



June 21, 2022

Mr. Ken McDonald  
Chair  
Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans  
House of Commons  
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6

Dear Mr. McDonald:

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I would like to thank the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans (the Committee) for its Report, *Pacific Salmon: Ensuring the Long-Term Health of Wild Populations and Associated Fisheries*. I am pleased to receive the Committee's recommendations and would like to thank Committee members for dedicating their time and effort to identifying ways in which the Government of Canada, in collaboration with others, can take coordinated steps to address Pacific salmon declines.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) is committed to supporting Pacific salmon conservation, as demonstrated through significant actions including launching the five-year \$647.1 million (plus \$98.9 million in amortization) Pacific Salmon Strategy Initiative (PSSI) in June 2021. This initiative responds to the challenge to conserve and protect Pacific salmon and their habitats and ecosystems across the Province of British Columbia (BC) and Yukon. Through the PSSI, DFO will make significant investments in Pacific salmon under four pillars: Conservation and Stewardship; Salmon Enhancement; Harvest Transformation; and Integration and Collaboration. As per the Budget 2021 decision, these new investments include:

- Stabilizing and conserving wild Pacific salmon populations, including through research, new hatchery facilities, and habitat restoration.
- Creation of a Pacific Salmon Secretariat and Habitat Restoration Centre of Expertise
- Improving management of commercial and recreational fisheries
- Doubling the British Columbia Salmon Restoration and Innovation Fund (BCSRIF) with an additional federal investment of \$100 million
- Further engaging First Nations and fish harvesters

The Committee's Report advocates a holistic approach to address the various factors causing salmon declines and stresses the urgent need to employ a comprehensive suite of strategies. The Government of Canada agrees with the Committee's assessment and recognizes that working with others on conservation and restoration has never been more critical. That is

why my December 16, 2021 mandate letter includes working in close collaboration with Indigenous partners, provincial and territorial authorities, fishing and stewardship organizations and implicated communities to implement the PSSI. I was pleased to see that the Committee's views are significantly aligned with the work envisioned under the PSSI.

The Committee's recommendations will help guide the Government in its continued work to stem Pacific salmon declines so that these iconic species can be rebuilt and sustained long into the future. I have outlined our Government's response to the report based on the four pillars of the PSSI and other key themes identified by the Committee.

### **Conservation and Stewardship**

(Recommendations 1 - 6, 11, 13, 18, 22, 24, and 27)

This grouping of recommendations addresses key actions aimed at Pacific salmon conservation, including targeted efforts to restore salmon habitats and ecosystems. Given climate change and broader environmental challenges impacting Pacific salmon survival, conservation and stewardship actions are considered a foundational means by which we must, collectively, make a positive difference for the sustainability of Pacific salmon.

The Government shares the Committee's views regarding the importance of science. One of the key objectives of the PSSI is to improve our understanding of the causes of salmon decline by enhancing monitoring of salmon populations and ecosystems. Work through the PSSI will enable the development of strategic and prioritized conservation actions for salmon rebuilding, integrating potential harvest, hatchery, habitat, and ecosystem management strategies.

Specific to the Committee's recommendations on science and data on cumulative impacts and marine conditions (including ocean temperatures), the PSSI will enhance our capacity to work in partnership with other countries to participate in two high seas surveys within the five-year PSSI timeframe. This work will help fill key gaps in our understanding of the ocean phase of the salmon life cycle and better our understanding of the effects of environmental variability on Pacific salmon distribution and abundance in the North Pacific Ocean.

The Committee's recommendations related to salmon stock assessments and estuary management strategies have strong linkages to the PSSI Conservation and Stewardship pillar and in particular the activities that will need to be undertaken collaboratively, given provincial and territorial jurisdiction in land and water use. The PSSI includes a strong focus on strengthening collaboration with the government of BC, and building on existing governance with Yukon, to better align Pacific salmon priorities. It also includes a focus on working collaboratively across jurisdictions, and with First Nations, as well as other partners and stakeholders, to collectively identify salmon ecosystem priorities for specific sub-regional areas.

