

What We Heard

“We come from wealthy territories that everyone benefits from but us.”

Getting to Know Communities and their Fisheries

“When the program rolled out, it didn’t foresee this as an outcome: the cost to actually harvest and pay for food.”

- Participants included Nations, Tribal Councils, and Fisheries Societies with Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy agreements and/or which administer these agreements. Combined, these participants have 28 member communities.
- Participants fish sockeye, coho, chinook, chum, halibut, herring, kelp, crab, clams, prawns, sea urchins, and other groundfish and shellfish. Many have year-round food, social and ceremonial fisheries.
 - Some have designated fish harvesters, while others have people who fish as individuals. *“Capacity is limited to get out on the water and not everyone has a boat.”*
 - Many are involved in commercial fishing activities, including through the Pacific Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative, Allocation Transfer Program licences, and/or other economic opportunity fisheries.
- Participants note the need to retain member capacity to participate in the fishery and traditional fishing methods and processing/preparation practices. There is also a lot of interest in getting youth interested, trained and involved in fisheries.

Understanding Food, Social and Ceremonial Needs

“I come from a time when we could roam freely and fish. Now, we’re controlled, based on our Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program.”

- Participants report that Nations pay all the costs of fishing, processing, and distributing fish used for food, social and ceremonial purposes. Some Nations distribute both on and off reserve, while others only distribute to on-reserve members.
- Participants find communal fisheries are not meeting the needs of communities.
 - More than one fishes for the needs of the members regardless of what may be in their harvest agreement *“as long as there are no conservation concerns.”* Some are reluctant to provide catch numbers to the Department because of this practice, while others report the catch numbers to demonstrate their need. Still others do not want to submit catch data because they do not trust how it is used. *“Data is used against us.”*
 - One applies for a supplemental licence to access sockeye in another fishing area to try to meet their community’s food, social and ceremonial needs. Another wants the Department to direct by-catch to communities to help with food fish deficits.
- Some participants find the Department does not recognize protocol agreements that are between Nations, such as for communal fish days. One wants the program to more

clearly recognize the importance of fish for its social and ceremonial value. *“Fish are the foundation of First Nations’ culture, well-being and traditional values.”*

- Several Nations have active commercial fisheries and some contract these (or other commercial fish harvesters) to get food fish for their communities.
 - One has struggled with using contracted fish harvesters because after negotiating an agreement for the number and cost of fish (and issuing a permit), the fish harvester ends up selling the fish to another Nation for more money.
 - Another has been exploring a pilot program to purchase food fish, but is worried it will turn their communal fishery into an economic one. *“Getting fish is one thing, but losing our ability to get it ourselves is an issue.”*

Understanding Agreements

“We want to share our wealth like we used to – not just the programs.”

- Participants report that agreements have not changed since it began despite inflation; especially, on the cost of fuel. A few also say their funding has decreased over the years.
- Participants find agreements largely pay for the full- or part-time salaries of employees, such as managers, monitors, guardians, and/or technicians. *“One staff gets five months’ work from the Oceans Protection Plan, which is enough to get Employment Insurance.”*
 - More than one Nation uses own source revenues to keep staff working longer and/or year-round, even if those jobs are only part-time. Others use other programs to fund staff, including the Aboriginal Aquatic Resource and Oceans Management program.
- Participants have considered not signing their agreements. *“I fear we’re signing a little bit, in a way, our rights.”* One did not sign one year, but ended up signing it again the next year *“because it provides jobs.”* Another said *“every year, it’s signed under duress.”*
 - Many want access to other species in their agreements and some also want to develop member capacity to fish these species.
- Most participants said their agreement is often signed late in the year, even December, although one said their agreement was signed really quickly this year.
 - Some want multi-year agreements, including those who want one long-term agreement which covers several programs, such as the Aboriginal Fund for Species and Risk and Oceans Protection Program. *“It would save us time, rather than having all these little programs with different timelines to report on.”*

Understanding the Technical Components of Agreements

“Success comes from what we do, not from what we get.”

- Most participants are involved in some data collection, stock assessment, and catch and fishery monitoring activities, but they say funding is insufficient for what is required. *“AFS comes with pages of activities to be done, but no funding for any of it.”*
 - Some have technical monitoring equipment, such as Didson counters, counting fences, and a scaler. Others have biologists to do sampling-related work.

