

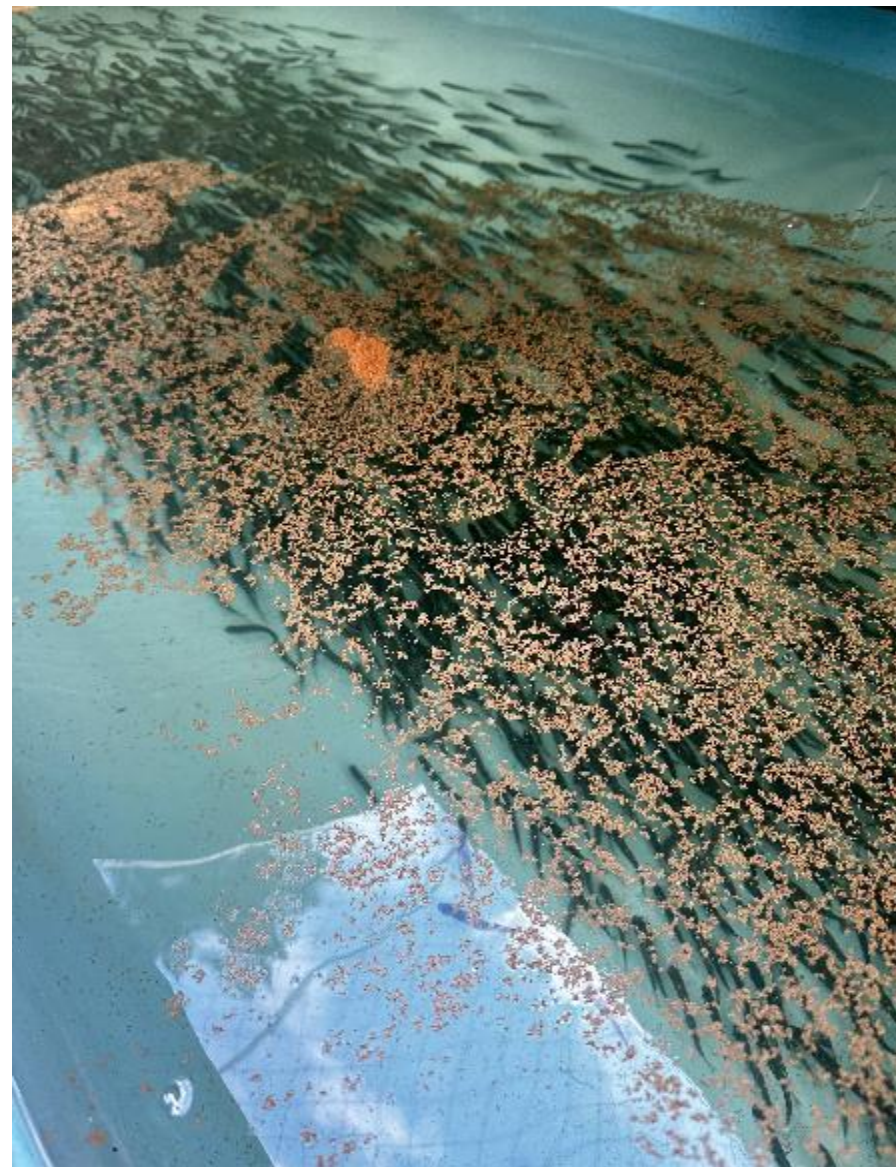


Evaluation of the Pacific Salmon Strategy Initiative

Final Report

February 2025

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Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and the Canadian Coast Guard, 2025
Cat. No. Fs23-756/2024E-PDF
ISBN 978-0-660-74590-9



Feeding of juvenile Pacific salmon at Capilano River Hatchery

Photo Credit: Ashwini Canagaratnam

Evaluation context

Evaluation context

This report presents the findings of the Evaluation of the Pacific Salmon Strategy Initiative (PSSI) conducted by the Evaluation Division at Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) in accordance with the Departmental Evaluation Plan. The evaluation complies with the Treasury Board Policy on Results and meets the obligations of the *Financial Administration Act*.