Regarding recommendations focused on the need to work collaboratively with partners and stakeholders, and in particular First Nations and Indigenous groups, the new Stewardship Directorate, including a Habitat Restoration Centre of Expertise, will be established to

provide technical support to stewardship groups undertaking rebuilding, habitat restoration work, and other salmon stewardship activities in support of Pacific salmon conservation. In addition, we will be working to enhance First Nations' technical capacity to support collaboration with DFO and others in priority setting, planning and implementation of conservation and stewardship activities.

While management of inland fisheries in BC and Yukon has largely been delegated to the provincial and territorial governments, DFO is responsible nationally for the administration of the fish and fish habitat protection provisions of the *Fisheries Act*. However, BC and Yukon authorities share a range of natural resource conservation responsibilities and initiatives under various provincial and territorial laws that complement those of the federal government, including land-use and water-use decisions made by these authorities, which may have a significant bearing on the quality, quantity and function of fish habitat in a given watershed.

The BC Salmon Restoration and Innovation Fund (BCSRIF) is another example of how we are supporting and working with our partners to address Pacific salmon declines. BCSRIF is a funding partnership with the Province of BC that provides support for external groups to conduct important work that contributes to salmon conservation and stewardship. In Phase 1 of BCSRIF, DFO and the Province of BC provided an initial investment of \$142.85 million over five years (until 2024) to support protection and restoration activities for priority wild fish stocks, including several projects that will protect and restore freshwater salmon habitats. In 2020, BCSRIF's funding priorities included salmon habitat restoration and species of concern rebuilding, with a specific focus on Fraser steelhead, Chinook, and coho research. Details on projects funded by BCSRIF, including projects with benefits to Fraser River salmon stocks and surrounding ecosystems, are published on the DFO website. Supported by a high level of public interest and early program results, Budget 2021 committed an additional \$100 million federal contribution to expand and extend BCSRIF until 2026. The Province of BC has signaled its intention to also double its own investment in the Fund, towards Phase 2 of the program. Discussions between DFO and provincial partners are underway to confirm timelines and joint funding priorities, and further details will be shared once available.

Pacific salmon assessed as at risk by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada are also eligible for funding support through the Habitat Stewardship Program and the Aboriginal Fund for Species at Risk. Support for salmon species at risk is also provided through the Canada Nature Fund for Aquatic Species at Risk (CNFASAR). Pacific salmon are a priority species under CNFASAR; CNFASAR also provides support for Indigenous based stewardship activities and capacity building.

### **Salmon Enhancement**

(Recommendations 16, 17, and 19)

This grouping of recommendations focus on the importance of hatcheries to the conservation and rebuilding of Pacific salmon species. The PSSI Salmon Enhancement pillar focusses on the importance of taking a strategic approach where salmon hatcheries can be used to support

Pacific salmon rebuilding and recovery in targeted areas, as well as targeted harvesting opportunities where they align with conservation priorities. In particular, the PSSI will invest in modernizing current hatchery programs, including new conservation-focused hatchery facilities, retrofits to existing infrastructure, and ensuring adequate scientific and technical support to align with the broader objective of conserving and rebuilding Pacific salmon stocks.

The Government shares the Committee's views that the Fraser River watershed could benefit from enhancement efforts to improve conservation outcomes. As the Committee noted, a lack of hatchery capacity in this area was further underscored after the Big Bar landslide disrupted Fraser salmon and steelhead passage. Under this pillar, DFO will engage with First Nations partners, the Province of BC, and stakeholders in planning for enhancement in the Fraser River watershed. Building on previous work that has enabled fish passage for most stocks, DFO will undertake further options analysis for a long-term response to the Big Bar landslide to protect select early arriving Fraser salmon and steelhead stocks that continue to face difficulties getting past the site.

