



David
Suzuki
Foundation



NEWS RELEASE

Contentious B.C. salmon fishery set to receive eco-certification

Objection by environmental groups dismissed despite 'issues of concern'

For immediate release

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VANCOUVER – Conservationist objections to the eco-certification of one of the most endangered fisheries on Canada's west coast were dismissed Monday, clearing the way for Fraser River sockeye salmon to be branded as "sustainable" seafood.

Nearly all of the Fraser River's sockeye populations collapsed last year after only 13% of the expected 10.5 million salmon returned to spawn. A federal judicial inquiry is currently investigating the failed sockeye fisheries management regime that the MSC is now about to grant its seal of approval.

"By any definition, this is not a sustainable fishery," said Greg Knox, executive director of SkeenaWild Conservation Trust. "There is no way these kinds of endangered salmon should be considered a sustainable choice until the fisheries management system is improved and stocks given a chance to recover."

The Fraser River sockeye fishery does not meet the criteria of a sustainable fishery because it continues to catch endangered salmon and plans to recover dwindling fish populations are not being implemented, according to scientists at the David Suzuki Foundation, Watershed Watch Salmon Society and SkeenaWild Conservation Trust who launched a formal objection to the proposed certification last fall.

"The Fraser sockeye fishery continues to catch sockeye identified as endangered by Canadian and international scientific authorities" said Jeffery Young, aquatic biologist with the David Suzuki Foundation. "This certification could actually result in well-intentioned consumers buying an endangered Fraser River sockeye with an eco-label on it."

The three conservation organizations say certification should wait at least until federal fisheries managers have complied with recommendations anticipated from the judicial inquiry into Fraser sockeye fisheries management and the Canadian government has taken concrete steps to protect and rebuild the Fraser's threatened stocks.

All three organizations launched a formal objection to the Marine Stewardship Council's certification, which purports to enable sustainable fisheries to brand their products as an ecologically sound source of seafood. Sustainable seafood is generally defined as products that come from species with healthy populations via well-managed fisheries that don't cause significant harm to ocean environments and other sea life.

Under the MSC's third-party certification process, companies hired by fishing industry "clients" determine whether a fishery meets the MSC's criteria for eco-certification. While the MSC's adjudicator who heard the Fraser sockeye objection acknowledged that there were many "complicated and difficult questions" surrounding the fishery, the objection was ultimately dismissed in a ruling released Monday. No fishery has ever been denied certification after completing the MSC assessment process, and no objection to a certification has ever been upheld.

"The public should not be fooled by this suspect certification" said Craig Orr, Executive Director of Watershed Watch Salmon Society. "These are clear signs that there are serious flaws with the MSC objection process, as well as the assessment process overall."

The plight of Fraser River sockeye is increasingly an issue of national concern – and scrutiny. Two sockeye populations routinely caught by the Fraser River fishery have been officially listed as endangered species since 2003.

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For more information, contact:

Jeffery Young, Aquatic Biologist, David Suzuki Foundation
jyoung@davidsuzuki.org
(604) 764-6142

Aaron Hill, Ecologist, Watershed Watch Salmon Society
hillfish@telus.net
(250) 818-0054

Greg Knox, Executive Director, SkeenaWild Conservation Trust
(250) 615-1990

Craig Orr, Executive Director, Watershed Watch Salmon Society
wwss@telus.net
(604) 809-2799

Marine Stewardship Council certification of BC sockeye salmon fisheries

BACKGROUNDER

- The Marine Stewardship Council eco-label allows certified fisheries to brand themselves as a “sustainable” source of seafood. Fisheries voluntarily apply for certification, and they do so by hiring a for-profit company to carry out the assessment.
- All British Columbia commercial sockeye salmon fisheries applied for MSC certification in 2001 and were broken into four fisheries units for assessment (Fraser, Skeena, Barkley Sound, Nass).
- B.C. conservation organizations have provided input to these assessments, providing expertise on the sustainability of these fisheries and serious ongoing management problems.
- The final determination by the MSC recommended certification of all B.C. sockeye fisheries as sustainable. The David Suzuki Foundation, Watershed Watch Salmon Society and SkeenaWild Conservation Trust filed an objection to the certification of Fraser sockeye salmon fisheries as sustainable.
- The Fraser River sockeye fishery exploits 44 genetically distinct populations of sockeye salmon, each of which has evolved under a unique set of environmental and ecological conditions which govern its ability to withstand harvest and environmental change. Most of these genetically distinct populations migrate together through the same coastal areas at the same general time. They are indistinguishable from one another, and are all harvested in aptly-named “mixed-stock” fisheries. A few productive sockeye populations have been able to withstand relatively high harvest rates whereas many smaller populations have been driven to the edge of extinction and beyond. First Nations (aboriginal) people of the Fraser River, who harvested sockeye sustainably for thousands of years, now have difficulty catching enough sockeye to meet their families’ basic food needs.
- Two sockeye populations routinely caught by the Fraser River fishery (Cultus and Sakinaw Lakes) have been heavily overfished and are listed as critically endangered by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) since 2003.
- The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) grouped the Fraser River sockeye into 11 subpopulations and found that 6 are “vulnerable”, 3 are “endangered” and 1 is “critically endangered”. Overfishing was listed as a “key threat”.
- In the last 6 out of 11 years the Fraser River sockeye fishery has been closed due to poor returns.
- From 1999 to 2009, 70% of the pre-season forecasts have overestimated the actual return of sockeye. In years when fishing occurs, it is common for the fishery to harvest 20% of endangered sockeye populations such as Cultus and Sakinaw.
- The biological productivity of Fraser River sockeye is declining and is now at an all-time low, meaning that the populations are barely replacing themselves.
- Last year, nearly all Fraser River sockeye populations collapsed. Only 13% of the expected 10.5 million Fraser River sockeye returned to spawn. A judicial inquiry is underway investigating the collapse of Fraser sockeye and failures of their management.