

What We Heard

“We’ve been incredibly resourceful in making these programs happen.”

Getting to Know Communities and their Fisheries

“The fishery has seen a lot of changes: demands on the resource, climate change, etc. The Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program needs to change with it.”

- Participants fish salmon (sockeye, chinook, coho, pink) and steelhead in rivers and groundfish, rockfish, cockles, seaweed, shrimp, seals and ooligans in the marine areas. Some species may be by-catch.
 - Communities have designated fish harvesters who provide members with fish. The number of harvesters varies by fishery.
- Some participants have members both on- and off-reserve who take part in the food fishery. Non-residents are given transfer permits to bring their fish back home. The cost of permits and administration of the permits is done through the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program.
 - Participants note that allocations do not reflect off-reserve populations and the program does not have sufficient funding to offer services to these members. *“This is definitely an issue: it keeps us separated and it’s disingenuous on reconciliation. It also feeds uncertainty in terms of a well-managed fishery.”*
 - One community is also concerned about the loss of knowledge about traditional methods as the program does not fund actual fishing activities.

Understanding Food, Social and Ceremonial Needs

“Food security is an incredible concern and an important part of the process.”

- Participants monitor section 35.1 fishing activities, with some monitoring seven days a week for several months.
 - Food fish may be distributed individually in some communities, but distribution costs are not funded through the program.
- Participants report that food fisheries are not meeting the needs of communities.
 - More than one participant said their community reports their actual catch, regardless of what is in their agreement. *“The Department is not doing anything about it. I think the original numbers were just pulled out of a hat.”*
- Participants are concerned about changing fish returns and the impacts of recreational fishing on food fish. *“It’s time for the Department to start talking about the sportfishery.”*

Understanding Agreements

“The Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy is crucial to our whole fisheries program: without it, we could not maintain the staff or other items to have a program.”

- There are different types agreements; some are with individual Nations and others are for multiple Nations.
- Some participants have extensive fishery programs, but activities and the salaries of staff are not all funded through the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program. *“The funding is spread around. Technically, it doesn’t employ one person.”* Others have leaner programs. *“We have a shopping list of activities, but no funding to do it.”*
 - There is consensus among participants that program funding is stagnant and is only used to leverage their fisheries departments and activities. Most have secured other funding sources through partnerships, impact benefit agreements, and other programs. Some have also accessed ‘reprofiled’ funding from the Department in the past to assist with equipment purchases, maintenance and repairs, among other activities.
 - Lack of funding through the program is creating staff retention issues because communities cannot afford to pay salaries that employees can get elsewhere and/or to keep staff on year-round. *“We’re training people to be employees for others.”* Some participants have retention strategies for their fish harvesters.

Understanding the Technical Components of Agreements

“The program was original sold as having monitors at every single fishery – all of the funding was spent on monitoring and guardians.”

- Every participant has a catch monitoring program for inland food fisheries. One transitioned their program into an in-season monitor so they could use a smaller portion of program funding for this purpose. *“We found this made compliance better. It’s definitely been a success story.”* Another only keeps catch monitoring in their agreement because it creates jobs in the community.
 - Several participants question the value of catch monitoring because it is not serving the priorities or needs of the community. *“It doesn’t feel like more or enhanced monitoring is needed.”*
 - A few want campaigns and the development of protocols to be supported through the program to get more community members involved to improve monitoring.
- Most participants do data collection and stock assessments, but their involvement may not be extensive. Some may have done these activities in the past – or they have their guardians do these activities while they are in the field for other programs. One is doing data collection but *“not on what they want information.”*
 - Some communities have technical monitoring equipment, such as fish and smolt fences, vessels, and Didson counters. Funding to maintain this equipment is sought from other sources, including philanthropic and other government funding.

