

Frequently Asked Questions

Lake Winnipeg Eco-Certification and Fishery Improvement Project

Q - What is Eco-Certification?

A – Eco-certification, also known as Sustainable Fisheries Certification, is a process in which a fishery is assessed against specific standards by a third-party assessment body. Sustainable Fisheries Certification is a response to the global growing demand for sustainable sourced fish products. Manitoba has chosen to use the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) as its certifying body as it is most recognized within domestic and international markets.

An MSC certified sustainable fishery will have these components:

- Fish are harvested from healthy and sustainable fish stocks,
- Fishing occurs in a way that minimizes environmental impact, and
- Effective fisheries management is in place, including compliance with relevant local and international regulations, and can adapt to changing conditions.

Q - Why was the Marine Stewardship Council selected as the measure of certification as there are other certifying bodies?

A – The Marine Stewardship Council certification and its 'blue fish checkmark' logo is the most recognizable and accepted fishery certification in Europe and North America. Most of the commercially harvested fish is sold into North America and Europe where buyers are demanding fish and seafood products from certified sustainable fisheries.

Q – What is the process for eco-certification?

A – There are a number of steps in the process for eco-certification, as follows.

Pre-assessment

Prior to undertaking a full assessment, a pre-assessment is conducted on the fishery to determine the likelihood of achieving full certification. This includes a review of the fish stock assessments, management regime and enforcement and compliance activities. The pre-assessment evaluation will identify strengths and weaknesses in the fishery and may identify deficiencies which would make the fishery ineligible for full certification.

Fisheries Improvement Project (FIP)

If fishers are interested in pursuing certification, the fishery can enter into a FIP. There are three types of FIPs: prospective FIP, basic FIP and comprehensive FIP.

A prospective FIP is a public commitment to work on a comprehensive FIP within the next 12-month period. A basic prospective FIP is an action plan to address some, but not all, deficiencies outlined in the pre-assessment report but would not commit anyone to certification.

A comprehensive FIP includes the creation of an action plan to address the deficiencies outlined in the pre-assessment report toward certification over a number of years. Industry (fishers) must be co-authors of the FIP.

It is important to note that most fish buyers will continue to buy fish from fisheries provided they are actively working on a FIP.

Full Assessment

A full assessment is completed to determine if a fishery meets MSC standards for certification. The assessment is conducted by an independent third party that is approved by Marine Stewardship Council. Overall score based on a broad range of measures must be above 80 to pass. Certification lasts for five years at which time the fishery must choose if it wishes to re-certify and undertake another full assessment.

Annual Audit

Fisheries that have achieved certification require an annual audit. Annual audits are conducted to assess progress to meet agreed-upon conditions and ensure standards are still being met. It also measures performance and compliance to the fisheries management plan including the enforcement plan.

Q – Has a pre-certification assessment been completed for the Lake Winnipeg fishery?

A – Yes, a pre-assessment for the Lake Winnipeg fishery was completed November 2024. Ocean Outcomes was hired spring 2024 to conduct the pre-assessment, and site-visits occurred on March 19 and 20, 2024. A draft report was prepared in April 2024, and finalized in November 2024. It can be found at www.manitobafisheries.com.

Q - What were the results of the Lake Winnipeg pre-certification assessment?

A - The pre-certification assessment results suggest that the Lake Winnipeg fishery is currently unlikely to achieve an unconditional pass or conditional pass against the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) standard as its overall score is below 80.

Q – Which fish stocks are included in pre-certification assessment?

A – There were eight Units of Assessment included, as follows:

North Basin Walleye

South Basin and Channel Walleye

North Basin Sauger

South Basin and Channel Sauger

Four Lake Whitefish stocks in the North Basin

One Lake Whitefish stock in the South Basin

The separation of stocks is based on the difference in growth and maturity rates (Walleye) and differences in genetics and spawning locations (Lake Whitefish). Other fish species are included

in the management plan and they require careful management so they are not overharvested as a result of fishing activity that targets the quota species.

Q – Are these the same stocks that are being considered for certification?

