

ATIP Summary – DFO Aquaculture staff water down federal promise to transition from open net-pen salmon farming

Summary

Federal documents reveal two Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) committees, both dominated by aquaculture management staff, manipulated the federal promise to develop a “responsible plan to transition from open net-pen salmon farming in coastal British Columbia waters by 2025.” DFO’s watered-down interpretation of the promise omits removing open net-pen salmon farms as a possible outcome and refocuses the interpretation of the commitment on a plan that maintains open net-pen salmon farms in B.C.

(*Note: ATIP page numbers are provided in the following document as substantiation. The ATIP document can be [downloaded here](#).)

Background

Leading up to the 2019 election, several federal parties made election commitments around transitioning B.C. away from open-net salmon farms.

After the 2019 federal election, a promise was explicitly stated in two mandate letters from the Prime Minister to the Ministers of Fisheries and Oceans, Bernadette Jordan on [Dec 13, 2019](#), and Joyce Murray on [Dec 16, 2021](#). It reads:

“Work with the province of British Columbia and Indigenous communities on a responsible plan to transition from open net-pen salmon farming in coastal British Columbia waters by 2025” (hereafter referred to as the promise).

Two committees primarily driven by DFO Aquaculture staff are formed in 2020 to fulfill the promise: the Strategic Oversight Committee (SOC) and the Transition Plan Technical Working Group (TP TWG). The First Nations Fisheries Council (FNFC) is involved in choosing indigenous participants on these committees. Due to redactions in the ATIP, it is unknown how Indigenous representation on the committees is balanced; however, it is known one representative is from a Nation with strong ties to the salmon farming industry (i.e., from the [Kitasoo Development Corporation](#)) (P 083).

Although it is stated “the deliberations and work of the SOC shall remain confidential and not be disclosed to others outside of the group” (P 016), it is apparent the salmon farming industry became aware of the committees and requested membership on both committees (P 215).

The TP TWG is tasked with creating a responsible plan to transition open net-pen salmon farming in coastal B.C. (P 008) and the SOC provides oversight and direction to them (P 004).

The first meeting of the SOC occurred on October 16, 2020 and attendees were:

Rebecca Reid (Chair) - Regional Director General, DFO Pacific Region
Alix Dostal - Director General, Aquaculture Policy Directorate, DFO Ottawa
redacted - First Nations Fisheries Council
Allison Webb - Director, Aquaculture Management Division, DFO Pacific Region
Kerra Shaw - Aquaculture Management Division, DFO Pacific Region
Val Buhr - Aquaculture Management Division, DFO Pacific Region

DFO waters down the promise

The SOC tabled a new version of the promise (P 004), thereby changing its meaning:

“The Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) has been mandated by the Prime Minister to work with the Province of British Columbia (BC) and Indigenous communities to create a responsible plan (the Plan) to transition open net-pen farming in coastal BC.”

This altered version of the promise omits the 2025 deadline and the word “from.” The altered outcome is simply to produce a plan to transition (or change) open net-pen salmon farming in B.C. Without the word “from” the idea of transitioning open net-pen salmon farming to something else is lost and the status quo is preserved.

The first meeting of the TP TWG was held on November 12, 2020, and attendees were:

Allison Webb (Chair) - Aquaculture Management Division DFO Pacific Region
Alistair Struthers - Aquaculture Policy Directorate Ottawa
redacted - First Nations Fisheries Council
redacted - First Nations Fisheries Council
redacted - Skeena Fisheries Commission
Anoma Patirana - Aquaculture Management Division DFO Pacific Region
Kerra Shaw - Aquaculture Management Division DFO Pacific Region
Katie Verkaik - Aquaculture Management Division DFO Pacific Region

The TP TWG began drafting engagement plans and in a March 30, 2021, draft of the Marine Finfish Aquaculture Net Pen Transition Stakeholder Engagement Plan another version of the promise was included (P 165):

“Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) is undertaking work to meet the ministerial mandate commitment to develop a plan by 2025 to transition marine finfish open net pen aquaculture in British Columbia.”

