

From reflection to action: 20 years of Canada's Wild Salmon Policy

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Abstract

Twenty years after its adoption, Canada's Wild Salmon Policy remains a globally significant framework intended to conserve Pacific salmon biodiversity, yet implementation has lagged behind its ambition. Drawing on 10 papers in this Special Collection and discussions at a 2026 workshop of researchers and policy practitioners from Indigenous and federal governments, academia, and the non-profit sector, we synthesize five major themes that define the current state of Policy implementation. These themes highlight the need to invest in monitoring and assessment capacity, modernize decision frameworks for a changing climate, strengthen governance and accountability, integrate ecosystem processes, and advance rights-based co-governance with Indigenous Peoples. Building on these themes, we present 20 consensus recommendations intended to strengthen implementation of the Wild Salmon Policy and improve the long-term conservation and recovery of wild Pacific salmon.

Key words: Pacific salmon, conservation policy, Indigenous co-governance, monitoring and assessment, fisheries management

Introduction

Twenty years after its adoption, Canada's Policy for wild Pacific salmon—commonly known as the Wild Salmon Policy (WSP; DFO 2005)—remains one of the most ambitious efforts globally to embed biodiversity conservation within fisheries resource management. The contributions to this Special Collection (Table 1) reflect a wide range of perspectives on the Policy's design, implementation, and evolving relevance in a period of accelerating ecological and governance change. Collectively, they show that the central challenge facing the WSP is not a lack of ambition, nor lack of appropriate direction. Rather, persistent gaps in monitoring, assessment, governance, and accountability continue to limit implementation at a time when Pacific salmon face growing pressures from climate change, habitat degradation, and other cumulative stressors.

Drawing on insights across the Special Collection contributions, five shared themes emerged regarding the current state of WSP implementation, and the most pressing challenges and opportunities ahead. To build on this foundation, contributors to the Collection, alongside policy practitioners, Indigenous organizations, and other invited participants, convened in April 2026 to reflect on these themes and identify priorities for the future. The workshop moved beyond individual assessments to develop a consensus-driven set of actionable recommendations to strengthen the WSP and its implementation moving forward. The five themes presented below provide the organizing framework for this synthesis and underpin the specific recommendations that follow; their order of presentation does not reflect their relative importance or priority.

Table 1. Summary of Special Collection contributions.

Authors	Topic	Focus	CJFAS doi
Atlas et al.	Sustainable fisheries	Reviewing 20 years of progress towards sustainable fisheries under Canada’s Wild Salmon Policy	10.1139/cjfas-2025-0134
Connors et al.	Data accessibility	Democratizing data to support the implementation of Canada’s Wild Salmon Policy	10.1139/cjfas-2025-0250
Dennert et al.	Policy implementation	Gaps in policy implementation obscure conservation progress after two decades under Canada’s Wild Salmon Policy	10.1139/cjfas-2025-0111
Grant et al.	Status assessment	Best practices for Pacific salmon biological status assessments under Strategy 1 of Canada’s Wild Salmon Policy	10.1139/cjfas-2025-0112
Holt et al.	Decision support tools	Adapting quantitative tools to support the assessment and management of wild Pacific salmon in an era of legislative, environmental, and socio-political change	10.1139/cjfas-2025-0089
Irvine	Policy review	Reflections on Canada’s 2005 Wild Pacific Salmon Policy (WSP) with suggestions going forward	10.1139/cjfas-2024-0410
Lerner et al.	Ecosystem change	Changing oceans, ecosystem effects, and the Wild Salmon Policy	10.1139/cjfas-2025-0114
Price and Moore	Population monitoring	From policy to practice: declines in monitoring and Pacific salmon conservation in Canada	10.1139/cjfas-2025-0123
Whitmore et al.	Genetic assessment	Using lower river genetic stock identification (GSI) and a tributary specific mark-recapture program to estimate genetic unit escapements of Pacific salmon within large river systems	10.1139/cjfas-2025-0287
Wilson et al.	Risk assessment	Using fisheries risk assessment to inform precautionary and collaborative management in a declining Coho Salmon fishery	10.1139/cjfas-2025-0023

Themes

Rebuilding the information foundation for wild salmon conservation and precautionary management

A central and unifying finding across this Collection is that the WSP cannot function as intended without a rebuilt, modernized, and adequately funded information foundation capable of delivering timely assessments of biological status at the scale of Conservation Units (CU), and fishery impact data. [Price and Moore \(2026\)](#) document a decades-long decline in spawner monitoring, leaving nearly half of CUs without sufficient recent data for status assessment, and exposing the risks of relying on indicator streams that may be poorly representative of spawner trends elsewhere. [Connors et al. \(2026\)](#) broaden this finding to demonstrate that delayed reporting, inaccessible datasets, and fragmented biological and habitat information systems leave most CUs with insufficient data to determine biological status, eroding the ability to implement precautionary management. In response to these systemic gaps, [Grant et al. \(2026\)](#) provide a scalable “rapid status” framework that standardizes biological assessment under Strategy 1 of the WSP through automated metrics paired with structured expert review, enabling comparability and annual updates where data exist. [Dennert et al. \(2026\)](#) further argue that population and habitat assessments should be immediately prioritized, and that the Rapid Status Approach should be implemented widely and without delay. [Whitmore et al. \(2026\)](#) address one of the most persistent methodological barriers—estimating escapement in large river systems—by integrating genetic stock identification with mark-recapture (and other) approaches to generate statistically defensible CU- and Genetic Unit (GU)-level abundance time series with known uncertainty, thereby enabling benchmark development where traditional

enumeration has failed. [Irvine \(2025\)](#) stress the need for adequate stable funding to monitor salmon populations and their ecosystems, with findings made readily accessible. Finally, [Atlas et al. \(2026\)](#) demonstrate why these information gaps matter for real-world sustainability outcomes: where annual CU status and CU-specific fishery impact information are available (e.g., Skeena and Nass systems), adaptive in-season management can reduce by-catch risk to vulnerable populations while enabling terminal harvest on healthier CUs. Where such information is missing, conservation risk remains unquantified, and a precautionary approach to management becomes more challenging. Together, these papers converge on a clear conclusion: monitoring, transparent data governance, defensible population abundance estimation, and standardized status assessment are the precondition for precautionary, biodiversity-centred, fisheries management under the WSP. Without rebuilding this information foundation, the policy’s conservation-first commitment cannot be consistently realized.

Integrating ecosystem dynamics into salmon conservation and management

A second core theme is the recognition that conservation of wild Pacific salmon under the WSP must explicitly account for the ecological processes shaping survival across freshwater, estuarine, and marine environments. Several contributions demonstrate that recent salmon declines cannot be understood through abundance trends alone, but instead reflect shifting ecosystem dynamics operating across life stages. [Wilson et al. \(2025\)](#) show that marine productivity regimes associated with warming sea surface temperatures have fundamentally altered rebuilding prospects for Coho Salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*) in British Columbia (BC), while [Irvine \(2025\)](#) highlights warming oceans, freshwater climate extremes,

and density-dependent competition at sea as emerging constraints on recovery. [Lerner et al. \(2026\)](#) further illustrate how novel ecosystem stressors (such as thiamine deficiency complex) can arise from altered food-web dynamics and propagate across life stages, underscoring the need for mechanistic, ecosystem-based, research embedded within Strategy 3 of the Policy. [Connors et al. \(2026\)](#) emphasize that diagnosing limiting factors requires integrating biological status, habitat condition, and broader ecosystem drivers (including climate change) rather than addressing freshwater pressures in isolation. Together, these studies argue that precaution under the WSP depends not only on improved benchmarks or assessment tools, but also on explicitly integrating and/or accounting for ecosystem processes in monitoring, diagnosis, and rebuilding strategies. Safeguarding biodiversity in an era of accelerating climate change can be strengthened by life-cycle-wide monitoring, cross-ecosystem synthesis, and adaptive policy mechanisms that reflect the inseparable nature of freshwater, estuarine, and marine processes and account for ecosystem drivers in monitoring, assessment, and management decisions.

Modernizing assessment and decision frameworks for a non-stationary future

A third unifying theme across the Collection is that fishery yield-based reference-point frameworks grounded in long-term (or historical) conditions are likely insufficient to safeguard salmon biodiversity in a rapidly changing environmental and governance context. [Wilson et al. \(2025\)](#) demonstrate empirically that non-stationary productivity regimes have fundamentally altered rebuilding prospects for Coho on BC's north and central coasts, and that maximum sustainable yield (MSY)-based fishery reference points may lead to overly optimistic status outcomes under climate-driven change, particularly when contrasted with culturally meaningful abundance baselines. This concern about stationary assumptions is echoed by [Holt et al. \(2026\)](#), who describe how both lower and upper biological benchmarks can become non-precautionary or uninformative if they are not updated to reflect shifts in productivity, demographic structure, hatchery influence, and ecological function. [Holt et al. \(2026\)](#) argue for expanded metrics (e.g., body size, fecundity, spatial distribution, genetic diversity, ecosystem function) and simulation-based evaluation of management strategies under climate-driven non-stationarity. [Grant et al. \(2026\)](#) reinforce this need within Strategy 1 of the Policy, recommending formal methodological review of metrics and decision trees, incorporation of demographic and distributional indicators, and explicit guidance to incorporate time-varying productivity and habitat capacity into CU assessments. At finer spatial scales, [Whitmore et al. \(2026\)](#) show that CU-level trends can mask finer scale GU-level declines, underscoring the need for nested assessment scales and caution against overly aggregated benchmarks. The fisheries implications are made explicit by [Atlas et al. \(2026\)](#), who note that even where catch-conservation trade-offs are analytically understood, failure to align harvest strategies with updated CU-specific benchmarks weakens WSP credibility. Together, these papers argue

that precaution under the WSP cannot solely rely on static MSY-era constructs. Instead, precaution in an era of climate and ecosystem change requires dynamic, multi-metric, multi-scale benchmarks that explicitly account for non-stationarity, demographic change, hatchery genetic risks, and ecosystem objectives. Such benchmarks must be clearly articulated so that they can guide fishery decisions, rebuilding strategies, and integrated strategic planning during periods of uncertainty.

Strengthening governance, accountability, and legal authority

Across the Collection, a consistent conclusion emerges: the WSP's conceptual strength has been undermined by fragmented governance, diffuse accountability, and insufficient legal force. [Dennert et al. \(2026\)](#) argue that the absence of a clearly designated authority within Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO; the agency responsible for implementation) has led to inconsistent coordination, and limited integration across federal, provincial, and Indigenous governments. They also highlight how broad ministerial discretion and the lack of enforceable metrics of success and transparent decision criteria can weaken precautionary, science-based, decision-making. [Connors et al. \(2026\)](#) similarly emphasize that without binding reporting requirements, performance reviews, and legal continuity, the WSP risks remaining aspirational rather than operational. [Atlas et al. \(2026\)](#) demonstrate the practical consequences of these governance gaps in fisheries contexts, where incomplete CU status information and unclear accountability for trade-offs can allow conservation risks to persist despite a conservation-first framework. [Irvine \(2025\)](#) extends this analysis by cautioning that newer Fisheries Act "fish stock" provisions and rebuilding requirements could inadvertently shift focus back toward aggregate Stock Management Units (SMUs) unless CU-specific biological benchmarks and biodiversity objectives are explicitly embedded in assessments of SMUs and remain central in decision-making. As [Holt et al. \(2026\)](#) demonstrate, maintaining those CU-scale objectives depends on modernized, assessment approaches capable of guiding management decisions at a variety of scales, including those relevant for fisheries management (SMU) and conservation (CU). [Irvine \(2025\)](#) also underscores the need for a modernized domestic vision—particularly integrated strategic planning under Strategy 4 of the Policy—to clarify realistic goals and biological targets across CUs and SMUs, expand consideration to all anadromous *Oncorhynchus* species (including Steelhead, *O. mykiss*) across all geographies (including areas of the Canadian Arctic that Pacific salmon are colonizing due to climate change), and address jurisdictional fragmentation that has contributed to policy paralysis. Finally, [Wilson et al. \(2025\)](#) illustrate how cross-jurisdictional governance of fishery harvests (including coordination with Alaska fisheries) is essential when productivity regimes shift, reinforcing that effective precaution depends on coherent decision-making across sectors and borders. Together, these papers make clear that strengthening governance (such as through defined mandates, transparent annual reporting at a variety of spatial scales, enforceable bi-

ological benchmarks, clarified ministerial roles, and durable co-governance structures) may be as critical to WSP success as advances in science or monitoring.

Indigenous governance and rights-based stewardship

A fifth and central theme across the Collection is the recognition that successful implementation of the WSP depends on governance structures that meaningfully reflect Indigenous rights, leadership, and knowledge systems. [Atlas et al. \(2026\)](#) demonstrate how Indigenous-led monitoring programs (such as the Nisga'a fishwheel initiative) alongside in-season management tools like the Tyee Test Fishery, have improved CU-specific information and enabled adaptive fisheries management aligned with conservation-first objectives. [Grant et al. \(2026\)](#) similarly show that robust CU status assessments benefit from iterative expert review processes that include Indigenous Knowledge holders, fostering shared understanding and legitimacy in science-determined status outcomes. [Holt et al. \(2026\)](#) argue more fundamentally that assessment tools themselves must be co-developed to reflect Indigenous Knowledge systems as distinct, place-based, and relational frameworks rather than supplementary inputs to western analytical models. They propose re-envisioning assessment methods in collaborative and inclusive processes that reflect both Indigenous and DFO priorities such as those related to conservation, ecosystem, cultural, and fisheries objectives, bridging Indigenous Knowledge systems and western fisheries science. [Wilson et al. \(2025\)](#) reinforce that precautionary management under non-stationary productivity requires collaborative governance arrangements capable of aligning harvest controls across Indigenous, commercial, recreational, and international sectors. [Connors et al. \(2026\)](#) add that democratizing data while respecting Indigenous data sovereignty is essential to dismantling colonial information structures and enabling equitable participation in decision-making. Finally, [Dennert et al. \(2026\)](#) highlight that without formalized co-governance structures and clearly defined shared authority, implementation will remain inconsistent and vulnerable to political shifts. They recommend respecting and upholding Indigenous leadership through co-governance frameworks to support more effective management, strengthen cultural relevance of decision making, and enable stewardship champions for every CU. Collectively, these papers converge on a core insight: operationalizing the WSP in its third decade requires moving beyond consultation toward accountable and respectful relationships between Indigenous governments and other agencies working to steward salmon, and durable, rights-based collaborations and/or co-governance arrangements that embed Indigenous leadership in monitoring, assessment, strategic planning, and rebuilding for salmon. Doing so is not ancillary to biodiversity conservation; rather, it is foundational to enabling legitimacy, strengthening precaution, and ensuring that CU-based management reflects the social, cultural, ecological, and intergenerational values that the WSP was designed to safeguard.

Opportunities to strengthen the WSP moving forward

Collectively, the themes that emerged across the papers in the Special Collection highlight a consistent message: the conceptual foundations of the WSP remain strong, and perhaps are more relevant today than when the Policy was originally developed. However, the WSP's effectiveness depends on rebuilding its information base, accounting for ecosystem drivers, modernizing decision frameworks, strengthening governance, and advancing Indigenous-led and rights-based stewardship. The Special Collection and emerging themes across it provided the raw material for participants at the April 2026 workshop to reflect on opportunities to strengthen the WSP moving forward and identify specific recommendations for doing so. The recommendations that emerged are grounded primarily in the evidence, themes, and implementation challenges identified across the papers in this Collection. At the same time, workshop discussions drew on participants' lived experience in salmon stewardship, fisheries governance, policy implementation, and conservation practice across multiple regions and governance contexts, broadening several recommendations beyond the specific scope of individual papers. Many of the resulting recommendations echo concerns previously raised by the Cohen Commission of Inquiry into the Decline of Sockeye Salmon in the Fraser River (Cohen 2012), but reflect an additional decade of implementation experience, accelerating ecological change, evolving governance landscapes, and continued erosion of monitoring and assessment capacity. Importantly, these recommendations should not be misinterpreted as emerging from a formal and comprehensive assessment of all aspects of the WSP. Instead, they are a product of the contributions to the Special Collection and the experience and expertise of those that participated in the workshop to reflect on the Policy. We argue that such formal policy reviews, presumably led by DFO, are also an important part of being accountable to the WSP and strengthening the implementation of it moving forward.

Recommendations for strengthening WSP implementation

Rebuilding the information foundation for wild salmon conservation and precautionary management

1. Establish and sustain shared, coordinated, and long-term investments in WSP-centred monitoring and data stewardship as foundational elements of effective salmon conservation and management.
2. Modernize monitoring and data systems by developing, implementing, and normalizing monitoring approaches that incorporate Indigenous Knowledge systems where possible, and leverage new tools and technologies to better characterize and assess salmon biodiversity.
3. Conduct annual Conservation Unit status assessments, using all available, appropriate, and recent data, and ensure they are publicly reported to improve transparency and understanding of trade-offs in decision making.

4. Support and strengthen the sharing of monitoring data that respects Indigenous data sovereignty.

Integrating ecosystem dynamics into salmon conservation and management

5. Develop ecosystem indicators and targeted mechanistic studies that improve understanding of how changing freshwater, estuarine, and marine conditions influence salmon productivity, survival, and resilience.
6. Move ecosystem information from monitoring programs into decision-making by linking ecosystem indicators to Conservation Unit assessments to support precautionary and adaptive management in the face of ecosystem change and uncertainty.
7. Require the sharing of ecosystem information across jurisdictions so that salmon management can respond more effectively to changing environmental conditions.

Modernizing assessment and decision frameworks for a non-stationary future

8. Expand WSP assessment frameworks beyond reliance on yield-based metrics by incorporating demographic, spatial, genetic, ecological, and culturally-meaningful indicators of salmon status and resilience that feed into an adaptive management approach.
9. Develop guidance for ensuring that reference points, harvest decision rules, and stock assessments are robust to climate and ecosystem change.
10. Adopt risk-based approaches (e.g., Boldt et al. 2025) in the provisioning of science advice to help ensure management decisions are robust to uncertainty, and transparent when balancing trade-offs.
11. Pair adaptive management tools with the monitoring capacity needed to detect and respond to ecosystem regime shifts.

Strengthening governance, accountability, and legal authority

12. Create a durable governance home for Wild Salmon Policy implementation that leverages partnerships across governments and rights holders (e.g., the 2024 DFO-BC-First Nations trilateral accord).
13. Restore transparent, regular, and publicly-accessible reporting on Wild Salmon Policy implementation progress and outcomes.
14. Ensure conservation-first and Crown-Indigenous obligations (i.e., Doctrine of Priority) are clearly and transparently accounted for in management decisions.
15. Strengthen the durability, continuity, and impact of Wild Salmon Policy implementation by using it as a foundational organizing framework for investments in science, assessment, and management.
16. Ensure the frameworks used to guide salmon rebuilding and fisheries management decisions explicitly take Conservation Unit-scale biodiversity into account.

Indigenous governance and rights-based stewardship

17. Modernize implementation of the WSP by honouring existing, place-based governance. Build and honour relationships, collaboration protocols, or formal governance agreements that recognize First Nations laws, stewardship responsibilities, harvesting rights, and decision-making authorities, while creating space for collaboration among and between Nations.
18. Establish long-term, predictable funding for First Nations-led salmon stewardship that move beyond short-term proposal cycles and supports monitoring, restoration, and community stewardship priorities.
19. Ensure Indigenous Knowledge systems inform salmon conservation and management through trusted, long-term, relationships and governance processes that support the respectful weaving of Indigenous and western knowledge systems.
20. Respect Indigenous data sovereignty by developing shared data governance agreements and improving coordination among First Nations, DFO, provincial agencies, and other partners to support more integrated salmon conservation and management.

Additional considerations

Workshop participants raised broader questions about whether strengthening implementation alone will be sufficient to ensure the continued relevance of the Wild Salmon Policy. Some of the original policy architects noted the importance of leadership at senior levels of the federal government when the WSP was developed, while workshop discussions also emphasized the need for stronger and more sustained engagement by the Province of BC in its implementation. Renewed leadership across both levels of government may therefore be critical to reimagining and strengthening the WSP moving forward. Several participants noted that some persistent challenges identified throughout the Collection stem from ambiguities and limitations within the Policy itself. In particular, participants questioned whether aspects of the WSP should be revisited or updated to reflect the ecological, governance, and legal changes that have occurred since its adoption in 2005. This includes clarifying areas where the Policy's language, intent, or jurisdictional context has proven difficult to operationalize in practice—such as how to advance implications related to WSP Strategy 2 “Assessment of Habitat Status” without Provincial or Territorial leadership—as well as considering whether the scope of the Policy remains appropriate or should be expanded. Related discussions highlighted the potential value of expanding the WSP to encompass all anadromous Pacific salmonids across their full Canadian range, including steelhead, and extending its geographic scope to northern watersheds such as the Mackenzie, where Pacific salmon are increasingly present. Participants noted that climate-driven range shifts and evolving conservation challenges may warrant broader geographic and taxonomic coverage to ensure the Policy remains relevant in a rapidly changing future.

Workshop discussions also identified scale mismatch as an important consideration not fully captured within any single thematic area. A persistent challenge under the WSP

is navigating the biological, spatial, temporal, and governance scales at which salmon are monitored, assessed, managed, and conserved. These scales range from individual spawning populations and Genetic Units to Conservation Units and Stock Management Units, from local freshwater habitats to broader marine ecosystems, and from annual management decisions to long-term productivity shifts driven by climate change. Transitions across these scales create both challenges and opportunities for data collection and aggregation, status assessment, identification of limiting drivers, management, and policy. Participants noted that moving across scales can both obscure important local variation and reveal broader system-level patterns, raising important questions about what information is lost or gained through aggregation and disaggregation. Advances in analytical approaches and technologies may provide new opportunities to better integrate information across scales and improve decision-making under the WSP. Ultimately, effective implementation will require management frameworks that explicitly acknowledge scale and better align the units of monitoring, assessment, conservation, and fisheries decision-making.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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