

Backgrounder Potential SARA Listing of 12 Fraser River Sockeye Salmon Designatable Units

BC Nature – Background Information for Conservation Response



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Issue Summary

Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) is consulting on the potential listing of 12 Fraser River sockeye salmon (*Oncorhynchus nerka*) “designatable units” (DUs) under the federal *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). A DU is a biologically diverse unit that is discrete (isolated, with little transmission of genetic information from outside the unit and evolutionarily significant having heritable traits not found elsewhere in Canada). The DUs have been assessed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) as either Endangered or Threatened¹. Ten of the 12 DUs are assessed as Endangered and two as Threatened. DFO will ultimately provide advice on whether each DU should be listed under SARA, not listed, or referred to COSEWIC for further assessment. Although each DU will receive an individual listing decision, DFO is conducting engagement collectively because some DUs share overlapping management approaches.

The consultation period is open from **September 9 to November 9, 2026**

¹ COSEWIC is an independent committee of experts responsible for assessing the status of wildlife species in Canada. Assessments incorporate the best available information, including scientific data, community knowledge and Indigenous Knowledge. Under COSEWIC terminology, a Threatened species is one likely to become endangered if the factors leading to decline are not reversed, while an Endangered species faces imminent extirpation or extinction.



Species at Risk Context

- **Status:** Ten DUs are assessed by COSEWIC as Endangered and two as Threatened.
- **Species:** Sockeye salmon (*Oncorhynchus nerka*).
- **Habitat:** The DUs depend on a connected network of freshwater spawning streams, lakes and rearing habitat throughout the upper Fraser River watershed, as well as marine waters. Most populations rear in freshwater lakes for approximately 12–18 months before migrating to sea.

Primary Threats:

DFO identifies several interacting threats, including:

- climate change and severe weather;
- fisheries harvest;
- ecosystem modification;
- landslides; and
- mortality during adult return migration.

Significance: These DUs represent distinct components of Fraser River sockeye biodiversity, with different spawning locations, migration timing and life-history characteristics. Loss of individual DUs would reduce the biological diversity and resilience of Fraser River sockeye as a whole and the broader important ecological, social, and economic benefits they provide.

Geographic Context

- **Location:** The 12 DUs occur across much of the Fraser River watershed, from the Lower Fraser to the Fraser Canyon, Thompson, Cariboo-Chilcotin, upper Fraser and Nechako watersheds. The DFO maps included in the consultation materials show how widely dispersed these DUs are. Early Summer-run populations include spawning areas near Bowron Lake, Taseko Lake, North Barrière River, the Thompson watershed and the Nechako watershed. Summer and Late-run populations include the Quesnel and Horsefly systems, Takla-Trembleur-Stuart lake system, Widgeon Slough, Cultus Lake, Harrison tributaries and Portage Creek near Seton Lake.
- **Ecosystem:** Fraser River sockeye uses interconnected freshwater, riparian, estuarine and marine ecosystems during their life cycle.
- **Habitat:** Key habitats include spawning streams and gravel beds, nursery and rearing lakes, tributaries, migration corridors, the Fraser River estuary and marine migration routes through the Strait of Georgia toward the Gulf of Alaska.
- **Protection Context:** The populations currently only receive some protection under the federal *Fisheries Act*. SARA listing would provide additional legal mechanisms, including prohibitions against killing or harming listed fish, development of a recovery strategy and identification and protection of critical habitat.

Ecological Context

Sockeye salmon connect freshwater and marine ecosystems. Adults return from the ocean carrying marine-derived nutrients into river and lake systems, where salmon support food webs involving aquatic organisms, birds, mammals and riparian ecosystems. The 12 DUs also represent different ecological strategies. Some migrate exceptionally long distances. Early Stuart Sockeye, for example, travel more than 1,000 km to reach spawning areas in the Stuart River system. Population diversity is therefore important not only for sockeye conservation but for maintaining the ecological resilience of the wider Fraser River system.

Conservation Significance

The status of these DUs raises broader conservation concerns extending beyond fisheries management.

Potential conservation considerations for BC Nature include protection and restoration of spawning and rearing habitat; maintenance of riparian ecosystems and water quality; ensuring adequate stream flows and thermal refuges; protection of estuarine habitat; reduction of cumulative habitat impacts; climate change mitigation and adaptation; fisheries impacts on vulnerable populations; and long-term monitoring.

These DUs were assessed under the same or similar status by COSEWIC previously with Cultus-L in 2002, nine in 2017, and two in 2021 (i.e., Momich-ES and Fraser-ES). This indicates the long-term nature and seriousness of the plight and the urgent need for listing these DUs under SARA.

Consultation Context

DFO is asking organizations to provide two principal forms of input:

1. A listing position for any or all of the 12 DUs — List as Assessed, Decline for Listing, or Refer Back to COSEWIC if new information should be considered.
2. Perspectives on mandatory or potential conservation measures that should be undertaken under SARA if listed, or under the *Fisheries Act* if the population is not listed.

References

□ **Fisheries and Oceans Canada. (2026). *Engagement regarding the potential listing of twelve threatened and endangered Fraser River sockeye salmon designatable units under the Species at Risk Act.***

This is the September 9, 2026 consultation letter you received. It sets out the 12 DUs, the consultation questions, and the November 9 deadline.

[Fraser River Sockeye Salmon SARA Consultation – Species at Risk Public Registry](#)

□ **Fisheries and Oceans Canada. (2026). *Information Summary – Sockeye Salmon Designatable Unit 20 (Takla-Trembleur-EStu Population / Early Stuart Sockeye).***

This is one of the species-specific information sheets provided with the consultation. [Fraser River Sockeye Salmon supporting materials](#)

□ **Fisheries and Oceans Canada. (2026). *Information Summary – Fraser River Sockeye Salmon Early Summer-run Designatable Units.***

Covers Bowron-ES, North Barriere-ES, Taseko-ES, Momich-ES and Fraser-ES. [Fraser River Sockeye Salmon supporting materials](#)

□ **Fisheries and Oceans Canada. (2026). *Information Summary – Fraser River Sockeye Salmon Summer- and Late-run Designatable Units.***

Covers Quesnel-S, Takla-Trembleur-Stuart-S, Widgeon River-Type, Cultus-L, Harrison (U/S)-L and Seton-L. [Fraser River Sockeye Salmon supporting materials](#)

□ **Government of Canada. *Species at Risk Public Registry.***

The federal registry contains SARA documents, COSEWIC assessments and status reports, recovery documents, consultation materials and listing information. [Species at Risk Public Registry](#)

□ **Fisheries and Oceans Canada. *Species at Risk Act Listing Policy and Directive for “Do Not List” Advice.*** This explains DFO's listing process, including its default position of recommending listing in accordance with a COSEWIC assessment unless there is a compelling rationale not to do so. [DFO SARA Listing Policy and Directive](#)

□ **Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). *Status assessments and reports for Fraser River Sockeye Salmon.*** The DFO materials note that COSEWIC assessments and status reports form part of the scientific basis for the listing process. [COSEWIC Status Reports](#), [COSEWIC Wildlife Species Assessments – December 2021](#)