Fisheries and Oceans Canada is failing British Columbia's salmon

Canada's Pacific salmon fishery is forced to withdraw from a renowned eco-certification to avoid failing its upcoming audit.

VANCOUVER —Canada's Pacific salmon fishery is losing its coveted Marine Stewardship Council eco-certification because Fisheries and Oceans Canada, despite repeated commitments, failed to address issues identified with outstanding conditions in independent fishery audits. The industry has chosen to pre-emptively withdraw from the international certification to avoid failing its upcoming audit and having its certification removed.

MSC recertified B.C.'s commercial salmon fishery in 2017, subject to DFO addressing outstanding conditions where the fishery does not meet the MSC standard. These conditions required improvements to fishery monitoring, better stock assessments and reducing impacts on wild salmon populations from harvesting hatchery-raised salmon. An independent 2018 audit reported 40 per cent of these conditions were behind target.

"MSC sets a very low bar for wild salmon sustainability," says Watershed Watch Salmon Society executive director Aaron Hill.

"MSC only certifies whether the management system provides for a sustained harvest," says Raincoast Conservation Foundation wild salmon program director Misty MacDuffee. "It does not certify whether the fishery meets the needs of ecosystems, bears, whales and other wildlife, or whether it is sustainable in the face of climate change."

"The inability to meet even minimum standards for sustainability is an indictment of Ottawa's management of B.C.'s salmon," says Greg Taylor, a fisheries consultant and former industry executive. "The loss of MSC certification will be particularly noted in major European markets where many retailers require it. It will also mean programs like Ocean Wise, SeaChoice and Seafood Watch will no longer be able to recommend B.C. as a sustainable source of wild-caught salmon."

"We can't fish responsibly if we don't know how many fish are making it back to their streams to spawn," says Greg Knox from SkeenaWild Conservation Trust, highlighting the erosion of monitoring of B.C.'s salmon populations over the past decade — a key problem identified by the MSC. "The only real surprise is it took MSC this long to determine DFO's management system did not meet its requirements for a sustainable fishery."

"A benefit of the MSC certification is that it requires the fishery to address key gaps, including lack of monitoring, dealing with the risks of hatcheries and protecting salmon biodiversity," says David Suzuki Foundation senior science and policy analyst Jeffery Young. "Despite having close to a decade to act, the government has failed to deliver on its promises to help the B.C. fishery meet certification requirements."

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BACKGROUNDER

What is the Marine Stewardship Council?

The Marine Stewardship Council, or MSC, is an international, independent non-profit organization that sets a standard for sustainable fishing. Fisheries that wish to demonstrate they are well-managed and sustainable in keeping with the science-based MSC standards are assessed by a team of experts who are independent of both the fishery and the MSC. About 300 fisheries and 30,000 wild seafood products from around the world are certified to use the MSC eco-label.

MSC's principles and certification are based on the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' Code of Conduct, Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI), International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance (ISEAL), and International Organization for Standardization (ISO). Canada supports or is a signatory to all of these organizations and/or programs.

How does the MSC work?

Fisheries are independently assessed across three principles:

1. Fishing must be at a level that ensures it can continue indefinitely and that the fish population can remain productive and healthy.
2. Fishing activity must be managed so that other species and habitats within the ecosystem remain healthy.

3. Fisheries must comply with relevant laws and international best practices as recommended by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization and be able to adapt to changing environmental circumstances.

   A certified fishery must achieve average scores of at least 80 across the three principles. It is possible for a fishery to be certified with a score of between 60 and 80. In these cases, it is called a conditional certification. (B.C. salmon was conditionally certified.) Conditions imposed on fisheries must be met within a set time period in order to remain certified. The agency responsible for the fishery must sign off on an action plan that will address the conditions and raise the scores to 80 or above. These action plans must incorporate a timetable and annual benchmarks. An annual independent audit of the fishery evaluates whether the benchmarks are being met within the required timeframe. If the conditions fall more than two years behind schedule, the certification will be suspended or withdrawn. B.C. salmon was in this position going into fall 2019.