Evaluation scope and objectives

The evaluation was designed to be forward-looking and identify possible improvements for future Pacific salmon programming to address targeted requests for information from senior management. The evaluation assessed whether aspects of PSSI delivery could be improved, including alignment with First Nations and stakeholders, the Salmonid Enhancement Program (SEP), and the management and delivery of British Columbia Salmon Restoration and Innovation Fund (BCSRIF) projects funded under the PSSI. It also followed up on the status of the Management Action Plan (MAP) in response to five recommendations made in the [2022 Evaluation of DFO’s Activities in Support of Pacific Salmon](#). The evaluation covered fiscal years 2021-22 to 2023-24 and was inclusive of DFO’s Pacific Region.

Evaluation questions

This evaluation was intended to assess the implementation of the PSSI, and as such, was not designed to assess the achievement of its expected outcomes. Consequently, based on the specific information needs of senior management, the evaluation was scoped to examine only the following questions:

1. Are there aspects of PSSI delivery that could be improved?
2. Have BCSRIF projects funded under the PSSI contributed to the Department’s strategic direction and vision for Pacific salmon?
3. Has the Department addressed the recommendations from the 2022 Evaluation of DFO’s Activities in Support of Pacific Salmon through the PSSI?

Data collection methods

Data was collected from multiple lines of evidence to answer the evaluation questions, as depicted below. To mitigate any methodological challenges or limitations where possible, collected evidence was triangulated to decrease potential limitations with any one method, to develop the overall findings, and to ensure that considerations were based on objective and documented evidence. This report contains photos taken by the evaluation team during site visits.



27 interviews with First Nations, internal and external stakeholders



Data analysis of 61 BCSRIF applications assessed by the program as of May 2024



Guided site visits to three BCSRIF projects and three SEP hatcheries across Vancouver



Review of over 135 internal and external documents



Literature review of over 40 internal and external publications

The evaluation also complemented and drew from internal review exercises conducted in 2023-24. For instance, in 2023, an internal mid-term review (MTR) of the PSSI assessed if DFO was meeting commitments to address Pacific salmon declines and broader programming. The evaluation team met with program staff and a consultant who led the MTR to understand their objectives and findings.



Program profile

PSSI profile

The PSSI is a five-year initiative launched in June 2021 with the goal of stemming declines in Pacific salmon and rebuilding priority stocks to sustainable levels. The PSSI aims to achieve the following three outcomes: 1) restore vulnerable populations of Pacific salmon and their habitat, 2) support sustainable fishing opportunities and reduce impacts on vulnerable stocks, and 3) build capacity and work with partners to achieve better outcomes for Pacific salmon. The PSSI builds upon initiatives such as DFO’s response to Cohen Commission recommendations, as well as the Wild Salmon Policy 2018-2022 Implementation Plan, BCSRIF, Coastal Restoration Fund¹, Salmon Allocation Policy review, Pacific Salmon Treaty, and the renewed *Fisheries Act*.

The PSSI is implemented through four key pillars: Conservation and Stewardship, Salmon Enhancement, Harvest Transformation, and Integration and Collaboration. Together, the pillars work to strengthen science and habitat restoration, stabilize and grow salmon populations, create sustainable and reliable fisheries, and deepen communication and coordination with First Nations and stakeholders. The PSSI is composed of 24 initiatives and 48 sub-initiatives that span a series of immediate and long-term actions across multiple regional and national DFO branches, as well as new policies and programs.

Within Pacific Region, the PSSI Secretariat manages the implementation of the PSSI both internally, in collaboration with regional and national components of DFO programs, and externally, in collaboration with a wide range of First Nations and stakeholders, including the British Columbia (B.C.) and Yukon governments, industry in the commercial and recreational harvest sector, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that play a role in the protection of Pacific salmon stocks, habitats, and ecosystems. The table below illustrates PSSI actual and planned spending between 2021-22 and 2024-25 (Table 1).

