

What We Heard

“We’ve been trailblazers before and we could do it again.”

- Participants included First Nations fishery managers and stewards involved in the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program, as well as those who may have participated in the past.
 - Yukon Territory has modern treaties, which are comprehensive land claims agreements. These agreements outline First Nations governments’ rights to land, self-governance, economic development, resources, and more. First Nations who have signed land claim agreements are not eligible for the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy or its Fishery Guardian component. However, some of these First Nations participated in the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program in the past. In addition, many Nations have expressed interest in fishery guardian and other guardian-like programs.
 - Some Nations with modern treaties may still be working with Fisheries and Oceans Canada through contracts and/or other initiatives. For example, one is presently training stewards to monitor fisheries and do assessments in partnership with the Department.

Getting to Know Communities, their Fisheries and Fishery Guardians (or other Guardian type programs), and their Experience with the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program

“We know how to fish. We survived for thousands of years this way and this is what we do.”

- Communities fish (or used to fish) salmon (King, sockeye, chinook, chum, pinks, coho) and steelhead, as well as freshwater species, such as grayling and lake trout.
- Some participants have had Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy agreements since the program began. Others have signed agreements in the past.
 - Most Nations have guardians, stewards or technicians in their programs. One started funding a guardian this year using own source revenues (pilot project), while another has been funding land guardians using own source revenues and other funding sources for several years. Three Nations also partner in a wildlife guardian program.
- Participants with agreements note that funding has not changed since they first signed an agreement. *“It’s hard to stretch that funding to do the same activities with inflation.”* One uses the program to leverage other contracts and funds.

Food, Social and Ceremonial Fisheries

“We’re surrounded by fish-bearing streams and rivers, but the fish aren’t there anymore, so we must buy it to meet our needs.”

- Most participants report that there are not enough fish to meet community food, social and ceremonial needs, due to declining fish stocks and water levels on community. *“The 1990’s was the last time we had sufficient numbers.”* We heard numerous examples, including:
 - In one Nation, only one family went out to fish this year. *“Only 26 fish were caught.”*

- In another Nation, 25 families used to fish chinook and dry 300-400 fish each. Only 500 fish went through this year. *“If we fished like we used to, many would be affected.”*
- The catch in another Nation should be 34 thousand pieces, but only 6,900 pieces have been caught in recent years. *“We went into conservation mode about eight years ago.”*
- Meanwhile, chronic low water levels have prevented salmon from getting into lakes for another Nation. *“Only 11 fish made it this year, in a big year, it would be 10,000.”*
- While there is a set quota for chinook salmon in the Territory, that quota is not being met. *“The quota is set at two to three thousand, but only 89 were caught this year.”*
- As a result of declining fish stocks, a number of Nations have passed resolutions to voluntarily stop or limit fishing in their territories. Some have mixed responses from citizens when it comes to conservation. *“It’s hard to give up FSC when they see recreational fishing ‘catch and release’ and commercial still going ahead.”*
 - Many report that they purchase food, social and ceremonial fish from Taku Wild or other commercial enterprises. *“I didn’t know that others were buying their fish, too.”* A few are concerned that this is causing a loss of cultural practice and capacity to fish. *“You see when the truck is at the parking lot – that’s what fishing has become.”*
- Most Nations run cultural fish programs to teach youth how to harvest, clean, and prepare fish using traditional methods. The fish is then distributed to Elders to help meet their food needs. *“If we catch a big one, we’ll keep it for a potlatch so everyone can get a taste.”*
 - While some fisheries may be under moratoria, fish for cultural programs are permitted by Chief and Council. *“It’s important not to stop having these camps, regardless of moratoria, to keep that connection.”* One said their fish culture camp is funded through health organizations. Another gets trout bycatch from Parks Canada for their fish camp.
 - One thinks stock restoration projects help citizens maintain cultural connections to fish as well as community-based management plans that include traditional knowledge.
- Many Nations have first fish, potlatches and other harvest ceremonies. One recently reintroduced the first fish ceremony back into their community.
 - In one community, every family fishes their section 35.1 fish themselves. *“We have about 40 First Nations-owned fish camps and different fishing holes for families.”* Off reserve harvesters also fish in the territory with a Nation-issued transport permit.
 - In another, most commercial licences are held by the Nation, so they send food to the community either through their commercial enterprise or the Health organization.
- Some want to know what happens with food, social and ceremonial catch data as they do not see it reflected in integrated fisheries management plans. *“We can take as many fish as we want – it’s never been an issue, but how are our fish built into the escapement model.”*

Technical Activities

“We find data collection is not about meeting our needs. It’s about meeting DFO’s and Canada’s needs.”