Is the MSC a credible certification?

The MSC has been widely criticized for not holding a high enough standard for fishery sustainability, being in conflict because its revenues are derived from industry, and there is little incentive to further improve the fishery once it achieves a basic pass. Several certifications have been highly controversial, including B.C. salmon. Despite these flaws, MSC remains the most rigorous and widely recognized eco-certification available.

Where is the B.C. salmon fishery failing?

Fisheries and Oceans Canada is "behind target" (see table at the end of the backgrounder) on nine of the 22 conditions set out by the MSC. The conditions concern:

1. Decline in monitoring of salmon streams on the north and central coast, undermining the government's ability to estimate salmon abundance.
2. Inability of DFO to produce a comprehensive annual report on catch and escapements (numbers of fish making it back to their home rivers), total fishing mortalities, whether population and fishery reference points were achieved, how wild salmon are managed in fisheries on hatchery-reared and other enhanced populations, and the status of salmon populations on the north and central coasts.
3. Absence of an aggregate target reference point for Skeena River sockeye salmon that will ensure the smaller wild sockeye populations are maintained above their minimum thresholds (many are severely depleted). And the absence of a report that details whether enhanced sockeye production is compromising wild populations in Babine Lake.
4. Inability of DFO to produce the catch and escapement data that ensures wild populations of chum salmon in Area 8 (Central Coast – Bella Coola) are not compromised by fisheries targeting hatchery-reared chum salmon.
5. DFO has not provided a harvest strategy that would protect wild chum populations in B.C.'s south coast fisheries targeting enhanced chum salmon.
6. DFO is unable to produce a quantitative report on the contribution of enhanced pink and chum salmon in B.C.'s south coast fisheries.
7. DFO has not developed a plan that will provide information on the impact of fisheries on wild salmon populations on B.C.'s south coast.
8. DFO has failed to produce information on the mortality of non-target species (Chinook, coho, and steelhead) caught and released in all areas.

What is the impact on Ocean Wise and SeaChoice recommendations?

Ocean Wise and SeaChoice, as well as Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch, are popular programs that recommend to consumers whether various seafood choices are from sustainable fisheries. These programs have based their approval of B.C. sockeye, pink and chum salmon on these fisheries being MSC-certified. Therefore, these programs will no longer be able to recommend B.C. salmon as a responsible choice for consumers if the MSC certification is suspended or withdrawn.

Why is MSC important?

The B.C. government states that "export markets for B.C. commercial fish are increasingly looking for MSC certification as a prerequisite for market access. Current drivers behind the move towards requiring MSC certification involve major seafood retailers in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Switzerland. There is also growing interest from Asia, Japan in particular." MSC is the most important and recognized certifier of sustainable seafood across the globe. Having an MSC certification withdrawn is an unusual event and will be widely noted internationally. It will raise serious questions regarding Canada's management of its salmon populations.

What is the history of MSC certification of B.C. salmon?

Year	Action	Comment
2005	Canada's Policy for the Conservation of Wild Pacific Salmon (a.k.a., Wild Salmon Policy or "WSP") released	The WSP would become a key element in the MSC certification and commitments made by DFO to address conditions. It has not yet been implemented.
1999-2010	B.C. Salmon fishery assessed	B.C. NGOs have never been comfortable with MSC, seeing MSC as having a "low bar" relative to sustainability. Nonetheless, B.C. NGOs engaged directly in the assessment process, raising concerns about the fishery to MSC and the assessment team. B.C.'s NGOs have remained actively engaged in certification, identifying outstanding issues and encouraging DFO to meet the commitments it agreed to in its Action Plan.

