

What We Heard

“The Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy is only used as a lever to do what we need to do.”

- Participants run extensive fisheries programs, but the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program only funds a portion of these programs. *“Our agreement is supposed to cover one full-time manager, two technicians, a biologist on hire, and the activities from boats. That’s not realistic with the funds.”*

Getting to Know Communities and their Fisheries

“Our history is based on sea resources – our houses were built with really high ceilings to store dried fish.”

- Participants are very active in both inland and marine fisheries, fishing multiple species (salmon, halibut, clam, crabs, herring eggs, groundfish, seals, seaweed) under communal licences throughout the year. *“We fish throughout the territory – it just depends on how much we can afford in gas.”* They also fish according to certain calendar months and harvesting times.
- Participants are concerned about the barriers preventing younger people from entering the fishery. *“We no longer have legacies to pass down to sons. There’s nothing to grasp onto to get a loan.”* Barriers include the high cost of licences and access to quota, as well as the high cost of vessels, gear and maintenance.

Understanding Food, Social and Ceremonial Needs

“We try to avoid using ‘food, social and ceremonial.’ We have a [Nation] fishery, regardless of any government regulations.”

- Participants report that their food fisheries are not meeting community needs. *“A big problem with this program is the amount of fish that we get. We might as well buy sportfishery licences – we’d get more fish that way.”*
 - Food allocations for these communities were established within the Tsimshian Tribal Council’s Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy agreement. When the council dissolved, allocations did not change in individual community agreements.
 - Participants have tried to renegotiate these food allocations, but they have seen interest by the Department. One only has an activity agreement with the Department without a comprehensive fisheries (harvest) agreement.
- Participants document who fishes, when and how much is caught in their food fishery. Data is given to community fishery technicians, as well as the Department.
 - Several participants say they do not comply with the allocations set in their agreements although they report accurate catch numbers to the Department. *“In the end, we do report real numbers and it’s way over the allocations.”*

- Several participants compensate some of their members to fish for the community using incentives such as paying for the first fuel up and helping with net mending. One participant noted, however, that harvesters are still struggling to maintain their boats. There is also concern about the number of recreational fish harvesters in the region and its impact on food fish.
- Community food fishery programs distribute fish to elders and single mothers and they plan for fishing by members who live off reserve. *“But it’s not enough. Many members don’t get any.”*

Understanding the Technical Components of Agreements

“It’s important for the Department to realize that this resource is everyone’s concern.”

- Participants are involved in data collection, stock assessments, and catch and fishery monitoring activities. However, these activities are not fully funded by the program, despite assumptions by departmental staff. *“I tell the Department, ‘don’t think you’re funding the whole program.’”* They also point out that these technical activities are only done on select species through the program. *“There is no data on species in small streams – and we’d like to monitor other non-First Nation fisheries.”*
- Participants are interested in doing more technical work including habitat restoration and fisheries enhancement. One sees the need for more baseline data – and for departmental stock assessment information and data to be shared with Nations – with more funding. *“We propose options and they want us to add it to our agreement, but we need funding to supplement these projects.”*
- Participants are concerned about the lack of enforcement in their region. A few think the Conservation and Protection program is both understaffed and underfunded and the Department needs more scientists. They also think the Department is offloading services without providing the funding for Nations to assume these services.
 - Two communities have small contracts with the Department to monitor the herring fishery on its behalf. One also said they were asked to monitor vessels for the Department in certain parts of the Skeena. *“We’re taking up the slack where DFO can’t monitor.”*
 - Another community is funded to gather data through presence/absence surveys. Still another does not have the resources to bid on dive surveys that they used to do to gather data on aquatic species.

Co-management

“The Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program can play a role – but it is not a treaty agreement or a reconciliation. It’s one tool in the bigger picture.”

- Participants want more local control of their fish and the implementation of their laws in co-management structures. *“We still follow our own laws in terms of how we harvest. Our three-year conservation on roe-on-kelp was self-imposed, although I’m not sure where the Department is on that.”*

- One community has a memoranda of understanding with the Department related to a fishery which allow them to have a voice about pre-season protocols and when the commercial fishery can start. Another has the opposite situation related to the same fishery.
- Participants are frustrated with resource management decisions being made by Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the impact of these decisions on fish stocks, such as abalone and herring.

“The Department refuses to admit to mistakes and they continue to make the same mistakes. It’s had a cascade effect.”

“Herring is regulated according to biomass. It’s aggregate-based so whether herring are in our outlet or not, they’ll open the fishery.”

- Participants have issues with integrated fisheries management plans, including the separation of inland and coastal areas in these plans – and their inability to participate in so many integrated fisheries management planning processes.
- Participants want to interact more in planning related to species other than salmon. They also want departmental decisions to reflect their input.