The Committee also advocated for a hatchery strategy to augment runs of critical concern, and support mass marking to address hatchery impacts on wild salmon. Through the PSSI, DFO will be modernizing its strategic hatchery management to improve governance and program capacity to directly support efforts to respond to the declines in Pacific salmon populations and to changing salmon fisheries. This includes focusing on salmon enhancement where it is needed most to support conservation. DFO will also be procuring the technology required to increase its capacity to conduct mass marking to support harvest priorities under PSSI.

### **Harvest Transformation**

(Recommendations 12, 14, 20, and 30)

This grouping of recommendations is focused on assisting fish harvesters in the transformation of the Pacific salmon harvest sectors.

DFO is undertaking a comprehensive consultation process on the commercial and recreational salmon fishery in BC, including collecting feedback on the 2021 closures in preparation for longer-term commercial closures to begin for the 2022 fishing season. As well, DFO is consulting on the design of a Pacific Salmon Commercial Licence Retirement program, which will aim to mitigate impacts of longer-term closures on commercial harvesters, and support better alignment of fishing fleet size with available fishing opportunities. This will set the foundation for longer term transformation for harvesting sectors including modernizing regulatory and other management tools to enable more adaptability.

My Department is also engaging with First Nations communal commercial harvesters on options to access non-salmon fisheries under the Pacific Salmon Indigenous Communal Commercial Alternation Program, and shifting to more selective fishing gear and approaches.

In conjunction with its efforts to recover salmon populations, the PSSI will also explore opportunities to support targeted selective harvesting opportunities in feasible areas. One of

the ways the PSSI proposes to do this is through mark selective fisheries, which would provide fishing opportunities involving retention of marked hatchery fish only, in specified geographic areas. It will be important to ensure enhanced fishery monitoring efforts are put in place in areas where mark selective fishing is implemented, and stocks of concern are avoided.

Another way DFO is supporting targeted harvesting is through exploring opportunities to apply terminal fishery approaches, referring to fishing in the river close to where the fish spawn, on a trial basis in select areas. These fisheries will target healthy and abundant salmon populations (closer to terminal – or spawning – areas) in a selective manner while avoiding unnecessary impacts on wild stocks of concern. Data from these fisheries will be used to support post-season evaluation and future decision making.

### **Integration and Collaboration**

(Recommendations 21, 23, 25, 26, 28, 29, 31, and 32)

These recommendations all speak to improving outcomes from federal Pacific salmon activities through improved external collaboration with First Nations and stakeholders. A number of these recommendations are addressed by work which will be led by the Pacific Salmon Strategy Initiative Secretariat, a new DFO team that will be the internal integration point for DFO's delivery of PSSI activities and its interactions with others to address salmon declines.

Several of the Committee's recommendations note that DFO must work in close collaboration with those most impacted by Pacific salmon declines. We know the challenge before us is a long-term one, and will require all hands on deck. The PSSI includes significant investments to support coordination and collaboration on salmon management, both internally within DFO, as well as with other government departments as needed. The PSSI Secretariat will be leading and coordinating efforts across the Department to ensure integrated and prioritized Pacific salmon actions that consider all key policies, including the Wild Salmon Policy.

The PSSI Secretariat will also be working to formalize and enhance external collaboration and governance processes in order to better align and work in tandem with partners for Pacific salmon conservation and recovery. To do so, the Department will be undertaking several actions, including enhancing governance processes with BC and Yukon, working with First Nations, and considering creating a new Ministerial advisory process for salmon conservation and restoration.

The Government supports the principle that engagement with others must include a diverse cross section of perspectives and interests, including First Nations, as well as commercial and recreational harvesters, industry representatives, provincial and territorial governments, community representatives, stewardship groups, and others that have an interest in the way Pacific salmon are managed. The Secretariat will manage an overall strategy for DFO's engagement with others on salmon, so that new actions under the PSSI move ahead in collaboration with First Nations, partners, and key stakeholders.