February 2004	Brian Riddell writes “Pacific Salmon Resources in Central and North Coast British Columbia,” which is published by the Pacific Fisheries Resources Conservation Council, an advisory body established by DFO	Riddell's background paper chronicles the serious problems of inadequate information about salmon stocks in the region, and helps to inform the current discussion about how wild salmon stocks can be effectively managed in the absence of adequate records, sufficient data or valid scientific evidence in many cases. He makes a compelling case for increasing the level of federal government resources assigned to assess wild salmon stocks to ensure adequate and timely conservation. The certification in 2019 is failing on these long-established issues.
July 28 2010	B.C. salmon fishery first certified by MSC	DFO committed to an Action Plan to address conditions required by MSC. Many of the conditions were dependent on DFO fully implementing their Wild Salmon Policy.
August 2011	First independent surveillance audit	MSC notes limited progress made on conditions.
September 2011	Performance Review of the Wild Salmon Policy prepared for Fisheries and Oceans Canada	Independent report concluded, “Implementation [of the WSP] does not appear to be a Departmental priority.”
October 2012	Second independent surveillance audit	MSC again notes limited progress made on conditions.
October 2012	Cohen Commission of Inquiry into the Decline of Sockeye Salmon in the Fraser River releases its recommendations	Justice Cohen notes in his report that little progress had been made in implementing the Wild Salmon Policy.
October 2013	Alaskan salmon fishery re-certified by MSC	The Alaskan salmon fishery was first certified by MSC in 2000.

February 2014	Third independent surveillance audit	MSC notes limited progress made on certification conditions.
October 2014	MSC publishes new assessment methodology and new salmon assessment methodology	The new methodology stipulated that fisheries like B.C. salmon could no longer continue to fail to successfully address conditions within required timelines. Failure to do so would lead to suspension or withdrawal of the certification.
April 2017	MSC re-certifies B.C. salmon fishery under new methodology	Many of the unmet conditions from the previous certification were rolled into the new certification. DFO committed to a new Action Plan.
2017	COSEWIC assessment and status report on sockeye salmon	COSEWIC determines several populations of Fraser River sockeye are endangered or threatened.
August 2017	Price et al publish paper on DFO's failure to implement requirements of Wild Salmon Policy in north and central B.C. in *Canadian Journal of Marine and Aquatic Sciences*	The paper described the erosion of DFO's monitoring and assessment actions in north and central coast fisheries.
July 25, 2018	North Coast DFO Area Director memo to senior DFO executives	Memo states that because of cuts over recent years, DFO staff do not have the resources to monitor salmon populations. MSC audit team cites memo in December 2018 audit.

December 2018	First independent surveillance audit under new certification	The audit detailed DFO's failure to address the outstanding conditions in the required timeline. The new methodology states that failure to bring progress back into compliance for the 2019 audit would lead to suspension or withdrawal of the certificate**.**
April 2019	DFO publishes Wild Salmon Implementation Plan	This is a plan to plan the implementation of the 2005 Wild Salmon Policy by 2022. MSC requires measurable actions relative to the outstanding conditions. The promise of a plan is insufficient.
Fall 2019	Second independent surveillance audit scheduled	Industry recognized DFO had not made sufficient progress toward addressing the outstanding conditions identified in the 2018 audit, nor did DFO indicate much willingness to do so.
Fall 2019	Industry self-suspends certification	Industry was faced with paying $75K+ for an audit that would inevitably fail the fishery. Failure would lead to MSC withdrawing its certificate. Industry's only other option was to self-suspend.

Current status of conditions.

Those in red had been evaluated as being "behind target" in the December 2018 audit. They were required to be brought "on target" in the fall 2019 surveillance audit. DFO had not done the required work so the certification would have had to be suspended or withdrawn.

Condition	**Area**	**Requirement**	**Status**
1	North and Central Coast	For chum salmon, within 10 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: "The SMU is at or fluctuating around its TRP."	Behind target

2	North and Central Coast	For all three species, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “The assessment of SMU status, including the choice of indicator populations and methods for evaluating wild salmon in enhanced fisheries is subject to peer review.”	Behind target
3	North and Central Coast	For sockeye salmon, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “It is highly likely that the enhancement activities do not have significant negative impacts on the local adaptation, reproductive performance or productivity and diversity of wild stocks.”	Behind target
4	North and Central Coast	For chum salmon, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “Sufficient relevant qualitative and quantitative information is available on the contribution of enhanced fish to the fishery harvest, total escapement (wild plus enhanced) and hatchery broodstock.”	Behind target
5	South Coast incl. Fraser	For chum salmon, within 2 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “Sufficient relevant information related to SMU structure, SMU production, fleet composition and other data is available to support the harvest strategy, including harvests and spawning escapements for a representative range of wild component populations.”	On target