BCSRIF profile

The BCSRIF is a contribution program funded jointly by the federal government and the Province of B.C. It was established in 2019 as one of three Fisheries Funds² under the Fish and Seafood Sector program. Budget 2021 committed an additional \$100 million to expand the BCSRIF, bringing Canada’s total contribution to \$200 million over seven years. BCSRIF was extended and realigned under the PSSI to support projects until March 31, 2026.

BCSRIF investments made under the PSSI constitute Phase 2 of the fund, which provides financial support for projects in B.C. that protect and restore priority wild fish stocks, such as salmon, and support the fish and seafood harvesting, processing or aquaculture sectors.

Table 1: PSSI Financial Information by Vote (as of Oct 10, 2024)

	2021-22 Expenditures	2022-23 Expenditures	2023-24 Expenditures	2024-25 Budget	4-Year Total by Vote
Vote 1: Program Operations	\$ 9,828,344	\$ 27,356,956	\$ 50,526,661	\$ 59,792,946	\$ 147,504,907
Vote 5: Capital	\$ 492,540	\$ 8,891,830	\$ 13,501,531	\$ 62,953,703	\$ 85,839,604
Vote 10: Grants & Contributions (Gs&Cs)	-	\$ 12,052,552	\$ 78,796,958	\$ 65,215,015	\$ 156,064,525
Four-year total:					\$ 389,409,036

1. The Coastal Restoration Fund was renewed and expanded in 2022 as the Aquatic Ecosystems Restoration Fund.
2. The Fisheries Funds are three regional contribution programs funded jointly by federal, provincial, and territorial governments. Additional information is available through the [2023 Evaluation of the Fisheries Funds](#), which included BCSRIF activities between 2019-20 and 2020-21.

Evaluation Finding: Delivery

FINDING: Overall, the delivery of the PSSI has been positive despite early challenges with implementation. All interviewees expressed a need to continue to support Pacific salmon programming; however, external interviewees expressed differing views regarding what role DFO should play in managing Pacific salmon. Many internal and external interviewees indicated that PSSI delivery could be improved by further mobilizing external partnerships.

The PSSI is playing a necessary role in the management of Pacific salmon

Despite implementation delays at the onset of the PSSI (e.g., due to delays obtaining expenditure authorities), interviewees noted that delivery has been continuously improving and that the PSSI pillars were designed to touch on all elements of salmon rebuilding. External interviewees and site visit tour guides further stated that open dialogue with DFO staff, particularly staff from the Habitat Restoration Centre of Expertise, BCSRIF, and SEP, has facilitated PSSI delivery (Box 1).

All interviewees expressed a need to continue to support Pacific salmon programming, recognizing that the Government of Canada is well-suited to provide an outcomes-based approach to Pacific salmon rebuilding. External interviewees expressed various views about what role DFO should play in Pacific salmon management. For instance, a few noted that DFO's role should be that of a partner of First Nation, provincial and territorial governments as well as an enabler of external stakeholders' activities. Others indicated that DFO should focus on conservation initiatives and effective enforcement of conservation and protection regulations.

Box 1. SEP delivery

Internal interviewees and site visit guides expressed positive feedback for the work of SEP community advisors staffed under the PSSI. SEP hatchery activities visited by the evaluation team were reported to be going well as technical and capacity improvements are realized through PSSI funding. Overall, the evaluation found that the SEP could benefit from additional guidance for stock prioritization work, as will be provided through the integrated salmon planning framework discussed on page 8.



Nicomeckl Hatchery

Photo credit: Ashwini Canagaratnam

Mobilizing external partnerships to achieve outcomes

Many internal and external interviewees expressed a desire to shift the PSSI towards a delivery model that further leverages external partnerships. Building on the success of work currently being done with external partners, it was suggested that this shift could involve considering innovative external delivery practices and funding approaches, such as moving from spending on program operations towards contracting external work and increasing grants and contributions (Gs&Cs) spending. Sustainable conservation finance arrangements, such as the Project Finance for Permanence (PFP) model,³ could also be considered as alternative funding models.

