

Fraser Sockeye fishery deemed sustainable, but critics disagree

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The Fraser River Sockeye Salmon fishery was certified as sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council Friday, but conservation groups called the certification misleading to consumers.



The certification review, conducted by an independent assessor, was “a very thorough scientific process,” said Kerry Koughlin, the MSC’s regional director for the Americas, in defence of the decision.

The certification report lists 17 conditions the fishery must meet, including continued improvement of the sockeye runs and provisions to protect and rebuild both the Sakinaw and Cultus salmon populations — considered endangered by conservationists.

If conditions are not met, Koughlin noted, the fishery will lose the certification.

Also, the report mandates yearly audits to track compliance, which “set the stage for significant fishery improvement,” she said.

The MSC certification can translate into significant economic benefits for a fishery. “Some fisheries see a price premium because MSC-certified seafood is very much in demand,” Koughlin said. Others have to obtain the certification just to be able to sell their catch.

Koughlin said the MSC’s recommendations have helped other fisheries improve their practices and health, but conservationists say some of the fish in the Fraser River Sockeye fishery are endangered.

The fishery comprises genetic groupings or populations of fish that spawn in specific streams and lakes within the Fraser watershed.

Aaron Hill, an ecologist with the Watershed Watch Salmon Society, said some of those populations are critically endangered, meaning the lakes and streams where the endangered fish spawn could wind up with no sockeye salmon — even though there are still seemingly plenty of sockeye in the Fraser.

“We’re hemorrhaging biological diversity among the Fraser River Sockeye ... and we’re continuing to harvest these endangered stock,” Hill said.

“There are no sockeye salmon stocks that are officially listed as endangered under the Species at Risk act in Canada,” said Koughlin.

Both the Sakinaw Lake and Cultus Lake sockeye populations were designated as endangered in Canada in 2002 by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife, an independent group of scientists and wildlife experts. But neither is listed on the Canadian government’s species-at-risk registry.

Hill explained that when there are fewer populations contributing to the fishery, the entire fishery becomes less stable and prone to wild fluctuations.

“That’s what happened last year,” he said, referring to the historically low numbers of sockeye that returned to the Fraser to spawn in 2009.

In order to safeguard endangered sockeye populations, Hill said, fewer fish should be caught in the ocean, when they are all migrating together, and fishing in the Fraser should be moved farther upstream. “ You can catch them closer to the spawning grounds and so you’re not catching a whole bunch of different populations,” but targeting those populations that can sustain commercial fishing, Hill said.