6	South Coast incl. Fraser	For chum salmon, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “The SMUs are well-defined and include definitions of the major populations with a clear rationale for conservation, fishery Number Unit of Assessment Performance Indicator and Scoring Indicator Condition management and stock assessment requirements.”	On target
7	South Coast incl. Fraser	For chum salmon, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “It is highly likely that the enhancement activities do not have significant negative impacts on the local adaptation, reproductive performance or productivity and diversity of wild stocks.”	On target
8	South Coast incl. Fraser	For pink salmon and chum salmon, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “There is some objective basis for confidence that the strategy is effective, based on evidence that the strategy is achieving the outcome metrics used to define the minimum detrimental impacts.”	Behind target
9	South Coast incl. Fraser	For pink salmon and chum salmon, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “Sufficient relevant qualitative and quantitative information is available on the contribution of enhanced fish to the fishery harvest, total escapement (wild plus enhanced) and hatchery broodstock.”	Behind target

10	South Coast incl. Fraser	For all three species, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “A moderate-level analysis of relevant information is conducted and used by decision makers to quantitatively estimate the impact of enhancement activities on wild-stock status, productivity, and diversity.”	Behind target
11	West Coast Vancouver Island	For sockeye salmon and chum salmon, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “The assessment of SMU status, including the choice of indicator populations and methods for evaluating wild salmon in enhanced fisheries is subject to peer review.”	On target
12	West Coast Vancouver Island	For chum salmon, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “It is highly likely that the enhancement activities do not have significant negative impacts on the local adaptation, reproductive performance or productivity and diversity of wild stocks.”	On target
13	West Coast Vancouver Island	For chum salmon, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “Sufficient relevant qualitative and quantitative information is available on the contribution of enhanced fish to the fishery harvest, total escapement (wild plus enhanced) and hatchery broodstock.”	Behind target

14	All Areas	For steelhead, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “Main primary species are highly likely to be above the PRI, OR, If the species is below the PRI, there is either evidence of recovery or a demonstrably effective strategy in place between all MSC Number UoA PI and SI Condition and UoAs which categorize this species as main, to ensure that they collectively do not hinder recovery and rebuilding.”	On target
15	All areas	Within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “There is some evidence that the measures/partial strategy is being implemented successfully.”	Behind target
16	North, Central, and South Coast	For sturgeon species, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “Direct effects of the UoA including enhancement activities are highly likely to not hinder recovery of ETP species.”	Ahead of target
17	All areas	For marine mammal species, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “Direct effects of the UoA including enhancement activities are highly likely to not hinder recovery of ETP species.”	Ahead of target
18	All areas	For bird species, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “Direct effects of the UoA including enhancement activities are highly likely to not hinder recovery of ETP species.”	Ahead of target

19	All areas	The UoA and associated enhancement activities have in place precautionary management strategies designed to: • meet national and international requirements • ensure the UoA does not hinder recovery of ETP species. Also, the UoA regularly reviews and implements measures, as appropriate, to minimize the mortality of ETP species.	On target
20	All areas	For ETP species, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “Some quantitative information is adequate to assess the UoA related mortality and impact and to determine whether the UoA and associated enhancement may be a threat to protection and recovery of the ETP species.”	On target
21	All areas	For main habitats, within 4 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “Information is adequate to allow for identification of the main impacts of the UoA and enhancement activities on the main habitats, and there is reliable information on the spatial extent of interaction and on the timing and location of use of the fishing gear.”	On target
22	All areas	Within 3 years, the client shall demonstrate that the SG80 level of performance is met; i.e., that: “The fishery-specific and associated enhancement program(s) management system is subject to regular internal and occasional external review.”	On target