Given the breadth and scope of Pacific salmon rebuilding work, the evaluation found that it is important for DFO to involve First Nations and stakeholders based on their expertise and operational flexibility. For instance, interviewees suggested leveraging the scientific expertise of external partners and NGOs. Likewise, it was suggested that funding mechanisms can be implemented to disperse resources externally during extreme environmental events impacting Pacific salmon. Such mechanisms would allow DFO to direct funding towards response efforts where and as needed, reduce associated and unexpected internal workloads, and better position the Department to respond to extreme environmental impacts on Pacific salmon. The MTR similarly identified opportunities for the Department to consider where strategic external partnerships can be leveraged to expand program outcomes. This included providing partners with targeted funding to advance local habitat restoration projects and respond to extreme environmental events.

3. Since 2007, the PFP model receives government and private funding to support large-scale conservation in the Marine Protected Area Network and Great Bear Rainforest.

Evaluation Finding: BCSRIF

FINDING: BCSRIF projects funded under the PSSI are aiming to contribute to Pacific salmon restoration. Phase 2 of the BCSRIF is performing well despite initial delays with approval processes.

BCSRIF projects funded under the PSSI are aiming to contribute to salmon restoration

Under PSSI's Conservation and Stewardship Pillar, BCSRIF Phase 2 projects are taking action to improve the restoration of priority Pacific salmon populations and their ecosystems (Box 2). The evaluation reviewed 62 BCSRIF project applications that were recommended for funding and assessed against funding priorities related to salmon habitat and salmon ecosystems as of May 2024. Many BCSRIF Phase 2 projects aim to address priorities related to salmon ecosystems (57%), salmon habitat (32%) and sustainable fisheries (11%). Of those reviewed, 61 projects also contained information indicating how projects are aiming to contribute to priority salmon stocks, climate change impacts to salmon as well as meet DFO Ministerial mandate commitments:

- 93%** A majority of BCSRIF Phase 2 funded projects (93%) aim to address priority salmon stocks.
- 15%** A few BCSRIF Phase 2 funded projects (15%) aim to focus on climate change adaptation measures for salmon stocks and aquatic ecosystems.
- 92%** A majority of BCSRIF Phase 2 funded projects (92%) aim to meet DFO's Ministerial commitment to work with provincial and territorial authorities, Indigenous partners, fishing (n=61) and stewardship organizations and implicated communities to implement the PSSI.

Projects funded through the PSSI are performing well despite initial delays with Phase 2

Delays at the onset of Phase 2 were due to the increased approvals required when working with a provincial counterpart. These resulted in Phase 2 projects being deferred to 2023-24. Nevertheless, interviewees and site visit guides indicated that the BCSRIF is a well-performing program, particularly as it has provided funds directly to groups and allowed the federal and B.C. governments to work together. The strength of the provincial-federal partnership was highlighted as a positive and facilitating factor.

BCSRIF program officials are responding to the recommendations and MAP developed through the 2023 Evaluation of the Fisheries Funds. While no further improvements were identified through the current evaluation, interviewees noted that future iterations of the BCSRIF will likely require increased Indigenous participation through a trilateral governance structure to ensure alignment with partners, as further discussed on page 7.

Box 2. Better outcomes for Pacific salmon

Through site visits for the evaluation, it was observed how BCSRIF funding has enabled collaboration among a network of provincial, municipal, academic, NGO, First Nations and community partners working towards better outcomes for Pacific salmon. In one example, funding delivered through Resilient Waters, a BCSRIF-funded project on MakeWay's Shared Platform, is supporting research into alternative flood control infrastructure on the Coquitlam River in $\lambda\acute{e}x\acute{a}t\acute{e}m$ Regional Park (Colony Farm Regional Park). These innovative floodgates are improving the passage of juvenile salmon to previously inaccessible overwintering habitat in the Lower Fraser and advancing best practices for the application of fish friendly flood control infrastructure in other regions.



A jetty breach from the Fraser River Estuary
Salmon Habitat Restoration Project
Photo Credit: Ashwini Canagaratnam

Evaluation Finding: Alignment

FINDING: The diversity of external views on issues affecting Pacific salmon creates complexity, making it difficult for the Department to achieve alignment between PSSI and external priorities. For future programming, external interviewees suggested that alignment could be improved by providing First Nations and stakeholders the opportunity to contribute to PSSI planning processes.

