

Briefing Note

To: BC AFN

Date: November, 2020

RE: State of Pacific salmon/ Fraser sockeye



FIRST NATIONS
FISHERIES COUNCIL

Information Briefing

Summary

- The decline of Pacific salmon in BC has been decades in the making, with numerous reports and studies since the 1990's. It is best described as *death by a thousand cuts*, the result of cumulative effects to stocks from numerous stressors.
- Pacific-wide, some salmon stocks have declined while others maintain viability to support fisheries. Notably, pink and chum salmon support growing fisheries in Russia and Alaska while sockeye, chinook and coho salmon are experiencing declines (particularly in BC, Washington and Oregon). In B.C., salmon stocks have generally been declining but at various levels. Most notably, Fraser and other southern BC stocks are experiencing disturbing and alarming fishery collapses.
- In the face of this decline, Canada is still managing fisheries with an outdated approach that is based on a harvest model of abundance (of fish) and protecting fisheries, oft times attempting to balance access across sectors, and avoiding priority access principles.
- The FNFC is supporting research to understand the limiting factors to Pacific salmon survival using a life cycle approach. This research will support the development of a coherent strategy to rebuild Pacific salmon stocks.
- A consolidated *BC First Nations inter-organizational fisheries strategy*, - is recommended to ensure a coherent approach in providing advice to government, and ensuring consistent collaboration between political and technical processes.

Issue

- The decline of Pacific salmon stocks, Fraser and southern stocks in particular, is best summarized as *death by a thousand cuts*. As described in the Cohen Commission report, Pacific sockeye decline is caused by cumulative effects of numerous stressors, environmental, regulatory, and administrative, - and not any one single threat. (Numerous studies have been commissioned past 3 decades *Pearse- Larkin, Pearse-Mcrae, Our Place At The Table, Cohen.*)
- Canada continues to manage fisheries with an outdated approach that is based on *abundance of fish* model, and licence conditions protecting weak fisheries, oft times attempting to balance access across sectors, which avoids priority access obligations.
- While BC First Nations share common priorities to protect and rebuild Pacific stocks, a stronger coherent voice is needed to advance actions. Coherent messaging requires leadership to be informed by technical expertise of regional First Nations fisheries organizations.

Background

- Abundance of Pacific salmon have generally shifted to the north and west (e.g. Alaska and Russia) while southern regions (e.g. BC, Washington and Oregon) have experienced steady declines.
- In BC, most Pacific salmon stocks have declined. Fraser sockeye, with an adopted run size of 283,000 (as of August 24, 2021) is the lowest anticipated return on record and well short of the 2009 return (1.37 million) that resulted in the Cohen Commission.

- During the amendments review of the *Fisheries Act 2017-18*, the FNFC coordinated 130 Nations in the *BC First Nations Coalition* response. A key recommendation was to a Purpose Section of the Act, focused on a rebuilding strategy with language to promote the restoration of fish and fish habitat.

Analysis

- No single factor can explain the collapse of Fraser sockeye. The decline of Pacific salmon is the result of decades of cumulative effects from ocean temperature climate change, overfishing, loss and degradation of habitat, changing predator/prey relationships, non-selective harvest, disease and pathogens via open net pen operations ..etc.
- Similarly, any single actions to rebuild Pacific salmon are unlikely to be sufficient. Mitigation measures should be informed by a comprehensive strategy that follows the life cycle approach to mitigating limitations and stressors (i.e. at each stage of a salmon's life cycle).
- Canada's management of fisheries is outdated and needs to change to be more in line with the reality of the situation. *Fisheries can no longer be managed as if fish stocks are abundant.*
- A new approach to fisheries management will require a combination of habitat protection and restoration, re-organization and re-prioritization of fishery management measures and salmon enhancement activities.
- Consistent with the *BC First Nations Coalition's Fisheries Act* recommendation, fisheries management should directly contribute to the rebuilding of fish and fish habitat.
- This is an opportunity for BC First Nations to more effectively collaborate and speak in coherent approach to rebuild Pacific salmon stocks. First Nations will need to lead conversations with federal and provincial governments in order to develop a coherent approach and strategy.
- The Pacific Salmon Commission may also support broader rebuilding targets. The 26 member First Nations Caucus could be re-positioned to advance BC First Nations' interests with Canada and supporting enhancement opportunities to rebuild declining stocks.
- Issues with protecting First Nations food security and priority access will continue as salmon stocks further decline. Fisheries management measures cannot balance impacts across sectors and should prioritize access to support First Nations needs.
- Implementation of the *Wild Salmon Policy* has been slow and not yet resulted in tangible benefits to Pacific salmon stocks writ large. New *Fisheries Act* provision to rebuild depleted fish stocks provide a stronger regulatory tool but questions remain on how to apply Pacific salmon stocks into the new provision.

