

SALMON COMMITTEE OF THE PACIFIC MARINE CONSERVATION CAUCUS
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July 15, 2014

Susan Farlinger
Regional Director General – Pacific Region
Fisheries and Oceans Canada

Dear Ms. Farlinger,

Marine Conservation Caucus member organizations have recently learned that DFO is considering a request by the North Coast-Skeena First Nations Stewardship Society (NCFNSS), representing a number of Tsimshian bands on the north coast and lower Skeena, to allow the use of gillnets in inland demonstration fisheries on the lower Skeena in 2014 under a scientific license. While being billed by DFO as an experimental “tangle tooth net” fishery meant to test feasibility for future years, this proposed fishery would nevertheless be a significant departure from a policy that has been in place and supported by First Nations, the Skeena recreational sector, and ENGOs for over thirty years. Moreover, the proposal is being put forward with a troubling lack of transparency, consultation, due process, and scientific rigour.

This proposal is not in the 2014 fishing plan. The NCFNSS and DFO appear to be fast tracking this proposal, skirting the province-wide advisory process at the last minute, and without debate. The MCC salmon committee has not been consulted through the Integrated Harvest Planning Committee process and other Skeena First Nations report that they have not seen the proposal or been consulted, aside from the cursory information first presented on the July 9, 2014 in-season conference call. On that call, DFO officials were not able to answer basic questions regarding study design, including gear specifications, sampling parameters, locations, duration, and use of experimental controls. If a written proposal has been developed DFO needs to share it with First Nations and stakeholders for review and comment prior to making a decision on the proposal. Will this happen?

If DFO is considering the NCFNSS proposal under the guise of research using a scientific license, surely the proposal should be designed to produce scientifically defensible results that would withstand peer review. DFO told First Nations and stakeholders on July 9th that the research results would be reviewed in next year’s IHPC process. If the study results are to make a useful contribution to post-season discussions, its objectives must be discussed with the SFC and stakeholders, and its design must be reviewed and approved by independent experts. A demonstration fishery in 2014 that fails to meet these tests will not be scientifically defensible nor contribute to constructive discussion in 2014/15.

Can DFO confirm that independent experts and/or regional DFO science staff will vet this proposal?

In the absence of a written proposal that includes sound study design and other specifications warranted in a scientific fishery, it is impossible to determine how this exercise will differ from other gillnet fisheries. While very supportive of inland demonstration fisheries employing highly selective fishing gear, the MCC salmon committee is opposed to any change in regulations that would permit gillnets to be used in inland demonstration fisheries on the Skeena. Gillnets are cheaper, easier to use, accessible to anyone, and can be deployed anywhere. Hence, they are more difficult to manage, monitor and enforce. If one fishery is allowed to return to using gillnets, how

will DFO be able to deny other fishermen participating in inland demonstration fisheries elsewhere on the Skeena from using them, regardless of whether a scientific license is used?

In 1992 Skeena First Nations instituted a revolutionary management regime that required all commercial inland demonstration fisheries on the mainstem Skeena, Kitwancool River, Babine River, and Babine Lake to be harvested by means other than gillnets. The MCC salmon committee strongly supports the inland fisheries that have developed since then where sockeye and pink salmon are harvested by beach seine, dipnet, fish wheel, and "pocket" seine boats. Gillnets were recognized as being non-selective for species such as steelhead, coho, and chinook due to high mortality rates for discarded fish, and a significant but undocumented "drop-out" component where fish drop out of the net before the net is brought aboard. Studies have shown that salmon that "drop-out" of gillnets suffer high long-term mortality.

Recent research by UBC and Carleton University has shown salmon caught and released in the lower Fraser - where they are acclimatizing to freshwater - suffer high rates of long-term mortality if not carefully handled or "scarred" during release. The proposed fishery will take place in a similar environment on the Skeena.

There is little scientifically defensible information on the number of bycatch species that may be encountered in this proposed gillnet fishery, the long-term mortality associated with drop-outs from the "small mesh" gillnet, or the long-term mortality from catching and releasing fish by gillnet in the lower river. Without a sound study design employing experimental controls, the results will not be useful in evaluating the selectivity of the proposed fishery in relation to the other gear types currently in use in inland demonstration fisheries.

Allowing this new gillnet fishery would also call into question the Department's commitment to meeting MSC conditions, which require improvements in selective fishing. This fishery is also contradictory to DFO's Selective Fishing Policy, which states that priority access will be given to fishers using methods known to significantly reduce mortality on bycatch.

We look forward to a prompt reply to our concerns and questions in this matter.
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Craig Orr". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Craig Orr, Ph.D.
Chair, Marine Conservation Caucus

CC: Hon. Gail Shea, Kevin Stringer, Dan Cody, Rebecca Reid, Mel Kotyk, Sandra Davies, Stu Barnes, Walter Joseph, Mark Cleveland, Donna MacIntyre