Aligning PSSI and external priorities is complex

External interviewees were divided on whether their priorities aligned with DFO's strategic direction and vision. While there is some alignment between DFO and external priorities on specific pillar activities, the overall approach to implementation varies significantly among stakeholders and partners. First Nations, provincial and territorial governments, industry and NGOs are motivated to protect Pacific salmon for various reasons (e.g., food, social, and ceremonial fishing practices) and through various approaches (e.g., via establishing fishery closures and/or share-based management approaches to commercial fisheries).

It would be difficult for the Department to achieve alignment on DFO's strategic direction and vision for Pacific salmon due to the broad spectrum of external views and priorities. This poses a challenge wherein improving alignment with certain First Nations, stakeholders or partners on specific pillar activities, for example, by placing a greater emphasis on conservation activities, could lead to distancing from others.

Many external interviewees indicated that a lack of clarity regarding the DFO vision for Pacific salmon and the PSSI implementation strategy contributes to challenges in achieving alignment. Sharing a clear implementation plan that outlines how the various pillar objectives are being pursued and support Pacific salmon outcomes would help enhance alignment, as further discussed on page 8.

External input to PSSI planning processes may encourage alignment

Many internal interviewees expressed that PSSI activities are only somewhat aligned with First Nation and stakeholder priorities, due in part to a lack of external input into the design of the PSSI. Likewise, many external interviewees noted that a lack of input during the early decision-making stages of the PSSI limited collaboration and partnership.

To increase ongoing alignment, external interviewees expressed a desire to provide input to PSSI planning processes. DFO could seek and integrate feedback into future iterations of the PSSI, signaling that strong partnerships are key to achieving successful PSSI outcomes. Increasing opportunities for external participation in planning processes may also foster transparency and trust.



Pacific salmon at Capilano River Hatchery / Photo Credit: Annette Kattackal

Evaluation Finding: Alignment (continued)

FINDING: The establishment of trilateral governance structures between the Government of Canada, the Province of B.C. and First Nations groups, as applied elsewhere by DFO and other federal departments, was identified by some internal interviewees and many external interviewees as an important consideration to increase alignment.

External interviewees expressed a desire for trilateral governance structures to improve alignment

First Nation and stakeholder alignment, engagement, and collaboration could be further strengthened through the implementation of government-to-government-to-government collaborative models, otherwise known as trilateral governance models, with the Province of B.C. and First Nations. Some internal interviewees and many external interviewees suggested the implementation of trilateral governance approaches in the spirit of reconciliation and in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. As identified by internally-led reviews, such an approach could serve to oversee the advisory and decision-making processes of all aspects of Pacific salmon stewardship. Implementing a trilateral approach will require a balance between consultation, engagement, and timeliness of service delivery.

Trilateral approaches to co-management have been applied within DFO and in other federal departments, as highlighted by a literature review conducted for this evaluation (Box 3). Recently, DFO established a trilateral governance structure with the Province of B.C. and local First Nations in each of the areas affected by the 2021 atmospheric river event to address impacts on salmonid habitat and populations. In 2024, DFO also announced a trilateral declaration on the urgent need to address wild Pacific salmon populations in B.C. alongside the First Nations Fisheries Council of B.C. and the B.C. Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship.

Box 3. Examples of trilateral governance

The evaluation's literature review highlights two examples of successful trilateral co-management that the Department could examine for future integration on Pacific salmon issues:

- The Okanagan Sockeye Program represents a trilateral collaboration between the Syilx Okanagan Nation Alliance, the Province of B.C., and DFO, which has been ongoing since the 1990s. The program includes a tripartite technical working group that was established to oversee the planning, execution, and evaluation of restoration activities. Within this structure, decisions are made by consensus and required unanimous agreement.
- The Tsilhqot'in Collaborative Emergency Management Agreement represents the first multilateral agreement of its kind. It was signed by the Tsilhqot'in Nation Government, the Province of B.C., and Indigenous Services Canada in 2018 to launch a Joint Command Governance Model with First Nation partners to facilitate decision-making and emergency response processes. Through this agreement, region specific plans have been developed between First Nations and federal, provincial and territorial governments.



