



2024 Fraser & Approach Salmon Fisheries Forum 2

Kwantlen Youth: Working as one, thinking with our hearts and spirits, the wisdom of the elders and the importance of thinking outside the box for solutions to protect the gift of salmon for future generations.

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Background & Context

Forum 2 is intended to build on Forum 1 in the sense that the agenda is structured to dive deeper into the specific issues, options, priorities, and potential approaches to managing salmon for the coming year. Forum 2 purpose and objectives were as follows:

- For DFO and the FSMB to provide further detail on some of the considerations for 2024 fisheries planning for Fraser salmon and host a discussion on priorities, options, approaches; and,
- To provide an opportunity for First Nations with interests in Fraser Salmon to work at a Tier 1 level to review key technical information, exchange perspectives and discuss options for fisheries planning.

The objectives are very broadly defined intentionally since it is generally understood that the Forums are not decision-making meetings but are an information exchange, a place to share different perspectives and clarify any outstanding questions or concerns regarding any specific area or fishery.

As mentioned in my earlier report there is ongoing work to update 3 different Terms of Reference (TOR): Forum Process TOR, Forum Planning Committee TOR, and the Joint Technical Working Group TOR. Updating the TOR's is important in order to stay relevant and timely as the process evolves. The task of updating these has been undertaken by the following Forum participants:

1. **Forum Planning Committee** (Victor Isaak, Sonora Thompson, Mat Parslow, Ken Malloway, Robert Leech, Thomas Alexis, Greg Witzky, Sharmayne Owen, Kristin Hrapchak, Amy Wakelin, Mike Staley, Maddie Thompson)
2. **Fraser Forum** (The same subset from the Forum Planning Committee)
3. **Joint Technical Working Group** (Maddie Thompson, Dawn Steele, Kristin Hrapchak, Greg Witzky, Kelsey Campbell, Mat Parslow)

The Forum Renewal process undertaken by West Coast Aquatics has identified the following objectives for Forum Renewal is as follows:

- ensuring that the renewed Fraser Forum is an effective and inclusive platform for discussing and addressing salmon management issues,
- aligning the mandate and objectives of the renewed Fraser Forum with the goals of the FSCMA and the current needs of the region,
- facilitating salmon management that is fair and equitable for all participating parties,
- strengthening the relationship between First Nations and the DFO,
- and improving the transparency and accountability of the Forum process.

The March Forum, like the January meeting was a hybrid meeting with approximately 30-35 in-person and another 15-20 on line. The meeting space was sufficient with a lot of space to move freely. Once again, the meeting space had no windows ,but definitely had a better air circulation system and temperature control which made the afternoon doldrums less than in Burnaby. That being said, topic timing remained a challenge at times, as conversations on certain topics were sometimes longer than expected. In order maintain focus, short stretch breaks were welcomed and helped move the conversation along without too much resentment. The FSMC staff were an excellent support by managing the online participants and also by having a mic runner in the room which made the meeting run smoothly and without major interruptions or challenges.

Another change worth mentioning was the overall structure of the agenda. For this Forum the day 1 agenda was limited to sockeye and coho only with the primary focus on the sockeye. This approach was a strategically smart move and allowed participants to really dig into the issues at a more granular level instead of breaking this up and moving too quickly from one species to the next as has happened in the past. Allowing the entire day to talk about all things sockeye has a very positive affect on the outcomes and I feel like participants could express the full depth and breadth of their concerns, issues, and priorities for sockeye management. The same applied for chinook etc.

As the facilitator I was given specific instructions by the Forum Planning Committee to ensure conversations were on topic and not out of focus. To that end I was very clear from the beginning that I had to better control “out of scope” conversations. For the most part participants were appreciative and supported the facilitation approach. That being said, there were those that did not appreciate this approach and took it as a technique for shutting highly emotional conversations down. I was clear that this was not the case and after some deliberations the air was cleared and the meeting proceeded as per my instructions.

Forum role/Forum Renewal

There remains uncertainty about the changing nature of the fisheries planning process and the inclusion of new “rights based stock specific fisheries” In the Forum renewal process it will be important that individual nations are consulted re new fisheries, as that’s where the rights lie. The FSMB and Forum can support more effective bilateral consultation, given many concerns about flaws in current IFMP consultation process. This issue can be to proposed expansion of JTWG role, with more emphasis on expanding technical support and collaboration that can feed back to supporting individual nations to understand and respond effectively to fishery management options.

The Forum can also provide valuable support for FSMB by helping to flag where their management may raise rights issues and where those local nation talks need to happen, e.g. Cowichan. There is a request to have the Forum and technical process focus on helping nations do the necessary homework throughout the year to come up with comprehensive, proactive, consensus positions that drive fishery planning and hold DFO accountable to objectives like conservation and FSC priority, in ways that are consistent with indigenous priorities and values. Finally, the Forum can help individual nations get more organized and coordinated, understanding planning timelines and context, ensuring indigenous priorities and values shape planning and holistic solutions that knit together all the interests (so more proactive, less reactive; more UNDRIP, less colonial).

