

Groups rail at fishy salmon decision



Fraser River sockeye salmon could soon be branded sustainable.

File

By [Jeff Nagel - BC Local News](#)

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An adjudicator has swiftly overruled objections from environmental groups and paved the way for Fraser River sockeye salmon to be certified as a sustainable seafood source.

The Marine Stewardship Council said it expects to soon certify the fishery – an outcome conservation groups consider bizarre in light of the collapse in Fraser sockeye stocks over the past two years and the federal inquiry now probing the causes.

The MSC said although scientists are uncertain as to the cause for low returns, there is "general agreement that commercial fishing pressure is not the cause."

Certification would mean Fraser sockeye products would carry the MSC seal of approval, telling buyers the salmon comes from healthy stocks that are sustainably harvested without damage to the marine ecosystem.

“This certification could actually result in well-intentioned consumers buying an endangered Fraser River sockeye with an eco-label on it,” said Jeffrey Young, aquatic biologist with the David Suzuki Foundation, one of three groups that opposed the certification.

The adjudicator who heard the concerns acknowledged there were many "complicated and difficult questions" surrounding the fishery before dismissing the concerns.

At a minimum, conservationists say, MSC should wait until after the Cohen Commission into Fraser sockeye hands down its findings and work begins to rebuild threatened stocks.

Watershed Watch Salmon Society ecologist Aaron Hill said the international body's credibility will be "shot" if it proceeds, but adds he did not hold out much hope of a better outcome.

The MSC has never before failed a fishery after it has completed the full assessment.

"It's a rigged process," Hill said, adding the organization's goal is to increase market penetration for its brand and the certifiers it relies on are hired and paid directly by industry.

The groups say eco-certification could be a valuable tool to reward fishermen and areas with good management, but handing it out willy-nilly renders it meaningless.

More than 10 million Fraser sockeye were expected to return last year, but just 1.4 million materialized.

The MSC has already certified sockeye from the Skeena and Nass rivers and Barkley Sound.

B.C. harvesters have found themselves increasingly at a disadvantage compared to producers in Alaska, where salmon has been MSC-certified for several years.

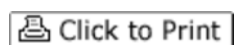
Buyers increasingly insist on buying only certified salmon.

Fraser sockeye fisheries have been closed six out of the past 11 years due to poor returns and the Cultus and Sakinaw lakes runs are so low they are listed as critically endangered species.

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