

What We Heard

“This program needs to reflect the legitimacy of First Nations rights and knowledge – and build a clear understanding of why First Nations are in the water first.”

Getting to Know Communities and their Fisheries

- Participants included communities both with and without Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy agreements.
 - One did not sign an agreement this year because the community finds the program has not delivered on its objective to build capacity.
 - Another received funding for a half-time monitor to count fish for two-and-a-half months, despite not having an agreement.
- Communities fish primarily sockeye and chinook, and sometimes pink and/or spring salmon. In the past, fishing also included trout, whitefish, ling cod and coho.
 - The primary fishing method is dip-netting, even though gillnetting is sometimes permitted. Traditionally, one community used multiple fishing methods, including weirs, but these were removed in the Barricades Treaty. *“Being limited to one method is not good.”*
- Participants note the negative impact of environmental disasters on their fisheries, including the Mount Polley mine disaster and forest fires. *“In the last two years we haven’t gotten any fish because of the fires.”*
 - Some said members are fishing in different areas because they are worried about the health of fish close to waterways affected by Mount Polley.
 - A few want more federal science effort to focus on the impacts of these events on fish and to rivers, streams and lakes. *“We are spending millions to study the ocean, but it should be spent in rivers where it could actually help fish.”*
- Participants stress the importance of rehabilitating habitat and fish stocks through fisheries enhancement, environmental monitoring and studies on cumulative effects.

Understanding Food, Social and Ceremonial Needs

“We had a bargain with the salmon: First Nations looked after the beds and the salmon looked after the people.”

- Most participants report that food fisheries are not meeting the needs of communities. *“We’ve been [affected] by regulations for so many years that people don’t recognize salmon as a food source anymore.”* One said 70% of their needs were met this year for sockeye, but only 15% of their needs were met for chinook and 2% for steelhead.
 - The importance of meeting the food, social and ceremonial needs of community members is paramount for participants. *“When our people are hungry for fish,*

they will eat any fish.” A few received food fish from other Nations when they were unable to go fishing because of forest fires.

- More than one participant shared that they or someone in their community had been caught fishing for food. *“We have Elders who fish regardless of what the agreement says. They catch a fish and cook it over open fire at the beginning of the season as a ceremony to welcome the fish home.”*
- Only one said their food, social and ceremonial fishery was doing alright. Another said the past year was great for their members to *“fill their freezers for a year.”*
- For participants, fish play a key role in the preservation of community identity, culture, and society. *“The community feels strongly about our right to catch and sell fish. It was their currency at one point.”* More than one shared stories about family gatherings to fish and other cultural activities involving fish – and everyone expressed concern about the impact of declining fish stocks and fishing activity on First Nations culture, especially on youth involvement in the fishery. *“We need youth to continue fishing or it will die out.”*
- One community noted that part of the problem is their difficulty accessing fish in traditional areas – and the fact that licensing does not take traditional knowledge into consideration. *“It’s more about how to make an agreement fit the unique characteristics of each Nation. When we can fish is dictated by rain because you can’t access the trail in if it’s raining.”* Another said there was not a lot of room to fish in certain areas because of recreational fish harvesters.

Understanding Agreements

“The agreement provides just a bit of work to get Fisheries and Oceans Canada data. There are no long-lasting benefits.”

- Participants note that their agreements primarily fund monitoring activities. *“We do basic monitoring and counting, and record the condition of the fish. That’s all we get funded for.”* One has natural resource officers to do the monitoring work; while others have field technicians.
- One participant wants a meaningful agreement that will address community frustrations and include a community-created harvest fishing plan that meets conservation measures. *“Why don’t we have a fishery program, rather than a program just for catch data submission?”*
- Another wants their agreement to be based on historical fishing, not on fishing that was done since the 1980’s. *“We used to fish 250,000, but we are licensed now for only 20,000 and we only get 4-5,000. DFO is pushing us to enshrine this current practice: they want to make deals based on low abundance.”*
- Another wants the agreement to enable ceremonial activities, including the opening of fishing season ceremonies, and opportunities for Elders to teach youth how to cut up and cook fish and explain traditional fishing laws.

Understanding the Technical Components of Agreements

"I think more money is spent on closing the fishery rather than what we need to fix it. We need a real conversation on what needs to be done, who will do it, and how."

- Every participant is involved in catch and species monitoring activities, even if these activities are not currently funded through the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program. Some also do species at risk monitoring and data collection activities, such as monitoring fisheries closures to steelhead and sockeye.
 - Some communities have counting fencings, Didson counters, and other technical equipment. Others want this technical equipment to be able to do more projects.
 - Several question the value of the data collected as the Department does not communicate how it is used. *"Data as a whole is 'held' by DFO, so the benefits are unclear and one-directional."* Some also question the value of monitoring activities because they do not see the benefits to fish. *"It only provides two part-time jobs."*
- There is strong support for habitat restoration and species rehabilitation to be funded through the program and for First Nations to lead this activity. *"We have knowledge to remediate creeks. DFO does not have to be in control."*
- Most participants are also interested in being more involved in stock assessments and other scientific and technical activities, as long as the results of these activities are used by the Department to benefit the resource. Some are frustrated that the concerns expressed during technical calls with the Department are not addressed. *"The season is over and nothing happens. It feels like lip service."*
- A few participants support more departmental support on inland research, rather than its current focus in marine areas. *"There is a total lack of instream enhancement – we need work on the rivers and the streams. We can fix the problems in these areas."* There is also some support for water quality research.