- Participants in the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program typically do data collection, catch and fishery monitoring, and some stock assessment-related work. They also use funding from the Pacific Salmon Commission Northern Fund or the Pacific Salmon Treaty

transboundary river enhancement chapter for their habitat restoration and/or fish enhancement activities, such as chinook rebuilding using incubator seed boxes.

- There are mixed views as to whether these technical activities are meeting the needs of communities. While one said data collection was meeting their needs, another said the opposite and is uncertain if they even want data collection in their agreement. *“The AFS funds seasonal monitoring work, but it’s not always enough for EI.”* Others question whether First Nations are benefitting from assessments and restoration activities as they seem to only benefit commercial fisheries. *“We provide stats and data for commercial fisheries management. We’re not allowed to use funding for other initiatives that our community would prefer to know about.”*
- One reported that while the program funded some technical activities *“more is done through a separate biologist contract with the Department.”* This Nation also has a number of camps in their territory in which departmental and First Nations technicians work. *“We would prefer to do this work ourselves.”*
- There is support for more technical research and studies to be done on fish stocks, water levels and quality, and the impacts of climate change and other industries on fish stocks, habitat and waterways. *“No effective studies are being done – or collaboratively across the watershed.”* One wants more baseline and other surveys to be done on fish populations, as well as genetic testing. *“We lack science data.”* Another wants climate change to be incorporated more clearly into fisheries management plans.
 - Some require equipment such as sonars or Didson counters to be more involved in technical activities. Others have technical equipment to run their fishery and technical programs, such as fish wheels and weirs, and some fund salmon survey fly-overs.
- Several participants in treaties are involved in data collection, stock assessment, habitat restoration, fish enhancement and/or catch and fishery monitoring activities. For example, two do telemetry work as part of their restoration projects.
 - While most said data collection and/or stock assessments were done in partnership with the Territory or Fisheries and Oceans Canada, a few said their citizens did most of these activities themselves. Others want their citizens to be contracted to do technical work for the Department.
 - One Nation partners with third parties, such as the Canadian Wildlife Federation and universities, to fund and undertake technical activities. Another gets funding through the Northern Contaminants Program to do their technical work.
- Almost all participants are involved in education-related activities. This includes salmon in the classroom projects, salmon education and conservation projects, the stream to sea program, and annual fish camps. One is also takes part in classroom incubators, dissections and lifecycle documentation.
 - Most are heavily involved in wildlife and other resource activities, in addition to fish and fish habitat. For example, a number said they have (or are working to get) beaver dam removal and beaver trapping programs. Some also mentioned technical activities related to caribou, moose and sheep.
- Many Nations have prioritized collection and documentation of Indigenous knowledge. For example, one has partnered with non-governmental organizations in a salmon resiliency project to collect and incorporate First Nations values into salmon management. Another

collects traditional knowledge on freshwater fish species through Elder engagements. Still another has linked with journalist schools in universities to have them write stories about their traditional fisheries and knowledge.

- Participants want to see Indigenous traditional knowledge reflected in fisheries management plans and practices. *“ITK (our worldview) shows the bigger picture, but it’s being compartmentalized by the data needs.”*

Aboriginal Fishery Guardian Program

“We really want to lead and design our own program to address our priorities.”

- Participants want guardians working for their Nations and most want their guardian team working on fisheries, land, water, environment, and heritage stewardship activities.
 - One partners with neighbouring Nations in British Columbia to get a land guardian, but the Nation funds this guardian through own source revenues to also work on fisheries issues. *“DFO is pretty much a no show in [our] lake because there’s no salmon in it.”*
- While some run multiple guardian programs, these are not funded through the Department. Most say funding for guardian programs is lacking and there is concern that inadequate funds to provide wages and benefits is causing retention issues. Some have lost employees to the Department or the Yukon government; others to mining and other industries. *“I’m happy for them, but I have to start all over training someone new.”*
- Guardians in Nations observe, record and report in territories. While participants support guardians and officers having more authority, their views about ‘enforcement’ may differ.
 - Some guardians actively enforce their Nation’s laws and regulations, as well as territorial laws, and have been trained as peace officers with authority to issue tickets on traditional lands. Others aspire for this authority. *“We want authority, not just ride-alongs. We want to be actual partners inputting into the system and issuing tickets.”*
 - Some say authority is needed for First Nations because no one is enforcing the rules on settlement lands. *“The Yukon Government has no jurisdiction, but who does? We don’t have regulations yet. We need interim solutions for this.”*
 - A few are more interested in education, rather than punishment. *“We want to encourage people to voluntarily not fish for subsistence.”* One said this approach helps retain relationships with harvesters *“when collecting data later on.”*
- Some fishery guardian, land stewards, or other guardian types educate citizens about conservation issues, explain fishing and wildlife rules, and hand out pamphlets.

Co-management and Rights Issues

“Maximum Sustainable Yield is not the First Nations’ systems. If it must be MSY, then let’s define sustainable – but for future generations and in the context of climate change. It can’t be for the year.”