- Several communities are partners in the Gitxan Watershed Authority, which collects environmental and biological data on Slamgeesh salmon stocks and runs an extensive fisheries catch monitoring and ranger program.
- Many participants are involved in habitat restoration or fisheries enhancement work, but through other funding programs. Some question the benefit of this work. *“We’re just producing fish for someone else – and why spend program dollars to fix other people’s mistakes?”*
 - One community is interested in working on species at risk programs because *“if sockeye is listed, it will open doors to other funding.”*
- Participants are required to report all meetings that they attend related to their agreement. *“As salmon numbers decrease, meetings increase. We have to send someone to these meetings – but we have to get the money from somewhere.”*
- Some participate in a regional technical committee that was set up to relieve engagement and meeting fatigue, but there’s a *“trust issue among First Nations that must be overcome.”*

Co-management

“They used to call this a co-management program, but there’s not enough money for this anymore, let alone a science-based program. If government is serious about co-management, they need to look at inflation and increase funding for this program.”

- Participants want meaningful input into fish management, but they are not seeing it. *“It’s a bilateral conversation where the Department tells us what they’re doing this year.”* They also want involvement in the management of all species. *“Fisheries management at the Department is about sockeye. They don’t know about other species.”*
- Several participants are managing many aspects of their fishery, including licensing, transfer permits, designations, and monitoring. This is in addition to doing scientific studies, research and other technical work.
 - Some also lead stock assessment work that is used as a key management tool by multiple users, including the Department. *“It’s a core program that the Department should be paying for – everyone here agrees, but it doesn’t happen.”*
 - One participant noted that First Nations collaboration at the technical level has also led to some changes in certain fisheries.
- Some participants would like recognition for the work of their guardians. *“The Department comes to us, we fly drones with them, but we don’t get the recognition. Conservation officers do the same thing.”*

Understanding the Economic Components of Agreements

“Economic opportunity fisheries are so important for fish harvesters. It’s the six to eight weeks that they may only be employed.”

- There is support by some participants for the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program to fund access to economic fisheries programs. In the past, the Allocation Transfer

Program has been used to buy licences for community members to fish and build revenue for fisheries programs.

- One finds licences secured through this program to be insufficient. *“There’s too high a barrier to enter the fishery.”* Another is looking to develop a program on their own to provide employment to members. A third thinks allocations through this program should be given in river. *“Part of our role in these jobs is to get the community out fishing. But they get ready and we have to tell them no. The total allocation is so low that isn’t almost non-economical to have them go.”*
- One thinks the lack of economic development program funding has resulted in an illegal fishery. They want the decision to roll the allocation transfer program into the Pacific commercial program revisited because it does not employ local people.
- Some communities participate in excess salmon to spawning requirements or economic opportunity fisheries, but there are mixed views on the benefits of these fisheries. One participant said that the Integrated Fisheries Management Plan was going to delay fish wheels this year to ensure escapement. Others said the Department does not management for escapement.
- Participants want economic opportunities through allocations. However, they recall that the pilot sales program turned into a licensed-based fishery and they would like to retain a rights-based fishery. One suggested that this could be a rights allocation, such as a portion of the run after conservation. Another thought some catch could be routed from the recreational fishery.

Understanding Relationships

“Older ones don’t go out of their way to meet us. Younger ones are willing, but they don’t have the corporate knowledge or the clout.”

- Participants support higher level relationships with government to demonstrate more meaningful Nation-to-Nation relationships.
- Participants have varying relationships with departmental staff, some of which has been impacted by cuts at the Department in past years and high turn-over of staff. In some (but not all) cases, communities have good relationships with local staff but the overall consensus is that *“some people are really inappropriate for their jobs.”*
- Everyone think an Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy program officer is necessary for the program. However, a few have never had one visit their community which they feel is necessary to understand needs. *“Get an idea of what we do and how we do it. We did this with another government official and then they understood what it costs.”*
- Some are developing relationships with conservation and protection officers, but others say officers do not do anything with poaching evidence provided. Several would also like to be informed about conservation and protection priorities in their region. *“We ask and we don’t get an answer. That’s important for us to know.”*

