

Conservation groups warn consumers to avoid eco-certified Fraser River sockeye salmon

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VANCOUVER – Conservation groups in British Columbia are warning consumers to avoid purchasing endangered sockeye salmon certified by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

Today, the MSC granted sustainability certification to the Fraser River commercial sockeye fishery despite last year's sockeye population collapse and an ongoing federal judicial inquiry into management of the fishery.

“Given recent events it is both misleading and irresponsible to certify the Fraser fishery as sustainable,” said Greg Knox with SkeenaWild Conservation Trust. “We will be launching a new awareness campaign for European consumers advising that the certified salmon they are buying could come from B.C.’s endangered Fraser River sockeye population.”

Scientists say the Fraser River sockeye fishery does not meet the criteria of a sustainable fishery because it continues to catch endangered salmon and strategies to recover dwindling fish populations are not being implemented.

“There is no way these kinds of endangered salmon should be considered a sustainable choice until the fisheries management system is improved and endangered stocks given a chance to recover,” said Vicky Husband, Senior Advisor with Watershed Watch Salmon Society.

Under the MSC's third-party certification process, fishing industry “clients” hire private companies to determine whether a fishery meets the MSC's certification criteria. No fishery has ever been denied certification after completing the MSC assessment process, and no objection to a certification has ever been upheld.

“Obviously we have serious concerns with the objectivity of MSC's certification process,” said Craig Orr, Executive Director of Watershed Watch Salmon Society. “For fisheries certification to be effective, consumers must be able to trust the certifier's evaluation process. In this case, it appears the MSC is simply using a rubber stamp.”

Scientists at Watershed Watch Salmon Society, SkeenaWild Conservation Trust and the David Suzuki Foundation launched a formal objection to the proposed certification last fall, which was rejected last week by the Marine Stewardship Council.

Two sockeye populations routinely caught by the Fraser River fishery have been officially listed as endangered species since 2003.

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For more information, contact:

Craig Orr, Executive Director, Watershed Watch Salmon Society
corr@telus.net
(604) 809-2799

Aaron Hill, Ecologist, Watershed Watch Salmon Society
hillfish@telus.net
(250) 818-0054

Vicky Husband, Senior Advisor, Watershed Watch Salmon Society
vickyhusband@me.com
(250) 478-0388
(250) 920-9355

Greg Knox, Executive Director, SkeenaWild Conservation Trust
gregk@skeenawild.org
(250) 615-1990

Marine Stewardship Council certification of BC sockeye salmon fisheries

BACKGROUND

- The Marine Stewardship Council eco-label allows certified fisheries to brand themselves as a “sustainable” source of seafood. Fisheries voluntarily apply for certification, and they do so by hiring a for-profit company to carry out the assessment.
- All British Columbia commercial sockeye salmon fisheries applied for MSC certification in 2001 and were broken into four fisheries units for assessment (Fraser, Skeena, Barkley Sound, Nass).
- B.C. conservation organizations have provided input to these assessments, providing expertise on the sustainability of these fisheries and serious ongoing management problems.
- The final determination by the MSC recommended certification of all B.C. sockeye fisheries as sustainable. The David Suzuki Foundation, Watershed Watch Salmon Society and SkeenaWild Conservation Trust filed an objection to the certification of Fraser sockeye salmon fisheries as sustainable.
- The Fraser River sockeye fishery exploits 44 genetically distinct populations of sockeye salmon, each of which has evolved under a unique set of environmental and ecological conditions which govern its ability to withstand harvest and environmental change. Most of these genetically distinct populations migrate together through the same coastal areas at the same general time. They are indistinguishable from one another, and are all harvested in aptly-named “mixed-stock” fisheries. A few productive sockeye populations have been able to withstand relatively high harvest rates whereas many smaller populations have been driven to the edge of extinction and beyond. First Nations (aboriginal) people of the Fraser River, who harvested sockeye sustainably for thousands of years, now have difficulty catching enough sockeye to meet their families’ basic food needs.
- Two sockeye populations routinely caught by the Fraser River fishery (Cultus and Sakinaw Lakes) have been heavily overfished and are listed as critically endangered by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) since 2003.
- The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) grouped the Fraser River sockeye into 11 subpopulations and found that 6 are “vulnerable”, 3 are “endangered” and 1 is “critically endangered”. Overfishing was listed as a “key threat”.
- In the last 6 out of 11 years the Fraser River sockeye fishery has been closed due to poor returns.
- From 1999 to 2009, 70% of the pre-season forecasts have overestimated the actual return of sockeye. In years when fishing occurs, it is common for the fishery to harvest 20% of endangered sockeye populations such as Cultus and Sakinaw.
- The biological productivity of Fraser River sockeye is declining and is now at an all-time low, meaning that the populations are barely replacing themselves..
- Last year, nearly all Fraser River sockeye populations collapsed. Only 13% of the expected 10.5 million Fraser River sockeye returned to spawn. A judicial inquiry is underway investigating the collapse of Fraser sockeye and failures of their management.