- Many participants are involved in salmon management boards, the Pacific Salmon Treaty, and transboundary salmon and fisheries management committees. The impact of Alaskan fisheries on food, social and ceremonial fish, as well as the commercial fisheries of Yukon

and Yukon/BC transboundary Nations is a big issue for Nations and their citizens. *“There’s a whole different way interests are represented internationally, so it’s a challenge.”*

- One said neighbouring Nations with moratoria on fishing want to collaborate to bring a common message to Alaska to stop overfishing. *“We’re trying everything we can, but Alaskans are not changing; their rules and regulations are totally different.”*
- A few think Canada needs to be held more accountable when it comes to the Pacific Salmon Treaty. *“Canada picks and chooses what it enforces.”* They also want governments and the Pacific Salmon Commission to acknowledge that declining fish stocks in transboundary rivers are a result of too much commercial harvesting. *“Alaska has no First Nations fishery; it’s all commercial interests.”* In addition, one wants to see agreed-upon changes at the table reflected in practices. *“We can talk for two weeks about this, then we leave and nothing is changed.”*
- Participants support co-management arrangements to be established with the Department as well as the Territorial government (for freshwater fish) so First Nations practices, the advice of Elders for an ecosystems approach, and Indigenous knowledge are incorporated.
 - One said their Elders blamed the weir in their territory for preventing salmon from entering traditional fishing areas. While the Department has been operating the weir since the 1970’s, following a general assembly resolution to remove the weir, it modified the weir’s design to have multiple openings and to prevent it from closing.
 - One thinks there are too many organizations involved in fisheries management and that the Department needs to develop a five-year plan to outline the activities and management priorities in which First Nations need to be involved. *“It’s fragmented, redundant, and not effective. We’re all over the place, but there’s no fish.”*
 - One disagrees with the Department’s management focus on maximum sustainable yield and the shifting baseline to always give a 10-year average, without considering the historical baseline average. *“If the average is dropping over time, it’s not an accurate quantifiable picture.”*
- Some Nations have their own fish and wildlife laws, while others are in the process of developing these laws (or implementation regulations) or they want to develop them. One also wants to develop internal policies for food, social and ceremonial fisheries.

Understanding Training and Training Needs

“Our Nation’s aspiration is to have a community member in my position.”

- Participants want more funding for training and more flexibility in the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program so they can set aside funding for recertification and other ongoing training needs. *“I have to cut out something every year to create a pot of funding for training.”*
- A number of training courses have been taken in the past by fishery managers, technicians and/or guardians (or stewards), but only some of these may have been funded through the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program. Past training may include, for example:
 - Bear aware courses, shotgun training, swiftwater rescue, vessel operation, geographic information system use, ATV, UTV, snowmobile, aquatics biology, and water quality.

- Some have taken a fisheries technician course offered by Yukon College. Others have taken the Canadian aquatic benthic index network (CABIN) biomonitoring protocol offered by Environment and Climate Change Canada.
 - Some lands steward officers and other guardians have been trained at the Justice Institute of British Columbia. Others have taken 'on the land Women in Hunting' training. *"This is a modern-day version of how people did this in the past."*
 - One is presently working with the Department to do on-the-job field training on water flow, water quality tests, and fish counting. Another was mentored for a year by the Department on how to do juvenile assessments.
 - One receives funding from the Yukon Government for training, while another is looking at the Yukon's conservation officer training program for their guardians.
- Participants have a lot of professional capacity-building and training needs, including:
 - Program administrator: environmental referrals, communications and outreach skills, technical, scientific and cultural skills, knowledgeable of Final Agreements, management and employment law.
 - Field technicians: fish and water sampling, fish counting, safety training, swiftwater rescue, data collection and analysis, wilderness first aid, ATV training, beaver control, small motor mechanics, *"I would like to see a local field stock assessment training program."*
 - Fishery guardian and other guardians/stewards: conflict resolution, investigative skills, defensive driving, environmental hazards, geographic information systems, note-taking, evidence taking, Indigenous knowledge interviewing and mapping skills, patrolling techniques, writing skills, wilderness first aid, vessel operation, fisheries regulations, public education and outreach, identification skills, enforcement training, and helicopter safety.
- Participants are interested in attracting youth to fisheries and wildlife jobs and several want to build internal capacity to be able to run technical projects. There is also support to emphasize Indigenous traditional knowledge in training and to involve Elders. *"Everyone needs training with Elders in traditional practices."*
- Most participants want multi-disciplinarian training for guardians so they have full-time employment, while others prefer having some trained in fisheries and water activities and others trained in land and wildlife. There is also some support for Nations to share guardians across watershed areas. *"Ultimately, I want to see DFO out of stock assessments and for us to take over all field camps, to collect the data, monitor and provide data to the Transboundary Technical Committee to be used in management plans."*
- Several want training on how to gather, store, analyze, use and protect traditional knowledge. *"How do we protect our knowledge? We struggle with that."* Others want governments to be trained in courses to better understand the worldview of Indigenous people.
 - One Nation has developed a Traditional Ecological Knowledge science data sheet to document land resources before they are leased.

