

# Overview of the Peer Review College

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## Introduction

Expert peer review is an integral part of the MSC fishery assessment process. It provides a review of the draft assessment report and is carried out by independent fishery scientists with similar expertise to the assessment team. In order to provide a standardised peer review process and to improve the efficiency of peer review within the fishery assessment process, the MSC has established a 'Peer Review College'. Prior to this development, the peer review process was managed by the Conformity Assessment Body (CAB) conducting each fishery assessment.

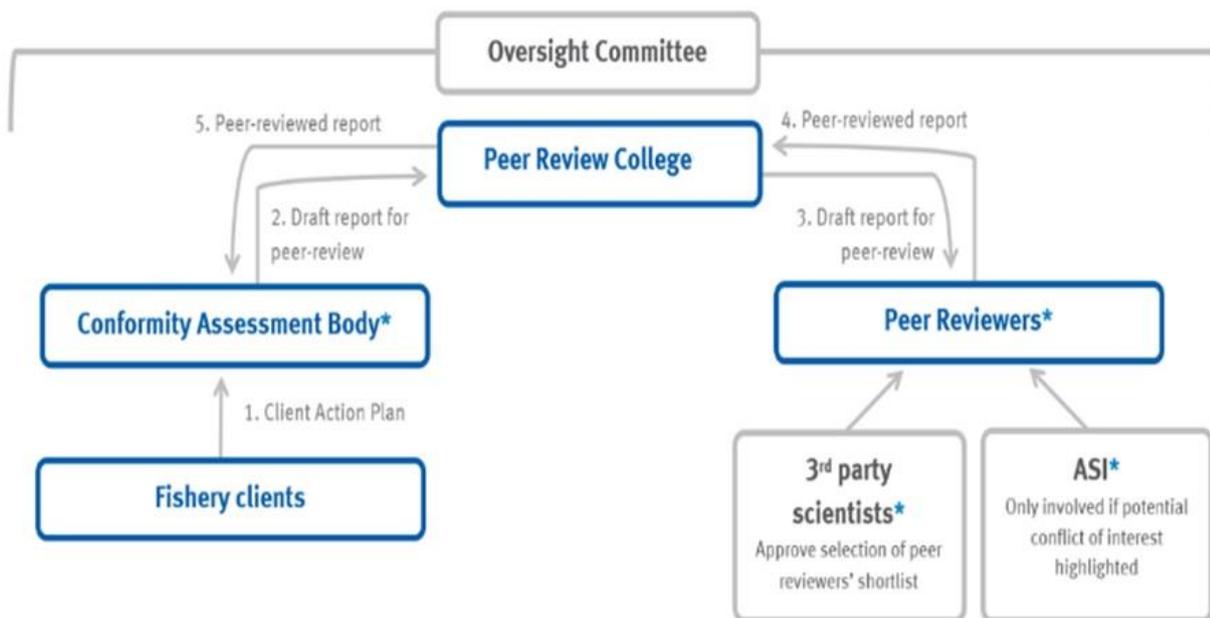
In setting up the Peer Review College the MSC aimed to fulfil the following objectives:

- Increase and maintain the independence and impartiality of peer reviews of fishery assessments
- Improve the credibility of the program by increasing and maintaining the consistency of peer reviews, and the reliability of their use by CABs, stakeholders and independent adjudicators
- Improve the speed and efficiency with which peer reviews are undertaken
- Maintain or reduce the cost of peer reviewers to fishery clients undergoing assessment

The Peer Review College was formally adopted by the MSC Board as a part of the MSC fisheries assessment process in August 2017, following an 18-month pilot phase (see details in the MSC Program Improvements website [here](#)). Fisheries that have entered assessment or reassessment from 1 September 2017 have been required to use the Peer Review College procedures.

## Governance and oversight of the Peer Review College

The Peer Review College is governed by an Oversight Committee, and works with independent third-party scientists, CABs and Assurance Services International (ASI), as illustrated in the figure below.



The MSC's trading arm – [MSCI](#) (Marine Stewardship Council International Ltd.), holds the contracts with key actors involved in this process, including Conformity Assessment Bodies (CABs), peer reviewers and third-party scientists (as indicated ‘\*’ in the figure). MSCI ensures that peer reviewer and third-party scientist fees are paid and that CABs are invoiced for peer reviews undertaken.