Photo credit: Ashwini Canagaratnam

Evaluation Finding: Communication and engagement

FINDING: The PSSI Secretariat took steps to promote communication and engagement within and outside the Department. For future programming, interviewees expressed the importance of transparent communication regarding the PSSI implementation strategy and the promotion of meaningful engagement by considering the capacity (i.e., resources and access to information) of First Nations and stakeholders.

More internal and external communication would be beneficial

DFO Pacific Region senior management noted that the PSSI Secretariat has made positive strides to improve internal and external communication of DFO's strategic direction and vision for Pacific salmon management and animate regional collaboration on Pacific salmon issues. For instance, the launch of engagement on the Pacific Salmon Data Portal resulted in significant external interest and support for further initiatives in this area. Notwithstanding the significant amount of communication that has been carried out with internal and external partners, the evaluation found that more transparency regarding how the Department is implementing DFO's strategic direction and vision for the management of Pacific salmon through the PSSI would help to clarify priorities and outcomes for internal and external interviewees who expressed a desire for detailed communication of PSSI's implementation progress and strategy. Interviewees also perceived that this lack of clarity contributes to siloed departmental activities that limit collaboration and may be affecting PSSI delivery.

Interviewees suggested various improvements as follows:

- communicating a PSSI implementation strategy to increase external and internal collaboration and reduce existing and perceived siloes. The evaluation noted that the Department is developing an integrated salmon planning framework to improve decision making about Pacific salmon management. The framework will also aid the Department in communicating planning decisions externally in a more transparent manner
- providing progress reports and frequent updates through the PSSI website. Reports can emphasize "what we've done" as opposed to focusing on "what we've heard"
- communicating evolving priorities clearly and proactively
- using inclusive wording in PSSI communication to improve cultural connections. For instance, by acknowledging First Nations with a direct relationship to the fish and fishery and using the term "stewardship" rather than "management"

Meaningful engagement requires addressing barriers

The Department used various methods to engage with First Nations and stakeholders on the PSSI, including three rounds of engagement in 2021-2022 following the launch of the PSSI, progress updates on the PSSI website, video campaigns, and the development of the Let's Talk Pacific Salmon platform, which helped DFO gather external feedback across several engagement campaigns. Nevertheless, external interviewees' responses were mixed on whether engagement is going well under the PSSI. Interviewees cited several barriers to meaningful engagement, including engagement fatigue, insufficient information-sharing by DFO, as well as administrative and reporting burdens.

A lack of internal and external capacity and resources to collaborate was also cited. Limited external capacity hinders engagement, particularly amongst First Nations that may struggle to keep up with DFO's engagement requests. Interviewees indicated that additional funding and transparent information-sharing platforms may be required to increase First Nations' and stakeholders' engagement capacity. They also noted the Department can introduce more flexibility into PSSI engagement processes by meeting groups in their preferred format (i.e., in person) to increase participation and improve the productivity of engagement sessions. Internally, DFO may also wish to explore flexible reporting requirements across Gs&Cs programs to increase external capacity for engagement.

Evaluation Finding: Progress on the 2022 Management Action Plan

FINDING: The Department took steps to address all five recommendations from the MAP developed through the 2022 Evaluation of DFO's Activities in Support of Pacific Salmon. The evaluation found that additional improvements could strengthen the recommendations' desired results.

The evaluation found that DFO Pacific Region senior management addressed the five recommendations of the 2022 evaluation as follows:

1. Develop a strategic direction and vision for Pacific salmon

The Department developed a strategic direction and vision for Pacific salmon, which was communicated both internally and externally. However, the findings of this evaluation and the MTR indicate that greater communication of this strategic direction and vision would encourage clarity within the Department and with partners. Work is ongoing to continue to clearly communicate this new vision internally and externally.