Understanding Relationships

"We don't always agree, but we talk about it beforehand now."

- Participants report having good relationships with the Department's stock assessment, weir technician, and resource management staff, as well as Yukon Government conservation

officers. Several meet with officials at regular points of the year, including post-season to discuss data related to management plans and future monitoring needs. *“It’s been really good in terms of integrating and sharing information back and forth.”* Some want more government-to-government meetings with officials.

- Most Nations report having little to no contact with Conservation and Protection fishery officers and view lack of enforcement as one factor in declining fish stocks. *“Do us the courtesy to tell us if you’re coming in as we want to be aware.”* However, one said they had some positive dealings with fishery officers related to alternative justice.
- Nations that have technical camps in their territories where departmental officials also work want officials to consult with them before planning real property improvements or other changes. *“Two sea cans showed up on an airstrip without consulting us. We built that cabin 30 years ago with AFS funds and we should be consulted if they want to make changes to it.”*
- Nations share food, social and ceremonial catch data with the Department, as well as data and other results from fish stock rehabilitation projects and fish enhancement work. Some also share data with the Territorial government’s environment staff.
- Several First Nations work in partnership with one another to accomplish regional fish, wildlife and/or natural resource objectives. *“We want to deal with overlapping areas and stop duplicating efforts.”* Others work closely with Yukon conservation officers to share fish and wildlife duties, including joint patrols and ride-alongs. In fact, one Nation funds a Yukon Government conservation officer.
- Some participants have other partnerships, including with Parks Canada, university students, and officials in the Northern Contaminants Program.

Improving the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program

“I want to see a modern-day interpretation of First Nations in their stewardship role – merging traditional knowledge and science to make better decisions, collaborations and partnerships, and a holistic approach to management.”

- Participants think the best way to improve the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program is by increasing funding. *“That means adequate funding to deliver the program that we’re expected to deliver.”* There is also support for funding to be delivered earlier in the year, including any reprofiled funding, so Nations can avoid taking out loans.
 - Those with agreements want reporting to be simplified and no more changes to be made to templates. *“Streamline the report and then leave it be: stop changing the formatting and trying to make it easier for managers. It only makes it harder.”*
 - One also wants more accountability by government officials who delay signing agreements and getting payments to Nations. *“Sometimes, we don’t hear back for months – it gets lost and doesn’t get addressed because it went on someone’s desk or they went on holidays.”*
- Some want more transparency in terms of program delivery from one Nation to the next – and a clear path to bringing the program and technical activities under First Nations control. There is also support for more collaborative watershed management of resources.
- In addition, participants want more training to be made available; especially, training that reflects Indigenous values and interests, as part of an improved program.

Measuring Success

- Participants measure success of the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy in the following ways: meeting food, social and ceremonial needs of their citizens, maintaining healthy fish stocks and ecosystems (which includes habitat and aquatic plants), and maintaining the traditional culture and practice of harvesting fish and wildlife.

Improving the Aboriginal Fishery Guardian Program

“I envision First Nations governments monitoring their own lands with their own employees.”

- To improve the Aboriginal Fishery Guardian Program, participants support the development of a nationally consistent framework. They also want proper training for guardians aligned with the program framework.
- Other improvement recommendations include:
 - extending the program to all First Nations
 - ensuring Nations have teams of two guardians out together at all times
 - enabling resource guardians or a guardian program that could cover environmental issues, climate change, fisheries, wildlife, heritage protection, and other land issues
 - including outreach and education programs to ensure the role of guardians is understood and respected by the public

Measuring Success

- Participants measure success in the following ways: managing resources in their territories, having authority to issue tickets when there are fish or wildlife violations in their territories, having enough funding to run a program with all of the equipment, expertise and training needed, being in an equal partnership with federal and territorial governments, and receiving positive feedback from citizens.

Other Comments

- A few Nations have contracts with Fisheries and Oceans Canada and other federal departments and agencies and they would like to see some improvements made with this process (including the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program):
 - One wants federal contracting and funding programs to reduce the number of different ways that Nations have to report on each funding program and to gain consistency in terms of how funds are distributed. *“Some give out money beforehand, some not – and all are administered differently.”*
 - Another questions the federal procurement policy (of Fisheries and Oceans Canada and other departments) as they have to bid on contracts to do technical work on waterways in their territories. *“We’re the only ones on this river – why should I be bidding against people in British Columbia or Alberta?”*