The Committee recognized the importance of establishing a common vision for the future of Pacific salmon fisheries. DFO will be working closely with First Nations, commercial and recreational harvesters, and others to help guide and inform the future of Pacific salmon fisheries. One aspect of this work is the review of the current Salmon Allocation Policy. This policy, along with legal obligations to First Nations under treaties and the Constitution, and Canada's international obligations guides the prioritization of annual domestic allocations of salmon harvested in BC and Yukon. After conservation, First Nations' priority for Food, Social and Ceremonial (FSC) as well as constitutionally protected Aboriginal and treaty fisheries rights will remain the highest priority. DFO will also be working with commercial and recreational harvesters to modernize and transform how salmon fisheries are managed overall. DFO is also committed to negotiating fisheries agreements to implement Indigenous fisheries rights including salmon harvesting.

Reconciliation, and implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN Declaration), are important aspects of these recommendations. Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples is one of the key principles of the PSSI. Building on the significant investments and work already done by the Department to support First Nations capacity and shared stewardship related to Pacific salmon, DFO is working to ensure that collaborative engagement is transparent, accountable, and responsive to Indigenous community concerns, is consistent with our commitments under the UN Declaration, and contributes to the goal of reconciliation.

It is important to clarify that the above noted linkages between the Committee's recommendations and the PSSI pillars are considered the primary linkages. There are many cross-linkages between the Committee's recommendations and the other pillars and salmon activities, given the interconnectedness of the various actions needed to advance Pacific salmon conservation and recovery.

### **Other Recommendations**

(Recommendations 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 15)

The Committee also made recommendations on other key themes. The Committee called on the Government of Canada to prioritize coastal restoration work in BC as part of the COVID-19 job recovery, adding this should include meaningful employment opportunities. The Coastal Restoration Fund addresses threats to marine habitats and species located on Canada's coasts by supporting projects that help to restore coastal aquatic habitats. Our Government's commitment to the Coastal Restoration Fund was recently renewed in Budget 2022. Funds of \$85 million over five years were announced in Budget 2022 in the renamed Aquatic Ecosystems Restoration Fund to invest in coastal and upstream inland communities to support restoration activities.

The Committee also included specific recommendations related to aquaculture, which align with actions being taken by DFO. The Government of Canada promotes a sustainable blue economy that includes an economically viable and sustainable aquaculture industry that creates jobs and promotes economic prosperity in coastal communities, while protecting wild

salmon and ocean health. The Government is committed to further exploring approaches that continue to improve aquaculture management, including through a robust regulatory regime that provides greater clarity to the sector while promoting conservation objectives.

Regarding the recommendation on the removal of DFO's role in promoting aquaculture from its mandate, the Government of Canada's view is that DFO's oversight of the salmon farming industry, while supporting the sustainable development of the sector, continues to be consistent with its statutory mandate under the *Fisheries Act*. The British Columbia Aquaculture Regulatory Program (BCARP) was established by DFO in December 2010 following a Supreme Court of BC decision which ruled that finfish aquaculture activities on the coast of BC constitute a fishery and therefore fall under federal jurisdiction. BCARP regulations support the viability and sustainability of the BC aquaculture industry. BCARP derives its mandated activities from the *Pacific Aquaculture Regulations, Fishery (General) Regulations*, and *Aquaculture Activities Regulations*.

My mandate letter includes a commitment to continue to work with the Province of BC and Indigenous communities on a responsible plan to transition from open net-pen salmon farming in coastal BC waters by 2025. I am firmly committed to the development and implementation of a responsible transition plan to position coastal BC as a leader in sustainable, innovative salmon aquaculture practices. Building on the momentum of the preliminary engagement conducted by then Parliamentary Secretary Beech, which culminated in the publication of an "As-was-heard report," released in July 2021, my Department will continue to engage First Nations, the Province of BC, industry, stakeholders and others on a responsible transition. This is supported by the allocation in Budget 2021 of \$20 million over two years to DFO to expand engagement with the Province of BC, First Nations, industry, scientists, and other stakeholders. In addition, Budget 2021 earmarked \$3 million over two years to pilot area-based management approaches to planning, management, and monitoring of aquaculture activities in priority areas on the BC coast — leading the way in developing aquaculture practices that are economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable.