Co-management

"None of the policies being written talk about co-management. They still hold the reins on allocation, enforcement and science."

- Participants are interested in participating in co-management and collaborative decision-making, but they also consider self-management of resources in their territories as an end objective. This includes having full control over technical activities, such as data collection and stock assessments. *"Collaboration should be a more cost-effective way of managing a fishery."*
 - Some question the will of the Department to enter into co-management agreements with First Nations. *"The culture within DFO makes it impossible to have a co-management agreement."*

Understanding the Economic Components of Agreements

- A few participants pointed out the inconsistency of Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy agreements when it comes to the sale of subsistence fish, with some Nations permitted, while others are not. *"Every First Nation has the right to fish commercially."*

Understanding Relationships

“We’ve had an agreement for at least 10 years, but there is no relationship with DFO.”

- Participants’ relationships with Fisheries and Oceans Canada range from great and/or pretty good to poor and/or non-existent. For example:
 - One community has a close working relationship with a Resource Manager. *“She makes an effort to listen and be there. She is friendly, open, collaborative and willing to learn.”*
 - Another held a protest fishery this year to express their dissatisfaction with their Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy agreement. *“When I started, it was very obvious the tension over salmon that the community had with DFO. For community meetings, the most turnout I saw was the meeting with DFO.”*
- Some participants are collaborating in activities led by their aquatic resource and oceans management group (stream clean-ups) or involved in partnerships with local groups, such as enhancement facilities. For example, with the assistance of their aquatic resource and oceans management group, one community is able to do contaminant and other environmental monitoring.
 - One wants more First Nations’ collaboration in watershed activities from the coast through the interior.
- Participants did not report having a relationship with Science or Conservation & Protection staff at the Department. Some want fishery officers to enforce conservation rules on big industries and development. Others want fishery guardians to handle monitoring and enforcement in their communities. *“We want community guardians that monitor according to their culture, not the DFO agenda.”*
- A few noted the need for more First Nations representation in government positions. *“Recently, there’s been a hiring spree, but they’re not hiring or contracting First Nations employees.”* One also thought the Department’s staff need more training or information session on how to fully recognize First Nations’ rights and title.

Improving the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program

“We don’t need DFO to help us fish for food; we need help in becoming empowered, capable and educated people who can perform fisheries management on our own. The Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program excludes us from true management.”

- Participants think the most important way that the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program can be improved is by focussing funding on activities that will rehabilitate fish habitat and rebuild fish stocks.
- There is also broad consensus for Indigenous knowledge to be integrated into the design of the program and apparent in fisheries management decisions. *“No matter what their job is, it impacts First Nations people in their communities. I want DFO staff to take this stuff personally by understanding community stories and values.”*
- Participants want the program and the Department to demonstrate the priority of First Nations rights when it comes to decisions that impact access to fish for food social

and ceremonial purposes. For a few communities, this means eliminating aggregate management. For others, it means First Nations' control of technical and management activities to ensure communities truly benefit from these activities. *"We are willing to spend huge amounts of capital, but what happens if we get the run up to a million fish a year and they give it to the commercial fishery?"*

- One also thought that subsistence fishing should override conservation at certain points. *"The community should have sufficient fish at any time of the year."*
- A few participants want to see program funding directed to educate the public about First Nations fisheries and their activities to conserve and rehabilitate these fisheries. *"An outreach education program should be part of AFS. A lot of people don't understand our fishery and they ask why First Nations get all the fish for free."*

Measuring Success

"If there's no increase of funds over time, what is the use of talking about this program?"

- Participants shared a number of ways to measure the success of the program. For example:

"By how many more fish per year there are in the creeks, in our freezers and on drying racks."

"Our ability to respond to fisheries and water issues according to the laws of the land."

"The satisfaction of First Nations people: enough salmon for everyone, a strong salmon culture, the reinvigoration of salmon identity and traditions, and the integration of our community's rights to their territory."

Skills and Training Needs

- Participants support more technical training for employees and seasonal workers involved in Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy activities. For example, one community wants training to understand the Department's science and decision-making processes. At the same time, they want departmental staff to be trained on First Nations practices, traditional protocols and education so they understand its value and make use of it.

Aboriginal Fishery Guardian Program

- Participants want more catch and fishery monitors and authority to enforce fishing rules. *"Even if we had our own Ranger Program it would not meet the community's needs without the ability to monitor illegal activity."*
 - One wants the program to focus on community education. *"We only need to know when the sockeye fishery is closed, but the notices are too small and just posted. They should be passed out at fishing sites."*