Joint Technical Working Group – Tier 1

Sockeye Management

The chair of the JTWG First Nations caucus remains, Kelsey Campbell from the UFFCA. Kelsey did an outstanding job of synthesizing the information and making it understandable to folks in the room. Their primary function is to review all of the technical data available and to the extent possible provide insights, raise questions, or present concerns for follow up in the Tier 2. The Tier 1 JTWG continues to express concerns about the overall approach to sockeye management. They continue to raise red flags with the current approach to sockeye management and express the need for sockeye framework reform.

FRSSI

Another key aspect underpinning the sockeye management framework is the, Fraser River Sockeye Spawning Initiative (FRSSI). Since around 2007, DFO has engaged with all sectors in the Fraser River Sockeye Spawning Initiative (FRSSI) which has been the primary driver for setting escapement plans as well as harvest rules for Fraser sockeye salmon. It was expected that stakeholder participation in FRSSI, which is a computer modelling exercise, would improve the sockeye management process in three important ways. First, it would provide a way for stakeholders to have direct input into the design of the model of the Fraser sockeye management system. Second, it would expose all stakeholders to potential conflicting objectives and interactions in a computer-based environment (i.e., as opposed to testing management actions in the real world). Finally, it would improve stakeholder understanding of the purpose, inputs, and results of management simulation exercises for Fraser sockeye fisheries. Unfortunately, the problem is/was mixed stock fishing on 4 major stock aggregates. This remains a complex problem which has only been exacerbated by the present sockeye situation.

“It’s time to get under the hood and begin addressing the problem with the current framework” – Kelsey Campbell

Any fisheries for Fraser sockeye harvest all 30 or so ‘conservation units’ or sub-species of Fraser sockeye from over 100 spawning areas while they are still mixed together in the ocean. The problem is a fairly obvious one, if a stock that was struggling to survive is mixed in with stocks

that are producing a large surplus, the fisheries were, and still are managed to harvest the surplus, and not restricted to fully protect the weak stocks in the mixture.

With the possible exception of the early Stuart, the four aggregates are not managed independently, since the timing aggregates overlap substantially. Harvesting as many Fraser sockeye as possible in mixed stocks ocean fisheries compromises the conservation of weak stocks, while conserving weak stocks leads to significant restrictions on the mixed stock ocean harvest of Fraser sockeye and significant impacts on fishers and the coastal communities they call home. The heart of FRSSI is a computer simulation model that uses past experience to project the catch and spawning escapement of Fraser sockeye under a range of alternative management strategies (assuming that the future is following the same rules as the past). The model produces a time series of catch and escapement by stock and aggregate that can be used to describe the economic and social impacts of restricting commercial fisheries to protect weak stocks, in order to assist us in making the trade-offs between harvest and conservation.

There are likely more threats to consider but this list should be sufficient to understand the general situation facing Fraser sockeye. Fraser First Nations perspectives on managing Fraser sockeye differ from the headwaters to the estuaries and out in the approach areas of Vancouver Island. Many Fraser First Nations in the mid and upper watersheds have access to only one or two stocks of sockeye and that is only if all the stars align. For these First Nations it is the return of sockeye to their territory that determines their fishing success, not the total return of sockeye to the Fraser River. ***The current aggregate based management system simply does not work and an overall paradigm shift is required to turn this approach around.*** The needs of Fraser First Nations are best served by a balanced plan that recognizes the current imbalance and begins to move the dial toward a more sustainable and equitable approach. Finally, any rebuilding plan that increases total catch of Fraser sockeye by increasing production from a few strong stocks, e.g., Tsilhqot'in or Adams Lake, while over harvesting the weaker stocks will continue to leave many First Nations without access. To be fair, DFO has moved, if somewhat uncertainly, towards a more conservative or precautionary approach to the management of Pacific salmon vis-à-vis it's Wild Salmon Policy.

Sockeye Forecast - Escapement Options & Test Fisheries

Given the current La Nina conditions it was strongly recommended that DFO exercise the precautionary approach to any sockeye planning in 2024. The FSMB had agreed to including two sockeye escapement options for DFO's draft IFMP. These two options were not considered final but were agreed to by the board as a starting place for conversation. The FSMB was made clear that a third or even fourth option would be entertained if that was the will of the group.

The primary driver for consideration for 2024 sockeye is the small preseason forecast return, the lowest on record, and the returners from the Big Bar slide. There was no TAC identified at the 50p forecast level. That being said, First Nations have expressed deep interest in exploring further the concepts of, Stock Specific Rights Based Fisheries, formerly referred to as ESSRs. More work needs to be done to educate participants about the move toward more of these type of fisheries in a new overall sockeye management framework. This conversation will likely be more important at the last Forum in Kamloops.