- Several are concerned about how data is being used by the Department and some question if it is being used at all. *“We’ve been submitting stock assessment reports since the early 90’s but we never hear any feedback as to what they do with it.”*
- Participants report that catch and fishery monitoring activities are generally related to communal fisheries. One also manages the collection of creel surveys from recreational lodges, and others want to be more involved in commercial and recreational monitoring.
- Many participants are involved in enhancement activities, including hatcheries and fertilization, and they want these activities to be funded through the program. *“We see changes based on what we’ve done to put food back on the table.”* Some are uncertain, however, if hatcheries and enhancement activities are eligible for funding through the program. *“Hatcheries seem to be a ‘grey area’ as we keep putting it into the agreements, but it keeps getting pulled. We’re told it can’t be in our program.”*
 - Others do not find communities benefit from enhancement activities. *“We enhance the stocks that others get to fish.”*
- A few participants are involved in habitat-related work, but this is not necessarily funded through the program. Funding for habitat loss prevention and restoration is also a priority for participants; especially, in areas that have been impacted by forestry. *“The impact of logging activity today is still like a bomb went off in terms of mud slides.”*
 - One said the Department verbally supported habitat restoration activities being funded through the program next fiscal year. Another said their Nation has put significant own source revenues into habitat restoration.
- Participants are involved in a lot of other technical projects that are not funded through the program. *“AFS gets all the information even though it doesn’t fund it all.”* For example, a few partner with the Province, Parks Canada, and BC Hydro to do water and fish sampling to inform water use planning. Some do enumeration work with the Department and other partners on test fisheries. One has community divers which voluntarily do kelp, urchin, and geoduck surveys to gain the experience.
 - Some use the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program to lever other programs. *“It think this is how it was originally designed.”* More than one is receiving funding for Oceans Protection Plan activities. One is also receiving funding for a Canadian Coast Guard program liaison position.
 - One said their technical activities are largely contracted to consultants so no capacity is being built within the community. Another thinks the Department’s scientific expertise should be working more for the benefit of Nations. Still another finds Nations are doing the Department’s work without adequate funding to do so.

Aboriginal Fishery Guardian Program

“If the guardian program opens up, it can kick the door open on better management of resources.”

- Participants included an Aboriginal Fishery Officer, a designated fishery guardian, and a formerly designated fishery guardian. Others currently have (or formerly have had) guardians in their programs. *“The biggest loss in our agreement is having no guardians.”*

- Communities want fishery guardians in their programs. *“We need someone on the ground monitoring.”* They also want funding to be able to offer meaningful, long-term employment to guardians. *“We’re laying off one this week due to lack of funding.”*
- Some support more enforcement authority to be given to fishery guardians, including the authority to charge violators of the *Fisheries Act*.

Co-management

“Ideally, our agreement would be a co-management agreement between the Nation and DFO that includes all of the technical activities.”

- Participants are keenly interested in co-management. *“We want to protect, enhance and have a say in how other people can access based on our decision and consent.”* Several also want to work with neighbouring Nations to co-manage fisheries in watersheds.
- Many criticize the way the Department manages fisheries as either managing for extinction or favouring commercial and recreational users. *“We need to force DFO to manage better. Right now, it’s managed for the economy.”*

Understanding the Economic Components of Agreements

“The AFS program for us is there, that’s about it. But if you don’t sign the agreement, you don’t get the commercial-commercial ATP licence.”

- Participants discussed at some length the economic component of the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program, along with other economic opportunities licences and the sale of communally licenced fish.
 - Only some communities have Allocation Transfer Program licences because they had the capacity to acquire them when licences were available. Others were able to acquire the licences but they cannot use them because the community’s vessels are not the size required in licensing policies
 - There is support to change licensing policies to address the needs of communal licence holders. *“Communal licensing makes it tough for an individual to make a living because the licensing system is built for privileged users, not the rights holders.”*
- Several participants talked about the requirement to apply some of the revenues generated through Allocation Transfer Program licences into Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy activities. *“DFO expected our commercial fishing enterprise would subsidize AFS.”*
 - One said they used to submit a business plan for each fishery before the Department would release Allocation Transfer Program licences, but this is no longer required. Another said statistical information on these licences is still requested which makes reporting cumbersome and *“takes us away from real work.”*
- A few participants want to know how reporting will work for Allocation Transfer Program licences if they are now linked to the Pacific Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative. *“We deal with the licences as a separate program, but we still do the reporting through the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy.”*

Understanding Relationships

“We’re isolated so we don’t see these guys that often and we prefer not to have someone there to tell us we can’t do things.”