This version also omits the word “from” and links the goal of completing a transition plan with the 2025 deadline.

From the beginning, it was apparent confusion existed around what the transition meant. Someone raised concern around the lack of clarity of the “transition” at the first TP TWG meeting on Nov 12, 2020 (P 034) and an action item was tasked to Allison Webb, DFO.

“Action Item #1 Clarity needed for what is meant by “transition”. DFO to seek further direction on this point from senior management and provide speaking points for clarity to promote a common understanding and consistent messaging” (P 042).

In an SOC meeting on April 15, 2021, the issue of a lack of clarity around the “transition” was raised again (P 200). The action item remained incomplete for at least five months while many other action items were completed (P 204). No further mention of this action item appears in the ATIP.

The SOC noted that while the definition of transition should remain open-ended and will likely be informed by the engagements conducted by Parliamentary Secretary, Terry Beech, an official definition does not yet exist (P 109). This raises the question, does confusion around the meaning of the promise aid DFO Aquaculture staff in the preservation of the status quo?

DFO begins prescribing status quo solutions for the transition before public and Indigenous consultations

In an SOC meeting on April 15, 2021, someone suggests the committee should not have an intention to prescribe an outcome in the transition (P 200), presumably before DFO consultations occur. Despite this, several passages suggest outcomes are repeatedly prescribed; however, removing open net-pen salmon farms is not one of the prescriptions.

A primary outcome that is prescribed repeatedly is Area Based Aquaculture Management (ABAM)—a vague term that entails some coordination of open net-pen salmon farm management in an area. It appears DFO Aquaculture staff attempted to move the “goal posts” of the promise towards a status quo outcome like Area Based Aquaculture Management.

“The transition plan will advance the recommendations of the Indigenous and Multi-Stakeholder Advisory Body (IMAB) and its three technical working groups, including the adoption of Area Based Aquaculture Management (ABAM) as one of several means through which to implement the Plan” (P 166).

DFO Aquaculture plans to set-up regional committees that will “provide coordination, communication, and support to the development of ABAM across the region” (P 269). DFO Aquaculture staff link the set-up of regional committees for Area Based Aquaculture Management with the SOC and the transition:

“Given that the SOC is already a trilateral senior executive-level structure, it is the preferred option to build on for the ABAM Regional Committee, which could be done by expanding the current Terms of Reference (TOR)” (P 270).

How does outside participation in DFO engagement processes around the transition contribute to the promised outcome?

In late 2020, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, Terry Beech, held preliminary meetings on his government's promise. He continued those consultations in [early 2021](#) and produced a "[what we heard](#)" report summarizing what he heard through consultations. It includes repeated comments around removing open net-pen salmon farms as an outcome.

Subsequently, non-government organizations (NGOs) reiterated the removal of open net-pen salmon farms is needed due to the risks of parasites, viruses and bacteria in consultations with the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans.

Despite this feedback, the removal of open net-pen salmon farms as an outcome is largely absent from the [DFO framework report](#) released in summer 2022. In a subsequent consultation meeting in September 2022 with NGOs, Neil Ladell, chair of the TP TWG as of March 2022 (P 283), stated that removing salmon farms is not within the scope of the engagement process.

It is apparent the SOC and TP TWG only need to *consider* input from First Nations, stakeholders, new science (P 050; P 240) and consultations organized by Terry Beech in the development of the transition plan (P 099; P 201). Once it is considered, it can be omitted.

In summary, it appears DFO Aquaculture staff have watered down the actual wording of the federal promise to allow open net-pen salmon farming to continue in B.C. waters. In addition, they appear to be pushing Area Based Aquaculture Management as a means to achieve that, while simultaneously ignoring consultation input that calls for the removal of open net-pen salmon farms from B.C.

-Stan Proboszcz, Watershed Watch Salmon Society