A two-person Peer Review College team operates the College on behalf of MSCI, with the primary task of liaising with the CABs and peer reviewers to ensure the provision of suitably qualified peer reviewers for each fishery assessment. Full details of the procedures are given in the PRC Structures and Procedures document. A short summary is given in the following “peer review process” section.

The Peer Review College Oversight Committee comprises up to five representatives of the MSC's [Stakeholder Advisory Council](#) and [Technical Advisory Board](#) (and up to one other independent expert). The Oversight Committee is responsible for approving the College's Structures and Procedures relating to both the team's day-to-day work with the CABs, peer reviewers and third-party scientists, and the quality control of the reviews. The current Oversight Committee members are listed on the MSC website ([here](#)).

The third-party scientists (listed as Peer Review Quality Assessors in the MSC website) are contracted to provide independent expertise at critical decision points in the peer review process, including:

- Confirming the initial admittance of peer reviewers to the College
- Confirming the shortlist of candidate peer reviewers for each fishery in assessment
- Performing 6 monthly quality assurance reviews of peer reviews

[Assurance Services International \(ASI\)](#) is MSC's accreditation body. ASI's specific responsibilities in the Peer Review College system are to check the team's conflict of interest (COI) procedures, review any potential COIs concerning the shortlisting of peer reviewers as raised by stakeholders, and to investigate any stakeholder complaints that are raised against the selection of peer reviewers due to perceived COI.

[Conformity Assessment Bodies \(CABs\)](#) are third-party organisations independent of the MSC that perform assessment services, based on information provided by the client and other stakeholders. CABs have contracts with ASI for their accreditation to provide assessments against the MSC standards, and with fishery clients for each assessment. CABs also contract with MSCI for the Peer Review College to provide peer reviewers. CABs are required to respond in detail to the comments raised by peer reviewers.

Last but not least, the peer reviewers are independent fisheries experts appointed by the College to provide high-quality, unbiased reviews of the CABs' draft fishery assessment reports. As of May 2022, the College has 105 registered peer reviewers, recruited via public invitations issued in 2015, 2018 and 2020. The criteria for admitting peer reviewers to the College are similar to those required for CABs to appoint members to their fishery assessment teams (see PRC Structures & Procedures, Section 1). Peer reviewers must have at least 5 years' experience in fisheries science or management. They are also required to undertake MSC training modules relating to their roles and to sign a Code of Conduct form. This includes commitments to declare any potential COIs with the fishery being assessed, and to act impartially and not allow any commercial, financial or other pressures to compromise their impartiality.

## The peer review process

The peer review process is outlined below, based on the full details in the PRC Structures and Procedures document and in the MSC Fisheries Certification Process Requirements (FCP v2.2). The selection of the peer reviewers begins once the fishery is announced by the CAB. Two peer reviewers are normally selected, each spending two days on the review. An increased number of reviewers or additional days can be allowed for fisheries with more than two species or gear types. A shortlist of peer reviewers is initially selected by the PRC team. This is checked with the candidates to confirm their availability and for any potential conflicts of interest (COIs). The College's third-party scientists are then asked to approve the shortlisted peer reviewers to ensure their experience is relevant to the fishery being assessed. In addition,

CABs are invited to comment at this stage and whilst these comments are taken into account, the final decision on the reviewers to include in the shortlist is taken by the College.

Once the site visit is complete, CABs provide the Peer Review College with the contact details of all the registered stakeholders to enable the College to undertake a 10-day consultation on any potential COIs of the shortlisted peer reviewers. Where preferred, CABs may contact their stakeholders directly at this stage, using the College's consultation form. In either case, any stakeholder comments are sent directly to the College. The final selection of peer reviewers is made by the College, including a consultation with ASI in cases where potential COIs are identified by stakeholders. Stakeholders that provide inputs at this stage are advised of the final decisions taken and have a further opportunity to complain about the decision taken by the College, which triggers a complaint process to review the decision (see PRC Structures & Procedures, Section 3 for further details on this process, and Annex 7 for guidelines on managing COIs).

After the team has completed its scoring of the fishery, the CAB issues a Client & Peer Review Draft Report for review by both the client and the peer reviewers. If the client requests any changes, supporting evidence is required. The client is also required to put together a client action plan to address any conditions which have been raised by the CAB.

At the same time, the selected peer reviewers use a template to give their opinion on the conclusions reached by the fishery assessment team, including the scores assigned to each Performance Indicator, the rationales for those scores, and any conditions that are raised.

