

Canadian Salmon Fisheries Granted Eco-Certification: Conservation Groups Wary

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VANCOUVER, CANADA – Three Canadian salmon fisheries are now certified “sustainable” by the London-based Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). Sockeye salmon harvested from the Skeena and Nass Rivers, and from Barkley sound, on Canada’s Pacific coast, will now bear MSC’s coveted eco-label in fish markets worldwide.

“The MSC has just granted eco-certification to three fisheries that routinely overharvest threatened and endangered salmon stocks,” said Dr. Craig Orr, executive director of the Watershed Watch Salmon Society. “As disturbing as this is, the MSC has placed several conditions for improvement on these fisheries, and we will be watching closely to see if these conditions are enforced.”

Earlier this year, three conservation groups from British Columbia (BC), Canada, (Watershed Watch Salmon Society, David Suzuki Foundation, and SkeenaWild Conservation Trust) filed a notice of objection to the MSC’s intention to award eco-certification to the Fraser River sockeye salmon fishery. As a result, the certification of the Fraser River sockeye fishery is temporarily on hold, pending the decision of an independent adjudicator, expected by July 10.

“We objected to the Fraser River certification because we believe it does not meet the MSC’s own minimum standards for certification, and that the management of the fishery is so dysfunctional that the conditions of certification are very unlikely to be met within reasonable timelines”, said Greg Knox, executive director of SkeenaWild conservation trust. “Overfishing is a serious concern in the Skeena, Nass, and Barkley Sound fisheries, but the situation is not as dire there as it is on the Fraser.”

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. No fishery has ever been denied certification after completing the MSC assessment process, and no objection to a certification has ever been upheld.

Some Fraser River sockeye stocks harvested in the soon to be certified fishery are listed as “endangered” by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, and “critically endangered” by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, whose team of scientists point to overfishing as a key threat. The Fraser fishery recently became the focus of a commission of inquiry by the Government of Canada, due to a major collapse of the fishery and widespread concerns over mismanagement.

“Eco-certification can provide a powerful incentive for improvement in the way we manage our fisheries”, said Aaron Hill, Ecologist Watershed Watch, “but it becomes meaningless when you set the bar too low, and certify unsustainable and mismanaged fisheries. It becomes fraud.”

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