldn’t afford it.”*

Understanding the Economic Components of Agreements

- One Nation does not support the sales of fish or economic opportunity fisheries. *“Our Chief and community agree that when there is more than enough fish, we will work as a Nation on commercial programs. But we have never met our total allowable catch.”*

Understanding the Technical Components of Agreements

- Communities all have catch and effort monitoring programs for their food, social and ceremonial fisheries. Some are also engaged in other data collection activities, such as coho enumeration counts.
 - One has resource officers to gather information to share with the Department. Another has a data manager to help collect, track and enter catch and effort data

received from community catch monitors, which is used to manage the Nation's fisheries and is also shared with the Department.

- While there is general agreement that catch records should be accurate, some are concerned about how the information is being used. *"In our Nation, when you supply numbers, DFO uses it against you."* Another said the data is just taken by the Department but they do not know how it is used.
- Two Nations participate in ghost net removals and fish in the classroom programs, which are funded through the program. Other projects, such as fishing camps used to teach youth traditional methods of canning, smoking, drying and salting, are not. *"AFS plays no part in this."*
- Participants say technical activities funded through the program are not meeting the needs of communities. For example, some want it to cover the collection of traditional knowledge collection. They also note a lack of program funding to fully fund technical activities and to take inflation into account. *"Our Bands are using internal funds to top-up projects."*
 - One said after their Nation signed an agreement with BC Hydro, the Department reduced their involvement regarding the impacts of dams and other habitat monitoring activities. *"When we go to meetings with DFO, they don't have catch monitoring data from communities working with Hydro."*
- Participants want to be involved in habitat restoration and habitat protection activities, including to study and understand the impacts of forest fires and other environmental disasters. *"We have always been in defense of fish. Our leadership has been involved in stopping and opposing projects that are possibly harmful to fish."* There is also some interest in fisheries enhancement.
 - One recalls that years ago, Elders refused to build a fish ladder and instead built across the river to protect fishing grounds. *"This was one of our fights back in the day."* They also did not allow roads for all-terrain vehicles to be built to fishing spots.
- Despite lack of funding in the program, participants have built a lot of technical capacity, including to determine when their community's fishery will take place, and to do stock assessments and other research. *"We want to be seen as a resource with our technical expertise."*

Co-management

"We keep hearing about co-management, but it doesn't seem to be filtering down to DFO staff on the ground."

- Participants report that member communities manage many aspects of their fisheries. For example, some have specific Band fishing rules and laws. *"One law is no non-natives on fishing rocks."*
 - Some are interested in developing programs to enforce their fishery rules, including to develop positions and protocols for their members to use for this purpose.

- One tracks communal licence totals and uses this information to develop internal harvest plans. These plans are then shared with the Department, which *“looks at it and decides whether to approve our harvest targets.”*
- Nations want more co-management of fisheries in their territories. For one, this means partnering with the Department and academia in stock assessment and fish enumeration studies. *“We tried to formalize this arrangement, but when DFO does proposals for more stock assessment in our area, they don’t talk to us.”*

Understanding Relationships

“We’ve come a long way with DFO; now, there is a ‘we’.”

- Participants regularly engage community leadership in fisheries issues and to guide fishery programs. One has worked for years to get the majority of their Nation’s Chiefs together to discuss fisheries issues.
- Participants also regularly engage and share information with community members, other First Nations, and Fisheries and Oceans Canada. *“Part of the agreement involves informing members.”* For example:
 - Nations inform community members about in-season opening and closures, and catch data needs, during regular fishing forums. They also meet with departmental staff at regularly scheduled technical meetings.
 - Some are also involved in regional technical meetings led by the Fraser River Aboriginal Fisheries Secretariat and the First Nations Fisheries Council.
- Participants report good relationships with local resource management and conservation and protection staff. These officials are invited to, and generally attend, community fishing forums held by Nations several times a year. Participants also meet with Science at joint technical working group meetings.
 - Relationships with departmental staff regarding reporting and funding is mixed; however, with participants reporting funding delays due to multiple questions on reports. *“The reporting template this fiscal year had new questions that weren’t there before. We need a head’s up on changes to these templates.”*
 - One said they felt ‘attacked’ through the reporting process when the resource manager said *“we can’t give you excellent at everything because there is always room for improvement.”* Another worked with their resource manager to improve reporting questions to reduce the duplication.
- Participants want to increase collaboration and relationships with other government agencies and levels of government, as well as with non-governmental groups. Some see the need for governments at all levels to collaborate with First Nations; especially, to prepare to respond to environmental disasters. *“There’s a real need for a relationship with Environment Canada and Climate Change.”*

Improving the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program

“The best way to improve the program is to continue to increase First Nations capacity through more funding. We want to have sufficiently trained staff so they can meaningfully participate in a variety of projects.”

- Participants think the most important way that the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program can be improved is by increasing program funding so Nations can:
 - continue to build First Nations capacity in fisheries management
 - have enough staff employed to really engage on and co-manage fisheries
 - provide full-time jobs for technical staff involved in their programs
 - be more involved in technical activities, such as data collection and stock assessments
 - establish habitat programs and participate in more habitat activities *“At least a base set of funds in the program for habitat restoration would be good.”*
- One wants the program to meet its objective of co-management. *“We always strive to have meaningful input in fisheries management but our feedback needs to be acted upon or taken into account.”* Another wants reporting requirements made easier. *“DFO staff pick every sentence apart in my reports. It’s frustrating for them to be so picky.”*
- One Nation would prefer an improved contribution agreement that is consistent with reconciliation and recognition – and outside of the program. *“AFS created too many problems to be the mechanism to solve them.”*
 - To that end, the Nation has developed a model contribution agreement with 19 sections, including jurisdiction of the parties, entitlement to participate in the fishery, fishing methods, openings, participation, distribution and disposition, enforcement, resource officers, economics, among other sections.

Measuring success

- One participant thinks success should be measured by the satisfaction of First Nations in the program and its relationship with the Department. *“We need to look beyond simply employment numbers as an indicator.”*

Aboriginal Fishery Guardian Program

- Participants do not have fishery guardians, but there is interest in getting more people ‘on-the-ground’ to monitor activities taking place in their territories.
 - One presently uses restorative justice for fishing infractions. Another wants to know how many industries and people have actually been charged through the *Fisheries Act*.