The peer reviews are provided anonymously to the CAB, just referred to as 'PR A' and 'PR B'. The CAB then has to explicitly consider the issues raised and incorporate appropriate changes into the next report version, the 'Public Comment Draft Report' (PCDR). The PCDR is the first public report in the certification process (in FCP v2.2) to include full draft scoring and a draft determination of whether the fishery is recommended for certification (the initial Announcement Comment Draft Report includes only approximate scoring ranges). It also includes explicit responses to all stakeholder written and verbal submissions received during the site visit and at other stages prior to the publication of the PCDR, as well as responses to the peer reviewers' comments. CABs must allow stakeholders at least 30 days to comment on the PCDR. Peer reviewers are also requested to review the CAB's responses to their initial reviews and provide further comments if they do not believe that their points have been adequately considered.

The next 'Final Report' version is then published by the CAB after the assessment team has considered the comments received during the PCDR consultation period and revised the report appropriately. The Final Report includes the team's final determination of whether the fishery should be certified. CABs must allow fifteen working days for previously involved stakeholders to file a notice of objection if they do not agree with the determination.

## The peer reviews and quality assurance

From December 2018, the peer reviewers have been requested to use a spreadsheet-based template published by the MSC for their reviews. This requires the peer reviewers to code their comments to show clearly what changes they expect in the report. It also requires the CAB to clearly code the nature of their responses and whether they agree with each comment or not. This approach enables the PRC to monitor the number of discrete comments raised about an assessment (in different categories of 'expectation') and the numbers of each type of CAB response. The coding specifically allows the PRC member to identify any issues that are potentially 'material' in the sense that a new condition could be required (reducing a score below the 80 level), or that the fishery could fail to meet the MSC standard (with a score below the minimum 60 level).

In some cases, peer reviewers have provided only a few comments on the CAB's draft report, which is seen as a thorough and clear assessment against the standard. In other cases, peer reviewers have raised serious concerns with the draft report, leading to many changes being made to the rationales and/or scoring. This can occur at the initial peer review stage, or at the 'follow-up' (PCDR) stage, if the CAB's initial response is seen as insufficient by the reviewer and further comments are raised and only then accepted by the CAB. Sometimes the CAB does not make exactly the same change as suggested by the reviewer, but this is explained in their written response.

In some other cases, peer reviewers raise comments which the CAB does not accept. If these points are raised and rejected again in the 'follow-up' stage, the issue is recognised as a 'persistent disagreement'. Such points can be identified in CAB Final Reports, by checking the codes assigned in the peer review template and noting any explanations given in the CAB responses for cases where they have not accepted a change suggested by the reviewer.

Quality assurance (QA) work on the reviews by the College members is done by the third-party scientists, as outlined in the PRC Structures & Procedures Section 7 and Annex 8. These QA reviews are not done as a formal part of the MSC fishery assessment process and are not intended to influence the assessment outcomes in any way. The aim of the QA work is rather to ensure the consistent high quality of the peer reviews, and to enable risk identification, follow-up monitoring and training for any weaknesses that are observed. Reviews are selected for QA against a set of risk factors, such as the peer reviewer having limited previous experience with the MSC standard or having been identified by the CAB as a source of concern for some reason. Not all peer reviews are included in the QA work (111 reviews were checked in 97 different fisheries included in the Peer Review College programme between the start of full implementation (September 2017) and June 2022).

From July 2022 (on a trial basis), fisheries with persistent disagreements, that could potentially change the outcome of an assessment have also been raised for QA. Following verification by one of the PRC Third Party Experts, cases where the CAB responses are deemed inconsistent with the MSC requirements are passed on to ASI as 'incidents'. Alternatively, cases where the peer reviewer's comments are seen as inappropriate are raised with the reviewer to assist their understanding of the MSC Fisheries Standard.

From the initial pilot phase up to May 2022, the PRC had been requested to provide reviews for 243 CAB assessment processes in total, including 452 'fisheries' as counted by MSC (Principle 1 fish stocks included in an assessment process). This compares approximately to a March 2021 total of 516 such 'fisheries' in the MSC programme (446 certified, 25 suspended and 70 in assessment, 2020-21 MSC Annual Report). Most MSC fishery assessments have now been reviewed by the PRC system.

## Contact Us

If you would like any further information about the Peer Review College, please email the PRC Team (Dr Dan Hoggarth and Freya Mohamed) on [PeerReviewCollege@MSC.org](mailto:PeerReviewCollege@MSC.org).