A – All Walleye and Lake Whitefish stocks in Lake Winnipeg are being considered for certification. Sauger is currently not being considered for certification as the market for Sauger is currently not demanding certification. If market demands change, certification for Sauger stocks can be considered later.

Q – Can you provide more information about Fisheries Improvement Projects (FIPs)?

A - A Fisheries Improvement Project, commonly called a FIP, is an action plan to address deficiencies noted in a pre-certification assessment. It is developed cooperatively with government and the industry (fishers). Funding and technical support is available through the Manitoba government. Many markets demanding certified fish will accept fish from fisheries under a FIP. A FIP acts as valid proof that a fishery is on the path towards sustainability and buyers will keep their markets open to such fisheries as long as they maintain their commitment to carrying out the FIP and have a targeted date to achieve full certification.

Q - I have heard that there is mixed support to move towards eco-certification and developing a FIP. How is government addressing this?

A - On December 2, 2024, the Honourable Ian Bushie, Minister of Manitoba Natural Resources and Indigenous Futures, along with Fisheries Branch staff, met with representatives of all Lake Winnipeg Community Licensing Areas (CLAs) in the north basin and channel, as well as two CLAs from the south basin. On December 9, 2024, the Minister and Fisheries Branch staff met with members of the remaining two south basin CLAs. Eleven of 13 CLAs expressed interest in moving forward with a prospective FIP to maintain markets. Two of the CLAs were undecided regarding a prospective FIP and requested more time to consider certification.

Due to the urgency and substantial risk of potential irreversible market loss, and in the interest of the province-wide commercial fishing industry, the Manitoba government has decided to move forward with two prospective FIPs for the Lake Winnipeg fishery – one prospective FIP for north basin walleye and lake whitefish stocks, and one prospective FIP for south basin/channel walleye and lake whitefish stocks. A prospective FIP is a commitment to work together on a comprehensive FIP over the next 12 months.

Q - What are the risks of this approach?

A - There is minimal risk to proceeding with the prospective FIP as it is not a commitment to certification, rather it is a commitment for continued discussions and planning towards certification and it also signals to markets that there is a willingness to work towards certification. The prospective FIP can be withdrawn later if industry support is not in place.

Q – What are the risks of not moving forward with a prospective FIP at this time?

A – In early December 2024, Manitoba’s largest fish purchasers indicated that there is a very real and imminent risk of substantial market loss if there is no progress towards certification in place for the Lake Winnipeg fishery by December 31, 2024. The loss of this multi-million-dollar contract and the continued risk of further market losses is detrimental to the Lake Winnipeg

fishery, and all fisheries who sell to major purchasers. Once a market is lost, it is very difficult to regain that business.

It is uncertain whether a prospective FIP will be enough to hold onto this market; however, it is the only action that government and the industry can take by December 31, 2024, to show its willingness to work together towards certification.

Q – Can certification proceed without support from all fishers?

A – A third party assessment body will not certify a fishery if most fishers and industry is not supportive. There are mechanisms to move forward with certification when certain communities are not supportive, however; the FIP Lead must be able to demonstrate that most fishers and industry are supportive.

Q - Will quotas be reduced as a result of the Fisheries Improvement Project or Eco-Certification?

A – The quota entitlement system in place on Lake Winnipeg and the size (weight) of the quota is established in regulation. There will need to be methods established to manage the total allowable catch (TAC) on Lake Winnipeg. Certification requires that management is reflective of the status of fish stocks – meaning if stocks are declined, management must be adjusted to rebuild stocks for a period of time. It also means if stocks are doing well, harvest may be able to be increased for a period of time. There needs to be a mechanism to adjust harvest when fish stocks are in a state of decline. Options for managing harvest will be a decision for industry (fishers) to make in collaboration with the province through a comprehensive FIP. A comprehensive FIP is implemented over a five-year period allowing for sufficient time to work together on a fisheries management plan.

Q: What are the next steps?

The Manitoba government will register two prospective FIPs by December 31, 2024. Fisheries Branch will also plan follow-up meetings with Lake Winnipeg fishers for early 2025 to continue discussions on ways to improve engagement and work towards certification. The Manitoba government will continue to gauge interest from fishers in moving forward with a comprehensive FIP.