- While some participants report having good relationships with departmental staff, others think these relationships need to improve. For example, one has been trying to partner with the Department in technical activities but *“they don’t want to work with us.”* Another has an industry partner lined up for a project but *“trying to get DFO onside and at the table takes so long.”*
 - One thinks the Department needs to demonstrate through action that they are listening to the concerns of communities. *“DFO flies over our territory to do data collection during the peak season for our people on the ground. This increases wildlife movement making it unsafe for our workers. We have brought it up several times, but they don’t listen.”*
- Participants say communities work closely with their aquatic resource and oceans management group, as well as with other communities, to achieve common priorities.
 - One wants more opportunities to meet neighbouring communities to find ways to work together. *“This is the first time I’m meeting with other Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy teams.”* Another said their aquatic resource and oceans management group is bringing members together to find ways to pool own source revenues to achieve mutually beneficial activities.

Improving the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program

“This program came in for First Nations, not for DFO, but funding goes to the Department and not us.”

- Participants are unanimous that more funding is needed to improve this program. *“This is a must and has been expressed plenty of times.”* In particular, more funding is needed to help Nations build staff capacity, to attract youth to the industry, and to retain their workers. *“Right now, we have labourers and we want – and need – technicians.”*
 - Some have capacity, but need funding to be able to offer longer (and, ideally, full-time) employment to their workers, as well as career opportunities. One said they needed to hire someone to handle all of the engagement requests of government.
- Participants also want to improve the program by:
 - reinvigorating the Aboriginal Fishery Guardian program into a career development program; especially, through training and connecting it to land and wildlife programs
 - increasing DFO staff to work with First Nations on marine issues
 - ensuring First Nations benefit economically from their enhancement activities
 - removing Allocation Transfer Program fees and limited entry and licence restrictions
 - co-designing program objectives and indicators of success *“When someone else designs a program for us, it doesn’t work.”*
- Participants also think the program could be improved with co-management agreements that respect Title, rights and ownership and by ensuring resource management is for conservation and priority users before the commercial and recreational sectors.

- Several also want the program's design to include an end goal of coming under the control and/or management of First Nations. *"This should lead to First Nations management of their territory."*

Improving Program Administration

- Some participants want to see more alignment between Indigenous programs, such as flexible reporting options, while others want a renewed commitment to the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy and Aboriginal Fishery Guardian programs without connecting them to the Aboriginal Aquatic Resource and Oceans Management program or the Pacific Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative. *"There seems to be a sneaky pull-away from co-management in AFS to rely on AAROM or PICFI."*
 - One wants a separate fund to help Nations replace assets such as vessels, motors and equipment.
- Many participants think more communication and trust between the Department and First Nations will improve how the program is administered and ensure projects are successfully completed and objectives are met. *"DFO needs to go through a similar exercise to ask, 'What is our purpose and what do we need to change?'"*

Measuring Success

"We will measure success through the action taken after these workshops are completed."

- Participants measure the program's success as meeting conservation and community needs, achieving restored and protected spawning habitats, having trained full-time fishery guardians, and increasing collaborative work done by the Department and First Nations.
- Some view long-term success as being being real partners in management *"Right now, DFO makes decisions for First Nations input and approval. That is NOT co-management" and no longer needing the program. "DFO staff need to see themselves as working themselves out of a job."*

"Maybe DFO or First Nations should hire a champion for Aboriginal Programs. There's no one there to champion our issues."

Skills and Training Needs

"We want a minimum of two fishery guardians per First Nation with training based on the first training programs in the '90s."

- Participants listed a range of skills and training needs that they feel are needed by administrators, managers, technicians and guardians. For example, managers need to develop reporting, proposal writing and note-taking skills; technician need to build technical "field" skills and knowledge; and guardians need enforcement powers, basic fish knowledge and a clear understanding of Tribal laws.

Other Input

- While outside the scope of this Program Review, some participants want government to start looking at and improving fisheries policies. *"It's hard to separate the technical from the policy because DFO always says, 'No, you can't do this because of policy.' Reviews like this have to come back to the bigger picture."*