Another lever for consideration was the adjustment to the Low Abundance Exploitation Rate (LAER). Other aspects for consideration were the MA adjustments given the low snow pack and potential for drought this year weighed heavy on people's minds. The Fraser will likely face La Nina conditions which will affect returning spawners. Also, for marine First Nations the potential for a reduced test fishery was of concerns since this would affect not only their ability to access sockeye but could potentially negatively affect the ability to forecast spawner abundance. The Fraser Panel will look at test fishery options, especially for marine, to avoid Early Stuarts, including potential for non-lethal testing, delaying the start, avoiding gillnets, etc. Suggestions welcomed. This is always a difficult conversation. At this time there is no solution proposed and will require further discussion at the next Forum. Finally, the issue of window closures to protect weak or vulnerable stocks was discussed, but here too no consensus approach was recommended. In fact, there is an idea of a window closure reduction being floated and supported by some participants in order to access other stocks. More conversation will be required to see if there is a general agreement of duration of closure.

Chinook Management

As in Forum 1 the main focus for chinook management remains weak stock management of the spring and summer 4(2) and 5(2) Fraser chinook. DFO has brought overall exploitation down on all Fraser ISBM fisheries but participants feel that more needs to be done to recover and rebuild these stocks. Confounding the conservation measures are ongoing pilot MM MSF fisheries in the marine areas. Participants were reminded that the FSMB is in discussion about these fisheries and a special ½ day FSMB meeting was planned immediately following the Form 2.

Other issues identified during this Forum were:

1. Priority access for rights based fisheries
2. Area G trawl fishery impacts
3. CSAS review on specific MUs
4. Reference fishery impacts and lack of transparency
5. Monitoring of the marine recreational fishery
6. FSAR and the need to speed up the rapid status tool
7. Recreational fisheries opened until closed policy
8. MSF analysis takes a lot of time and NRG to complete

The What We Heard format at the end of each Forum continues to be a positive development with both First Nations and DFO delivering the message which is a true collaborative approach instead of only DFO. The importance of the FSMC delivering the message is equally important and cannot be understated. This is because the CMA is a collaborative agreement and with mandated First Nations their consultation imperative is real and needs to be taken seriously. That being said participants want to see the What WE Hear report out with the back eddy changed slightly. They expressed the desire to have the back eddy populated with more details, especially with respect to time lines. It has been pointed out that placing an issue or topic which is beyond the scope of the Forum is not good enough. Instead some participants would like to

see a time line attached to the issue or at least a definitive statement made which declares the topic or issue beyond the scope of the Forum process.

Interior Fraser Coho (IFC)

Many First Nations commented that they have not fished on these stocks for 40 years and should have had recovery plans in place many years ago. It's taken so many years to get here, so propose keeping current limits until the 3 criteria for relaxing measures have been met. Based on the feedback and questions there remains uncertainty as to how the 3 - 5% exploitation rate is managed and how certain current management is in terms of meeting these targets. While there is a general sense that coho are showing signs of recovery participants were also clear that management measures should continue in order to allow them to re-establish in their traditional habitat and build resiliency before allowing any fisheries. There may be room to increase exploitation slightly but DFO does not have the necessary tools to manage at that scale so risk remains.

Request that DFO provide proposed scenarios for increasing IFR Coho ER for JTWG to discuss. Also want more detail of how current ER estimates are calculated and how those allowed impacts are shared to support fisheries. There is potential for rec fisheries to change: they are allowed to retain hatchery fish, some of which are IFR Coho. Propose also reviewing IFR Coho rebuilding objectives in this context. The last time we increased ER (2013-2014) there was a good Sockeye run and people wanted access to them, and there was a good IFR coho return the previous year, so the commercial sector argued for increased IFR Coho ER to permit access to sockeye, but the impacts were excessive and substantially knocked IFC back; DFO has been more precautionary since then.

Finally, there are already MSFs (Mark Selective Fisheries) for coho and hatchery production of marked coho for fisheries. We're seeing emerging problems with high incidental mortality in new Chinook pilot MSFs, so concern about similar problem of increased IFR Coho bycatch.

Steelhead

The preseason forecast for Interior Steelhead are extremely poor. Just to give an idea of the magnitude of the problem projections for Interior Fraser steelhead that returned in 2023 to spawn in 2024 were 228 for Thompson and 108 for Chilcotin. These estimates are based on Albion encounters between late August and early November. Final escapement estimates will be available later in 2024. For last year, the final spawning escapement estimates were 371 for Thompson and 134 for Chilcotin, which is an improvement over the prior few years, but still well below recovery targets. Further protection measures for consideration in the 2024 the draft IFMP includes window closures similar to those in place since 2019. DFO remains committed to the joint Canada BC Joint Steelhead Action Plan, and is continuing to work with First Nations and stakeholders to ensure that all our programs, including hatchery and habitat, are aligned to support steelhead recovery.

