

What We Heard

“Is this leading down a path where First Nations will eventually run this program?”

- Participants were pleased to be involved in the workshop: *“It’s smart to have Indigenous people design these programs.”* They also liked the idea of discussing key results and key directions for the future of the commercial fisheries program.

Getting to Know Commercial Fishing Enterprises

“The Chiefs knew, pre-contact, there was a lot of trading. We had a wide trade network. Elders reminded us: You’re not starting our commercial fishery; you’re re-establishing it.”

- ‘Commercial fisheries’ can be a bad term for some First Nations people. When food fishing has bad years, for example, commercial fisheries are viewed as the source of the problem, even if it’s not true. When the program began, it took a lot of work for some participants to inform the community about the importance of being involved in the program; especially, in the decision-making of the commercial fishery.
- Participating in ‘commercial fishing’ through the program also required community education because some members thought they could sell their fish on their own.
- The program has enabled participants to set up a commercial fishing enterprise, and to buy infrastructure and other assets to handle, store, label, market and sell their product. It has also benefitted communities: *“So many good things are coming out of this program for First Nations people: jobs, training, etc.”*
- Participants have been very creative in developing their enterprises and keeping them operational despite changing program funding eligibilities and not knowing if the program was going to be around year after year.

Improving the Pacific Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative

- Participants had a lot to say about where the program had gone wrong in the past and where it still needed improvements:
 - Funding eligibility is inconsistent from year to year, and program participants are not informed about changes or the policy (or authority) that results in changes. This has impacted the relationship between First Nations and the Department.
 - Program applications and reporting requirements are too complicated and time consuming for businesses. *“It takes managers away from running their business.”*
 - The money received through the program arrives too late in the year: often in November or December, rather than in April. This is not viable for a real business, which requires access to cash flow. *“It’s so hard for [the Department] to roll out funding announced in April. It takes six months at least to receive a cheque – and sometimes far later. We get cash-flow problems as a result.”*

- The program needs funding flexibility to meet the realities of salmon fisheries, which may be every other year or every four years. *“To run a proper business, there needs to be different models of funding. It can’t be one-size fits all.”*
- There is strong support for multi-year agreements in order to ensure long-term and strategic business planning.
- The program’s initial design was structured around the assumption that First Nations would be the only harvesters and funding was limited to infrastructure and training. But enterprise business models are further evolved to remove and replace the ‘middle man’ and to learn how to get the fish to market – and these aspirations are not necessarily supported through the program. *“We want to maintain ownership until the fish is in the final sales stage – and all handling. The program needs to allow us to build the infrastructure and capacity to get there.”*
- Participants are also critical of the program’s requirement to build an aggregate and/or its inconsistent approach to sometime require an aggregate and sometimes not. *“The composition of aggregates can be a challenge – and it would have more challenges if there were a lot of profits.”*
- Participants feel the program fits the Department’s ideas rather than business realities. *“They made such a big fuss over governance at arm’s length, but we’re buried in their bureaucracy. We need to find a more creative, streamlined way to administer this program. It’s time to roll it out differently than the standard Aboriginal program.”*
- While the value of the business development team is acknowledged, participants are uncertain as to who they work for and what their mandate is: *“There’s not a clear job description of the team and, then, how to access all of these services.”* Participants are also clear about their expectations of the business development team: *“They are there to assist us. They are not our voice. It’s not their mandate to speak for us.”* *“It would be good to have transparency from the business development team – including their criteria for rating fishing enterprises.”*
- One participant thought an association should be created to represent commercial fishing enterprises even though this has been an ongoing discussion. *“Collaboration always comes up at the [Commercial Fishing Enterprise] Forum, but nothing every seems to happen. If we could get enterprises organized as a collective, we might be able to access more opportunities.”* Another participant was also unsure whether the commercial fishing enterprise hub was operational.
- Participants have a mixed response to some past program changes. For example, some think the co-management funding envelope should continue to be part of the program, while others do not think this type of funding belongs in the program.

Identifying enterprise needs, milestones and success factors

“We have our own objectives. They may not jive with the program, but that doesn’t matter.”

Needs

- The top priority of all participants is healthy fish stocks to support food as well as economic ventures. The importance of food for First Nations communities is

paramount. *“Our priority is trying to get members fish. If they don’t have fish in their freezers, we don’t support selling it.”* There is also strong support for a strategic fish stocks rebuilding plan. *“This would benefit everyone.”*

- There is strong agreement among participants that fisheries are not well managed by the Department and that this has negatively impacted business success. *“We’re at the mercy of the whims of fisheries management. They’re not strong supporters of the commercial fisheries program and they make decisions contrary to the program.”*
- Less restrictive access to fish is another key priority for participants: *“It’s hard to consistently retail a product without any fish. When we don’t have a fishery, we need to buy a product. We need it to pace sales and accommodate a four-year fishery.”*
- Participants also want to procure fish from other First Nations and they feel the commercial fisheries program should enable this activity (as it has in the past). There is also strong support to sell fish to First Nations neighbours and/or in local markets.
- Participants also want the program to support: building capacity, diversification, internal communications and collaboration with the Nation (or Nations), research and development, training, and continued education of First Nations communities and the public about First Nations fisheries and fish products. One participant thought the program should also enable First Nations to take part in the catch monitoring industry.