The Committee also put forward a recommendation specifically related to seabed remediation. DFO has an ongoing, active research and monitoring program to continually improve our understanding of the effects of aquaculture on fish and fish habitat to improve the sustainability of Canadian aquaculture. Seabed information from under and near marine fish farming facilities is regularly and routinely collected, both by DFO staff and by the industry (which is then submitted to DFO). These data are collected during every production cycle while the farm is operational to ensure seabed impacts are not expanding or increasing over time. As a result of current regulations and proper management of seabed impact, recovery of the seabed can occur within months of the cessation of fish farming. Recovery of the seabed from marine finfish farming operations is dependent on a variety of factors, such as depth and current. During decommissioning, DFO works with the provincial government, and with industry if necessary, to ensure that debris from the facility that was lost to the seabed during farming operations is recovered. It is the provincial government who makes the final determination on when a tenure can end based on the state of the tenured area.

With respect to aquaculture data, enhanced public reporting is key to DFO's aquaculture management and supports the Government's directive on transparency and open government. DFO has also committed to increasing transparency when implementing BCARP, providing extensive public reporting on aquaculture operations in BC to ensure information is readily available to interested members of the public in a timely manner. While the Department does not seek industry or other stakeholder approval prior to publishing national aquaculture drug and pesticide data, time lags may occur due to the process of ensuring readiness for release, including that privacy concerns and data stewardship requirements are met.

Regarding the Strategic Salmon Health Initiative, this multi-year, collaborative initiative with the Pacific Salmon Foundation (PSF), Genome British Columbia, and DFO has transitioned, in part, into the PSF's Salmon Health Program. The Salmon Health Program will build on the existing collaboration between DFO and the PSF, and focus, in part, on the cumulative interplay between environmental stressors and disease undermining salmon productivity, as well as following up on targeted research and challenge studies for understudied agents that the SSHI research identified carrying the potential for impact. DFO values the innovative approaches and knowledge contributions of the SSHI, and will support the continuation of this under the Salmon Health Program and other initiatives.

The Committee also made a recommendation regarding the impact of predators, including pinnipeds. DFO is aware of concerns about the impacts of predators on salmon, including seals and sea lions. Pinnipeds (seals and sea lions) have increased over recent decades compared to what are considered historic norms. However, there is a large degree of scientific uncertainty regarding the impact of pinnipeds versus other predators or factors which may also be contributing to stock declines. While pinnipeds eat salmon, they are considered to be generalist predators eating a variety of prey. Furthermore, pinnipeds eat predators of salmon, such as hake, and are hunted by Transient Killer Whales, which are listed as Threatened under the *Species at Risk Act*. DFO is conducting research and monitoring activities on pinniped population dynamics, biology, and ecosystem interactions in coastal waters of BC to improve understanding of these issues.

The Committee's study has reaffirmed that conserving and sustaining salmon populations means taking bold action on all fronts, putting the rebuilding of salmon populations first. While several of the recommendations point to enhancing existing work, the Government shares the Committee's assessment that Canada should pursue an approach that acknowledges we are at a pivotal moment. DFO will continue to review and improve its existing approaches to conserving and sustaining Pacific salmon, but is also committed, through the PSSI, to do things differently, engaging in new work and taking bold measures, to help Pacific salmon rebound.

Once again, on behalf of the Government of Canada, I would like to thank the members of the Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans for their diligence and commitment in studying and providing recommendations for addressing Pacific salmon declines. DFO is committed to ensuring that the recommendations within our mandate are actioned in a timely and comprehensive manner.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'J.M.', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Honourable Joyce Murray, P.C., M.P.  
Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard