

Selective Fishing Survey: Preliminary Information: February 7th 2001 Draft only

Interviews were undertaken with individuals from over 40 First Nations communities between June and December 2000. Additional follow-up calls were made in January to clarify information.

The intention was to see how well the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Selective Fisheries program had working in meeting its targets within First Nations communities.

SELECTIVE FISHERIES PROGRAM;

Fisheries and Oceans Canada established a three year program to allow the three main Fisheries Sectors, Commercial, Recreational and First Nations to develop and test alternative technologies so that they would reduce the interception rates on various stocks at risk. Funding was available each year from 1998/99 through 2000/01. The program was extended for an additional year, and will end in 2001/02.

The emphasis was on the Commercial Sector, who in each year have undertaken a number of tests and projects specific to the various gear types, with varying degrees of success. The Recreational sector has undertaken some work, also specific to the technology used in their fisheries. The First Nations fisheries include all of the commercial and recreational fisheries methodologies, as well as some specific to First Nations undertaking Section 35 fisheries. Since many First Nations fisheries are in-river, a number of Selective technologies, including fishwheels, beach seining and traps, were already familiar to First Nations, and these projects have been primarily undertaken in this sector.

Implementation Stage

Fisheries and Oceans is faced with a management problem.. The various Selective Fishing methodologies tested through these projects must now be implemented across all the fisheries. Each of the Commercial gear types has undertaken some work which improves their ability to fish selectively, and the next steps appear to be implementation, enforcement and compliance with the new rules. The same is true for the Recreational sector.

First Nations Issues: Going into the Final Year of Selective Fisheries;

Coastal:

The First Nations fisheries cover the complete range of fisheries. First Nations use all commercial gear types, as well as recreational gear to pursue their fisheries. In many coastal First Nations communities the downturn in the fisheries has meant that many vessel-owners have not fished for the last few years, and are unaware of these new requirements. Some experienced fishers have given up their commercial licences, and now use their old gear for community or family Section 35 fisheries.

Coastal First Nations Commercial Harvesters:

Most communities have identified that there are a number, often estimated as the majority, of vessel owners who are not aware of the changes being required for their gear

type. These individuals are experienced fishers, who have managed to stay in the fishery, but have not been trained in new fish handling techniques, have not had access to information about proposed changes in gear which may now be required, and have no access to capital to make changes in their method of harvest.

These individuals are not prepared either technically or financially to begin to use Selective Fishing methods and techniques during their commercial or Section 35 harvest. Interviewees expressed the position that First Nations commercial sector fishers were not considered part of the ‘commercial gear type organizations’ and generally did not participate strongly in those organizations.

First Nations Commercial/Community Interests:

Most First Nations communities feel that they have suffered more from the changes in commercial fisheries than other coastal communities, and that they have fewer options for alternative employment for their members. Many communities have moved to look at other fisheries work, in habitat work, stock assessment, and stock enhancement. They see these opportunities as part of their First Nations interests in fisheries, and look to rebuild stocks as part of the work to stay competitive in the commercial fisheries. For these First Nations, the work done by in-river First Nations, which provides more fish, and therefore more fishing opportunities, promises a better future for their fisheries.

This view of Selective Fisheries, as a way to help fund stock assessment and stock enhancement activities, which will be directed toward an eventual increase in commercial opportunities, is not shared by the Commercial and Recreational sectors.

First Nations Section 35 Harvesters:

These individuals generally do not believe that new Selective Fishing rules apply to their Section 35 fisheries. These individuals include a number of experienced fishers with commercial gear, including those which no longer have Commercial Licences. These individuals generally believe that by giving up their rights to harvest commercially, they do not have to follow any Selective Fisheries guidelines. The statement has been made “ those rules only apply to vessel-owners who are harvesting commercially.”

Interior First Nations:

As the focus on selective fisheries moved in-river, the push to move to Selective Fisheries from the Commercial Sector diminished. Clearly the Commercial Sector was not particularly interested in supporting anything that increased the catch by First Nations involved in Pilot Sales, or any other fishery. In fact the two ‘saltwater’ sectors have strongly opposed some of the obvious next steps – permission for sale of available fish from fishwheels operated by those groups who have held legal commercial fisheries during this period.

With the exception of some “special technologies’ including fishwheels, there has been little or no attention paid to “Selectivity” in the in-river harvest of fish by First Nations. There was little interest in looking at changes in technologies in the drift and set net fisheries, and some assumption that dip net fisheries were already “more selective”.

Where First Nations in-river are involved in stock assessment activities, they are usually actively using various methods for selective interception of fish. The possibility of transference of these activities into some selective harvest has been almost totally ignored.

First Nations Interior Issues around Section 35:

There was virtually no one involved in the survey from the Interior who initially thought that Selective Fishing applied in any way to their community fisheries

On further thought most connected the dots, and discussed the fact that in all the talk about Selective Fisheries and the need to change the harvest methods and timing to avoid stocks of concern, there had been no effort to look at what that might mean for First Nations undertaking in-river fisheries.

Interest was expressed in considering how a set-net fishery could be changed to be more selective, and several unexpected suggestions were made in some of these conversations. Much of the interest centred around the potential to be able to continue to fish in the ‘moving windows’ currently used as in season closures to protect specific vulnerable stocks...there was an obvious set of issues in terms of how these changes might be undertaken, but some strong enthusiasm for looking at these possible areas of gear modification for Section 35 fisheries.

However, when it was suggested that Fisheries and Oceans might find themselves faced with closing or limiting some Section 35 fisheries because there has not been a change in gear, there was universal, strong opposition to the idea that the government could control the fisheries and the gear to limit harvest. There were several responses that could best be described as “explosive” the most recent being from Bill Spenst from the Babine Fishery. (comments in session for First Nations at Selective Fishing Workshop last week)

Susan AB