2. Implement a coordinated approach for transfer payments that is aligned with the strategic direction and vision for Pacific salmon

Program documents demonstrated that the Department worked towards implementing a coordinated approach for transfer payments. However, internal interviewees were mixed on whether a coordinated approach for Gs&Cs exists and the implementation of the approach is unclear. Further work is required to ensure the overall intent of the recommendation is addressed. Efforts to coordinate broader Pacific salmon Gs&Cs programming will be strengthened with the coordination function that is being led nationally.

3. Implement tools and methodologies to track resources in support of Pacific salmon

The Department developed a financial tracking strategy and a comprehensive report outlining all projects and programs linked to Pacific salmon. Together, these constitute improvements in the Department's ability to track resources in support of Pacific salmon. Nevertheless, internal interviewees expressed that the financial tracking strategy could be strengthened through integration into the Department's financial system.

4. Implement a performance measurement strategy for activities in support of Pacific salmon

The Department developed an interim Pacific Salmon Integrated Results Strategy as well as a logic model for the PSSI in 2021. Efforts are ongoing to develop an updated logic model.

5. Clearly define the governance framework for departmental activities in support of Pacific salmon

The Department developed a PSSI governance framework; however, the findings of this evaluation and the MTR identified that PSSI roles and responsibilities could be strengthened. For instance, accountabilities between the Enhancement and Stewardship Directorates, which carry out SEP activities under PSSI, were found to be dispersed. Work is underway to address governance concerns. Additionally, internal interviewees suggested that governance could be strengthened by creating working-level tables to improve engagement within the Department, creating regional or area-specific bodies to discuss local issues, and obtaining representation of PSSI issues at national headquarters, for instance, through an Assistant Deputy Minister champion.

Considerations

The content below is an amalgamation of evidence gathered on PSSI from multiple data sources, including those from internal and external interviewees. At times, varied and conflicting views were shared across topics including goals and priorities, program delivery, and governance. Overall, the evaluation evidence indicates that the management of the PSSI and future potential Pacific salmon programming could be strengthened with the following four considerations:

1. Mobilizing partners to respond

Further mobilization of First Nation and stakeholder expertise and partnerships would be beneficial for future PSSI delivery, particularly when responding to extreme environmental events impacting Pacific salmon to allow the allocation of resources when and as needed. To this end, DFO could consider shifting away from internal DFO delivery of the PSSI towards innovative external delivery practices and funding approaches. Building on the success of work currently delivered through external partnerships, it is essential that external collaboration and partnerships continue to be mobilized to improve the delivery of the PSSI.

2. Establishing trilateral governance

Aligning the PSSI with external priorities is a complex task due to the diverse views involved in the conservation and rebuilding of Pacific salmon stocks. It is important for the Department to continue building on efforts to enhance trilateral collaboration as a strategic step towards increased alignment with First Nations and stakeholders. For example, establishing trilateral technical working groups to oversee the planning and execution of Pacific salmon rebuilding activities would strengthen alignment. This will require a balance between consultation, engagement, and timeliness of service delivery.

3. Improving communication on PSSI plans and progress

Notwithstanding the significant amount of communication that has been carried out with internal and external partners, there is an opportunity for increased communication and collaboration within and outside the Department to improve transparency and break down existing and/or perceived silos. These changes primarily involve clearly communicating priorities and outcomes that are based on an implementation strategy, thus providing clarity on how various PSSI activities support the vision. More regular updates on implementation plans and progress could also be provided to partners. The integrated salmon planning framework has the potential to provide overarching strategic direction for the conservation and rebuilding of Pacific salmon stocks and guide coordinated action planning within DFO. It is important to prioritize intentional communication of this framework, both within and outside the Department.

4. Building engagement capacity

Although the Department used various methods to engage externally, limited capacity poses a barrier to meaningful engagement and alignment of the PSSI's strategic vision for Pacific salmon, particularly for First Nations. Increasing the capacity and opportunities for First Nations and stakeholders to participate in the engagement process is key.



Capilano River Hatchery / Photo credit: Alejandra Tobar