

Report 2—Sustaining Canada’s Major Fish Stocks—Fisheries and Oceans Canada

What we examined (see Focus of the audit)

This audit focused on whether Fisheries and Oceans Canada had identified and put in place selected key elements needed to manage Canada’s fisheries for conservation and sustainability, such as management planning and the collection and analysis of information about the state of fish stocks and how many fish are caught. To determine this, we looked at the 154 major fish stocks that the Department is responsible for managing.

We also examined the following selected fish stocks in closer detail: geoduck clam; and certain stocks of Greenland halibut, narwhal, bluefin tuna, capelin, chinook salmon, and lobster.

Why we did this audit

This audit is important because healthy fish stocks are necessary for fisheries to continue to provide economic and social benefits to Canadians, including livelihoods in remote Canadian communities. It is critical for Fisheries and Oceans Canada to have a strong fisheries management program in place to ensure sustainable fisheries.

What we concluded

We concluded that Fisheries and Oceans Canada had identified the key elements it needed for fisheries management: Integrated Fisheries Management Plans, scientific surveys, third-party fisheries observer programs, stock assessments, and reference points for establishing stock health. However, the Department had not put these elements in place for all major stocks.

We also concluded that Fisheries and Oceans Canada did not always apply these key planning elements to ensure management decisions for selected fisheries were focused on conservation and sustainable use.

What we found

Planning for sustainable fisheries management

Overall, we found that Fisheries and Oceans Canada had determined which tools and information it needed to plan for the sustainable management of Canada’s major fish stocks. It had identified Integrated Fisheries Management Plans for each stock as its key tool. We found that up-to-date Integrated Fisheries Management Plans were in place for 110 of Canada’s 154 major fish stocks, but were missing or out of date for the remaining 44 major stocks. Further, some of the plans that were in place included vague objectives to measure how well the Department was managing the stocks. We also found that for 12 of the 15 major fish stocks that were in the critical zone and required rebuilding plans, the Department had neither plans nor timelines for developing them.

This is important because the Department requires Integrated Fisheries Management Plans for all major fish stocks—and rebuilding plans for those in the critical zone (where serious harm to the stock is occurring)—in order to manage fisheries sustainably.

- **Fisheries and Oceans Canada had Integrated Fisheries Management Plans for most major fish stocks, but many were outdated or incomplete**

Recommendation. Fisheries and Oceans Canada should set out priorities, targets, and timelines for putting in place Integrated Fisheries Management Plans for all major fish stocks. These should include long-term, specific, measurable objectives, performance reviews, and rebuilding plans for stocks in the critical zone that are still being fished. These plans should also be made publicly accessible.

Gathering, analyzing, and managing information on fish stocks

Overall, we found that Fisheries and Oceans Canada was missing key information needed to manage Canada’s fish stocks sustainably. The Department was not carrying out all of the scientific surveys it had planned, and it did not have adequate controls to ensure that it gathered reliable and up-to-date data from third-party fisheries observers. Further, because of information gaps, the Department was unable to classify all its major stocks as being in the healthy, cautious, or critical zone. The Department’s difficulties in obtaining data were aggravated by aging and incompatible information systems that hindered the sharing of data among regions.

These findings are important because sustainable fisheries management is based on current, reliable monitoring information and scientific analysis of the amount of fish in the ocean and their biological characteristics (such as age, sex, growth, and reproduction), as well as on factors such as changes in ocean temperature.

- **Deficiencies in Fisheries and Oceans Canada’s systems and activities for gathering data on fish stocks resulted in information gaps and quality concerns**

Recommendation. Fisheries and Oceans Canada should review its current scientific survey activities to identify gaps, and adjust its activities to ensure they are fully aligned with departmental priorities.

Recommendation. Fisheries and Oceans Canada should improve controls for third-party fisheries observer programs to ensure sufficient coverage of fishing vessels, timely data, and mitigation of potential or actual conflicts of interest on the part of observer companies.

- **Fisheries and Oceans Canada’s means of classifying the health of fish stocks did not always provide a high degree of certainty**

Recommendation. Fisheries and Oceans Canada should set out priorities and timelines for establishing the reference points at which the major stocks it manages can be considered healthy, in the cautious zone, or in the critical zone.

Recommendation. Fisheries and Oceans Canada should set out priorities and timelines for identifying the measures to be taken if a major stock falls below a certain level, where this has not yet been done, so that sustainable fishing limits can be determined with greater certainty.

Recommendation. For each major fish stock, Fisheries and Oceans Canada should identify the indicators and values that would trigger a full stock assessment earlier than scheduled.

- **Fisheries and Oceans Canada did not have adequate systems to manage information on fisheries**

Recommendation. Fisheries and Oceans Canada should ensure it has allocated adequate resources to develop a system or systems that allow for data availability and comparison to enable more effective and efficient fisheries management.

Case Study: Fisheries and Oceans Canada’s management of Greenland halibut (turbot) stocks

Overall, we found data gaps that increased the uncertainty in assessments of the health of some of the Greenland halibut stocks. We found missing or vague fisheries management objectives, incomplete scientific surveys, and problems with the Department's ability to obtain third-party monitoring data. Further, we found that incompatible information systems caused poor communication among regions.

These findings are important because without this data, Fisheries and Oceans Canada may not have sufficient information to determine stock abundance quantitatively or to manage the Greenland halibut fisheries sustainably. If these management issues are not addressed, Fisheries and Oceans Canada will be limited in its ability to anticipate and prevent declines in Greenland halibut stocks.

- **Information gaps increased the risk of unsustainable fishing for some Greenland halibut stocks**

Recommendation. Fisheries and Oceans Canada should improve coordination between regions so that it can better share the fisheries monitoring information needed to manage the northern and Atlantic Greenland halibut stocks.

Entity Responses to Recommendations

The audited entity agrees with our recommendations, and has responded (see List of Recommendations).

Related Information

Report of the	Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development
Type of product	Performance audit
Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Environment• Natural Resources• Water
Audited entities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fisheries and Oceans Canada
Completion date	29 July 2016
Tabling date	4 October 2016
Related audits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chapter 4—A Study of Managing Fisheries for Sustainability—2011 December Report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development• Chapter 1—Protecting Fish Habitat—2009 Spring Report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development

For more information

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The Commissioner's Comments



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