Understanding the Economic Components of Agreements

“There needs to be a reset on some of the things that have been going on for 20 years, like high-end licences for geoduck and halibut being controlled in towers in Vancouver.”

- Participants find the Allocation Transfer Program licences inadequate to meet the fishing desires of the community, even though they count on the funds generated to cost-share their programs. *“The species in these licences don’t match with the resources in the territory that we want to fish. We just use it for leasing.”*
 - One community has a small-scale economic component to sell crab. There is also food distribution and trade taking place in some communities.
 - One participant explained how the success of their commercial fishery impacts their community fishery. *“When it’s making money, the commercial fishery spends their own money on gas to fish for the community. They don’t have that luxury anymore.”* Another said their community relies on roe-on-kelp to help with their food, social and ceremonial needs.
- Participants notice inconsistencies in economic fisheries programs and policies:
 - One wonders why their community pays management fees in the thousands of dollars for Allocation Transfer Program licences, when licences issued through the Pacific Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative do not have fees. *“A annual management fee is taken out of the Allocation Transfer Program contribution to supplement the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program.”*
 - Another questions why inland First Nations are given more preferable access than coastal First Nations. *“The excess salmon to spawning requirement fishery has created suffering for the marine Nations.”*

- Another points out that economic opportunity fisheries (which began as pilot sales) are not available to all Nations because *“once the court decision went in the Department’s favour, no more pilot sales fisheries were started.”*
- To improve economic outcomes, one participant wants more licence flexibility, such as fewer gear and vessel length restrictions. Another wants more fisheries in smaller streams *“to take some pressure off the larger systems.”* Another is interested in entering a Nation-to-Nation process to pursue and locally control aquaculture.

Understanding Relationships

“Listen to what we want to tell you – even when we’re at the wrong table. We don’t get a chance to talk to government that often.”

- Most participants do not have a good relationship with Fisheries and Oceans Canada blaming downsizing at the Department, high turn-over of local employees, and/or specific issues related to local personnel. *“People get to know us and want to work with us and then they are shifted out of our community.”*
 - One participant said their community’s fish harvesters are heavily monitored by Conservation and Protection and *“targeted for various infractions.”*
 - Another thinks communities are treated differently depending on local biases. *“The staff take a lot of cultural training, but I don’t think they’re absorbing it.”*
 - Still another thinks the Department should stop sharing proprietary information from one First Nation to the next.
- One participant has great technical relationships with local departmental staff. They input food, social and ceremonial data into the Aboriginal licensing management system to help maintain this relationship.
 - Another talked about how the relationship improved when the Department (and the RCMP) participated in a canoe journey with communities. *“It helped to show that we’re not bad people and nor are they.”*
- Participants support more interaction between the Department and First Nations as well as inter-cultural learning activities. *“They need to learn who the local area First Nations truly are – and where we come from.”*
- Some participants work together (or in aquatic resource and oceans management groups) on certain technical projects, but they note that aggregate groups do not speak for individual nations – and their work must have the support of member communities.

Improving the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program

“It would be nice to see some changes – and some recognition of rights through this program.”

- Participants want the program to be more adequately funded to meet the needs of communities, to keep up with inflation, and to reflect mature community fishery

programs. *“My program work plan hasn’t changed in four years even though my broader work plan has.”* Specifically, they want more funding:

- for technical activities, such as enhancement and protection, more data collection and stock assessments, improved water quality and safety, and increased collaboration on management decisions
- for fishery guardians, including initial and refresher training, designations, and pathways to become fishery officers
- for a biologist to do stock assessments and decision-making (and other field technicians)
- to meaningfully contribute to management processes

“Increased funds will lead to First Nations employment, better data for management decisions, better utilization of local knowledge, and more sustainable fisheries.”

- One participant would like the latest peer-reviewed/academic journals to ensure the work of their community builds on the latest studies. They also want access to raw data and past scientific work that has been done by the Department in their community. *“Data-sharing is important. We’d also like the opportunity to work with science when they’re doing their assessments – through science-to-science partnerships.”*
- Another would like the Department to work out dual fisheries to end restrictions in the communal licence to fish six to 12 hours before and after commercial fish harvesters. *“Once commercial haul out is done; we should be able to fish for food.”*

Improving Program Administration

- Participants note that some reporting issues were addressed a few years ago which improved reporting. However, they also said the Department expected more and more detail now in reports.
- Participants have different reporting timeline requirements. Some issue reports bi-annually, while others only submit one annual report.
- A few participants have also experienced lengthy turn-around times by the Department which caused delays in receiving agreements and funding.

Measuring Success

“Recognition of priority access is a measurement of success.”

- For some participants, success equals Indigenous people having full access to their traditional foods. It also means younger people having an opportunity to make a decent living in fisheries.
- One participant suggested using the First Nation Health Authority’s determinants of health as a model for the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program’s success factors. *“Access to food is related to the social determinants of health.”*