Current Actions Underway:

- FNFC's *Salmon Coordinating Committee* is developing a coherent strategy among FN regional fishery organizations, an approach to rebuilding Pacific salmon stocks. The focus will be to identify rebuilding activities that have high degree of implementation success and benefit.
- FNFC has also recently launched the development of an ***Indigenous Technical Advisory Network (ITAN)*** to coordinate provincially, First Nations science and technical experts across the province to collaborate at the provincial scale. ITAN will bring together provincial technical experts to help develop a coherent strategy to rebuild Pacific salmon stocks, (as well as other technical matters of broad concern – Oceans Protection, Aquaculture science, etc).
- Through the ITAN, the FNFC is supporting research to investigate limiting factors and vulnerabilities at each stage of Pacific salmon's life cycle and identifying a comprehensive package of mitigation measures.
- The FNFC is engaging with DFO regarding the implementation of the Fish Stock Provision. ITAN will form a sub-group to identify and review Fish Stocks for listing and review associated information on status.

- FNFC is working with the *Pacific Salmon Commission's First Nations Caucus*, to re-position the Caucus' relationship with DFO and with the Canadian Caucus, in order to more effectively bring forward BC First Nations interests and priorities.
- Many regional BC First Nations fisheries organizations are organized and already working on local and regional level restoration initiatives. The FNFC's focus remains on initiatives at the federal, and provincial policy and program scale that can support and amplify their interests and successes.

Conclusion

- There is robust capacity among BC First Nations at the technical scale, with growing network of formal articles of collaboration such as *MOU's*, and *Charters* among the Regional First Nation Fishery Organizations. The division of labour is still evolving, and expanding to include National scale program coordination and advice.
- **It is recommended that** this operational/technical network *be further enhanced* by the development of a coordinated BC First Nations Fisheries Strategy at the leadership scale.
 1. consistent with *2010 All Chiefs Task Force recommendation's*, FNLC should identify a formal process and structure to coordinate a coherent strategic approach in B.C. to re-set the relationship of collaboration with the Crown and ensure priority dialogue.
 2. Identify resourcing and support for leadership advice, participation, and coordinated engagement with the Crown (including to re-invigorate previous FNLC MOU with Minister, to discuss Pacific matters at least 2x per year)
 3. Identify priorities – in the context of limited resources development of a triage process for issues. Status of Pacific Salmon, priority access, reconciliation in a fisheries context
 4. At a tier 1 level - FNLC- FNO collaborations on delineating circle of power, and circle of influence, (jurisdiction v consultation)

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Other considerations

- **Big Bar landslide** continues to be a major migration impediment for many Fraser salmon stocks. While temporary fish transport systems have been installed for 2019 and 2020, planning is underway to install a permanent fish way to restore natural fish passage.
- **Low returns and spawning success** caused by the Big Bar Landslide will also require enhancement activities to jumpstart rebuilding efforts.
- **The 2014-2016 Pacific Ocean warm water event**, often referred to as the Blob, returned in 2019 which further compounded to decreased survivability for Pacific fish stocks and decreased prey availability. New research also suggests that changing ocean conditions may have larger negative impacts to salmon survivability than originally predicted.
- **2020 marks the third time**, in the last five years, where a new record low return has been set for Fraser sockeye.
- **While the Transition Plan** for Open Net-Pen Fish Farm is a priority, a comprehensive rebuilding strategy should be balanced to incorporate other limiting factors at different Pacific salmon life stages.
- **The Fisheries Act amendments** introduced a new *Fish Stock Provision* that can provide a stronger regulatory mechanism to rebuild depleted fish stocks. Work is underway to identify and list Pacific salmon stocks under this new regulation. If a listed stock is found to be at-risk (i.e. below its Fishery Reference Point), DFO is required to develop a Rebuilding Plan within 24-36 months.