Milestones

- Participants listed a range of milestones for commercial fishing enterprises: from all First Nations agreeing to key performance indicators and working together to having a functioning governance structure to turning a profit and developing new products.
- They also thought expanding partnerships and marketing, minimizing Fisheries and Oceans Canada’s role in the program, and being run only by, and for, First Nations are important milestones for their enterprises.

Success factors

“Getting over challenges and First Nations working together over the long term is success.”

- Participants defined success as increasing full-time jobs and employment opportunities for First Nations, diversifying profits and (potentially) markets, and making a profit – as well as the well-being and pride of community members, healthy and viable fish stocks, and the Rights holders making decisions about fisheries.
- Participants also viewed success as no longer being part of the program. *“Obviously, if the business is doing well, we don’t want government funds.”*

Meeting industry priorities, including through partnerships

“When a commercial fishing enterprise is new, we need a lot of partners, but I think the goal is to have fewer partners – to become vertically integrated.”

- Participants do not find access to capital to be an issue for their enterprises and gave examples of available sources. *“Access to capital is possible, even with minimal sales.”*

- Participants agree that diversification and marketing/market access are priorities for enterprises which have the ability to access, process and sell fish. However, they think this should be determined by enterprises themselves and not the Department.

Diversification

- Participants support diversification opportunities, but note that First Nations have difficulty accessing competitive programs, such as the Pacific Commercial Fisheries Diversification Initiative and the Seafood Export Development funding.
- The Pacific Commercial Fisheries Diversification Initiative has many of the same administrative issues as the commercial fisheries program. For example:
 - Applications are onerous, the application timeframes are rushed, and funding arrives far too late in the fiscal year: *“Year-end spending is a nightmare. We have to show good value for every purchase – and how do you do that in a few months? They must recognize the operational constraints.”*
 - Processes to approve funding are not transparent and communications is lacking. *“They don’t report back on how the funding was approved.”*
- Participants want to partner with other First Nations, but they are not looking for industry partners. *“Partnerships are a necessary evil. As we grow, we want to get into a position where we need less and less of this. We want to cut out the middle man.”* One participant also noted the importance of joint ventures among First Nations: *“In a true partnership, everyone is making money.”*

Marketing and Market Access

- Participants strongly support selling products to local markets, including First Nations neighbours as well as other local communities. There is also some support for province-wide markets: *“Export markets are not necessarily the answer.”*
- Some commercial fishing enterprises have (or have access to) partnerships to market their products, including with *Organic Ocean*, *OceanWise* and/or others. Others have their own retail space.
- Participants note the need for partnerships with the Province and/or with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. One also wanted access to seafood export development funding. Another wanted to ensure there was a market for all parts of the fish.
- Participants think market intelligence and feasibility would be of huge benefit for commercial fishing enterprises, in addition to First Nations product branding: *“People are interested, regardless of the product.”*
- Participants are also interested in certification labelling. For example, one participant suggested that a First Nations certification (similar to *OceanWise*) could be used to distinguish Indigenous products from those of others.

Access to Capital

- Participants have access to capital for their enterprises. They saw benefits in making timely, quick decisions and to have cash for operations at certain times of the year.

One participant also noted the benefit of using a third-party auditor to be able to access a line of credit.

- There is no interest in investors: *“We want a 100% First Nations-owned company.”*

Future Training Plans

- Participants feel the fish harvester training curriculum handout was outdated and did not reflect the needs of commercial fishing enterprises in terms of the jobs. *“This is a classic, turn-of-the-century list for fish harvesters.”*
- Participants see a need to train fleet managers, swift-water rescue, catch handling techniques for inland fish and emerging fisheries, marketing, hatcheries and different gear types: *“We need to see more about training beyond the harvester. There are a lot of jobs in the value-added side.”*
- Participants recommend that the business management training for the Pacific not promote the fisheries management software used in the Atlantic because it was designed for those with numerous vessels, different crews and multiple species. Participants also think that one software package should not be required: *“You’re not telling us to use one accounting software over another. We have a better system – we developed our own system for this.”*
- Some participants are also concerned that curriculum is being developed by the business development team without the full participation of all commercial fishing enterprises: *“Who’s authorizing them to do it and why is it restricted to managers?”*
- One participant also thought that the issues identified with the program as a whole (and the diversification program) were simply being repeated in the training program, with tight timelines to develop the curriculum and for enterprises to take part in it.