

NEWS RELEASE

Conservationists Launch Official Objection to Eco-certification of Troubled Canadian Salmon Fisheries

Groups say that labeling endangered sockeye salmon as “sustainable” misleads consumers

VANCOUVER, CANADA – Today, three prominent conservation groups from British Columbia, Canada, filed a notice of objection with the U.K.-based Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) over a recent announcement by the MSC to award its coveted eco-label to controversial salmon fisheries on Canada’s Pacific coast.

MSC is a global eco-label program which enables certified fisheries to brand themselves as a sustainable source of seafood. Sustainable seafood is generally defined as species with healthy populations, harvested from well-managed fisheries that don’t cause significant harm to ocean environments and other sea life. Major Canadian retailers, including Loblaw, and European retailers Tesco and Sainsbury’s, have recently committed to selling only MSC-certified seafood in their stores.

The objection of the conservation groups is focused on the Fraser River sockeye salmon fishery, which recently became the focus of a judicial inquiry by the Government of Canada, due to a worsening population collapse and widespread concerns over mismanagement. The Fraser is Canada’s largest Pacific river and meets the Pacific Ocean in Vancouver, the host city the 2010 Olympic Winter Games.

“Scientists have shown that many salmon populations – particularly in the Fraser River – are not only at very low levels, but at risk of extinction,” said Dr. Craig Orr, executive director of the Watershed Watch Salmon Society. “Endangered salmon should not be considered a sustainable choice for consumers until the fisheries management system is improved, overfishing stops, and depressed stocks are allowed to recover.”

Some Fraser River sockeye stocks harvested in the soon to be certified fishery are listed as “endangered” by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, and “critically endangered” by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, whose team of scientists point to overfishing as a key threat. Last year, Fraser River sockeye salmon collapsed with only 13% of an expected 10.5 million fish returning to spawn – the lowest return of sockeye in the past 50 years.

Under the MSC's third-party certification process, companies hired by fishing industry "clients" determine whether a fishery meets the MSC's criteria for eco-certification.

"These companies are doing brisk business by certifying fisheries," said Dr. Orr. "But given the state of Fraser sockeye, people should be more concerned about conservation than marketing fish. Our objection focuses on several areas where the third-party certifier has ignored crucial data and awarded passing grades to a fishery which should have failed."

"We are determined to expose the failures of this MSC's certification process in order to protect well-intentioned consumers from being misled," said Greg Knox, executive director for SkeenaWild Conservation Trust. "If this certification goes ahead, European consumers who attempt to make ethical purchasing decisions by choosing MSC-certified fish, could end up eating endangered Canadian salmon."

"Fraser River sockeye is one of several fisheries we view as unsustainable that have applied for certification by the MSC," said Mr. Young. "They are now poised to certify the Atlantic longline swordfish fishery as sustainable, despite concerns that it kills endangered turtles and sharks."

No fishery has ever been denied certification after completing the MSC assessment process, and no objection to a certification has ever been upheld.

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