Tsilhqot'in National Government lead biologist gave a brief update about the ongoing genetics research to support steelhead recovery/fishery management; and closure of their right-based fishery to protect steelhead. It was noted that Jenn Davis, senior BC official responsible for steelhead was not able to make it to this Forum, but that Forum planners will re-schedule an update from the Province in April.

ISSUES ID'd

1. There was significant improvement to the overall structure, i.e. full day spent on each major species, and with the blessing of the Forum Planning Committee directing me to ***“keep the conversations on point/topic,”*** the scope for conversations was much easier to manage. That being said some conversations tended to veer off into what are largely local issues that did not conform to the migratory route scale for salmon and would be better for local or regional forums.
2. IFMP timelines continue to be a source of tension and tend to lead DFO managers down a more consultation path, i.e. the need to unload information that is not always helpful for FN to deal with especially since the conversations at Tier 1 tend to be highly focused and productive and then DFO delivers many new issues which confuse or heighten tensions, understanding that this is part of DFO's consultation imperative.
3. Participant mix of technical and managerial remains a challenge but will likely not change moving forward.
4. The FPC does not plan any informal after meeting functions which can create a deeper level of cohesiveness and allow for a release of any tensions brought on during the day.
5. Tier 1 time may need to be expanded since the issues tend to affect FN mostly and the First Nations technical team is fully aware of the issues and mostly does not require DFO input since a lot of the information DFO presents tend to be redundant. Spending more time in Tier 1 can assist participants with finding common understanding and even developing common positions on management issues.
6. In line with the above recommendations is the suggestion that a 4th day be added to address other pressing issues like rebuilding projects in local areas, or monitoring programs within sectors
7. Distribution of content in a timely manner remains an issue.
8. Growing awareness that the current sockeye management framework is not in line with the current situation facing sockeye, i.e. one of little to no abundance. This implies that most sockeye management scenarios will be with limited to no directed harvest, i.e. no TAC leaving only First Nations to manage.

9. Folks tend to sit with like-minded or like regions or with old friends and I understand that since these meetings can get tedious but where possible these dynamics should be circumvented with more mixing to allow for table talk of a different sort.
10. Post meeting communications – key messages out need to be articulated to demonstrate the success of the process

Thoughts on Next Steps

Forum Structure and Overall Process improvements

- Maintain separation of species by day, for sure with chinook and sockeye since they both require lengthy discussions to develop options.
- Given the strength of the FN technical team and with plenty of lead time for DFO to get their information to the FN tech team reduces the need for DFO to be in the room. This would allow for more Tier 1 time and would free up time for an already over stretched DFO team.
- Need to strengthen distribution of Forum agenda package prior to the actual engagement. There were issues with the website and staff which were beyond the control of the planners.
- Suggestion of having 4-day species-themed Forums (one for chinook, one for sockeye...).
- Need to clearly communicate that DFO needs an effective protocol for substantive consultation re any proposed fishery changes that may affect Fraser stocks and or FSC access, e.g. mention of opening the Cowichan marine areas for chinook fishing for recreational purposes

JTWG

- Require more information / details on IFR ER tables in order to better advise FN leaders
- GSI info for MSFs on chinook and coho
- Suggestion re adding Tier 1 JTWG time, e.g. to explore fishery proposals in more detail
- 2 days for JTWG and 2 days for the rest of the Forum
- Expanded TOR for the JTWG including roles and responsibilities, series of off-season meetings to do more deep dives, coordinated with/supporting the roles of JTC/FSMB and others
- Forum will need a full-time policy analyst/coordinator position
- Communication or bulletin out after each Forum to inform FN on issues and interests
- Suggestion re broadening role to include all of Southern BC, not just Fraser (Fraser focus having unintended effects on rest of SBC).

Visions

There was general support for having an additional special Forum or Visions conference in June or early July, some suggested topics include:

1. Monitoring and compliance in all fisheries sectors including FN
2. Guardian roles and responsibilities and possible expansion beyond current limits
3. Deep dive into the SEP program and possibly tie into current regional rebuilding taking place in FN territories
4. MM MSF's implications and any future expansion. First Nations were clear that they are not apposed to MM MSF but want a greater role in any further work in this area
5. UNDRIP Action Plan. There was a suggestion to consider, UNDRIP workshop ([Carden Consulting](#)) for DFO staff on priority rights implementation.
6. 2 eyed seeing as a new paradigm for fisheries management
7. SARA – sockeye and chinook focus