FISHERIES SCIENCE

Overview

DFO has fallen behind on core fisheries science that underpins sustainable fisheries management. Missed fish surveys have created serious data gaps and some stock assessments have not been conducted. At the same time, the department does not always follow science when making fisheries management decisions. This is hurting the sector and communities that rely on it.

Fisheries science is fundamental to understanding fish stocks, including their health, their impact on the surrounding ecosystem and the disruptions of climate change. The Canadian fisheries industry works hard to provide their own industry-led studies, observations and knowledge, but it is the role of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) to provide regular surveys and assessments of fish stocks to inform management decisions.

Canada has the resources to be a sustainable fisheries powerhouse, but only if we understand, manage and optimize our fish stocks. The industry has an ambitious value growth vision but is being held back by lack of fisheries science and decisions not aligned with the science.

Objective

Ensure DFO prioritizes sufficient resources and commits to fisheries science in support of evidence-based management decisions and does so in a predictable, transparent and consistent manner.

Key Messages

1. **Increase funding resources for fisheries science in support of management decision-making.**
2. **Implement a resource management framework that is evidence-based, predictable, transparent, and consistently applied.**
3. **Sustainable use of fisheries is critical to the well-being of Canadian coastal and Indigenous communities, as well as the millions who rely on Canadian fish as a healthy protein source.**

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Background & Facts

Increasingly, activities that carry out data collection critical for analysis have been disrupted, due to either lack of funds, inability to procure a survey vessel, or other processes taking precedence over stock assessments because of staffing issues. These science gaps are leading to overly precautionary decisions that undermine the economic prospects for the industry. An example is Greenland Halibut (turbot) in Nunavut.

At the same time, the industry relies on DFO science as evidence for its audits under the Marine Stewardship Council certification. The industry has already lost certifications because of DFO. When that happens, Canadian products lose value in the market or lose access to certain retailers or markets.

In other instances, fisheries management decisions are not aligned with the underlying science. Pacific herring is a prime example of an ultra-cautious decision not supported by science.

As DFO enters co-management agreements with Indigenous communities, there is a shift towards (localized) place-based science vs broader ecosystem, ecologically based science. How does this impact scientific capacity, resources and outcomes? More clarity is needed to ensure sustainable fisheries management is maintained, if not improved.

Modest improvements have been made since last fall. New CCG research vessels are now active. Budget 2024 prevented a step-down in fisheries science. But there remains significant competition for scarce scientific resources within DFO – developing rebuilding plans, implementing the Fish Stock Provisions, and following the Precautionary Approach policy. Better prioritization is needed on understanding causes and effects; developing harvest control rules; and conducting science on commercial fisheries of most importance.

The losses to the industry are much greater than the cost of conducting the science. FCC has additional recommendations and questions regarding how to address these concerns. FCC has been engaged with senior DFO officials to share our questions and recommendations and to collaborate towards mutually beneficial solutions.

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