- Some want reciprocity when it comes to data-sharing and more respect from science and those involved in stock assessments. *“They don’t trust our knowledge even though our people trained with them.”*
- Participants have mixed views as to whether Indigenous communities should be involved in the hiring process of departmental staff. One suggested the idea, but others who have been involved in this process said it was not as expected. *“Even if you provide input, it’s very hard to make changes – people act in positions for years. It’s like they’re groomed into these positions.”*
- Many communities are working together to achieve their priorities. *“The working relationships we have between the Nations are the best relationships – and the most important.”*

Improving the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program

“You’re not giving us the funding to fulfill the agreement.”

- Participants think the most important way that the Aboriginal Fisheries Strategy Program can be improved is through increased funding – and funding that accounts for the changing rate of inflation. *“The money we currently raise to cover the shortfall could be put into great science, conservation and stock enhancement projects.”*
 - They are also clear that the Department’s expectations for program results do not match the funding provided. *“I could either submit a lackluster report or apply for other funding so I can report out well enough to convince them to keep funding us.”*
- Participants want the program to better reflect and meet the needs and priorities of the communities. This includes what communities wants studied and restored. *“Right now, it feels like the Department is dictating or steering what projects we work on.”* It also includes more economic fisheries access.
- Participants want program funding to be performance-based and linked to clear objectives, including an orderly fishery and meaningful participation in decision-making through co-management. For example, some want the program to support more communications, engagement and community protocol and policy development to improve monitoring programs.

Skills and Training Needs

- Participants support increased training of program administrators, fishery managers, field technicians and fisheries guardians in various areas. For example, leadership and supervisory training for fisheries managers, data entry and management training for field technicians, and safety, first aid and equipment operations training for guardians.
 - One thinks part of the program should encourage First Nations technicians to continue their education so they can better serve communities. Others would like to add registered professionals to their program teams.

Aboriginal Fishery Guardian Program

- Participants support fishery guardians being trained and involved in other resource issues, including environmental and wildlife monitoring, to create year-round jobs and improve staff retention.
 - One community has three full-time fish and wildlife guardians working year-round by combining programs. These guardians work on species at risk, moose surveys, caribou research, enhancement, water quality studies, habitat and escapement studies and other activities.
- Participants report that guardians have not been designated in years. Some communities do not have fishery guardians (or only had them in the past).
- Participants are clear that they are not enforcing fishing rules because they do not have the authority. *“Observe, record, report is useless; especially when you see the illegal activity by commercial harvesters. You call the number and they get back to you two days later. No one shows up.”*
 - Some do not want to be involved in enforcement. For example, one said they would not get any information from harvesters as *“it took three years to gain their trust.”* Another said it would be difficult now that the Nuu-chah-nulth decision was issued. *“They have a right to sell fish.”*
 - Others are interested and would like the ability to lay charges and do seizures. One community has a partnership with provincial conservation officers to be able to charge a member for shooting wildlife and selling pelts.
 - A few question whose rules guardians would be enforcing. One said guardians are only designated to be monitors. *“The designation letters explain the rules to guardians: report fish numbers for orderly management.”*
 - Another thought enforcement should be in a separate agreement. *“We learned pretty quickly that you can’t be mixing the two.”*

Improving Program Administration

- Several participants want funding on April 1st to stop wasting money on overdrafts. *“Even multi-year agreements seemed to get stalled because of work plan reviews.”*
 - A few want fewer reviewers on the agreements to reduce the number of questions they now get. *“The same questions are asked over and over. Often new people start and the agreement gets stalled.”*
 - A few support easier reporting. *“There are a gargantuan number of meetings and emails. The program is more time and effort than it’s worth.”*
- One participant thought more flexible, long-term agreements would be beneficial and would emulate the programs of other departments.