MSC Fisheries Standard Toolbox: Summary of Proposals

Introduction

This document supports the public consultation on proposed changes to the Fisheries Standard Toolbox ("the Toolbox") and version 3.1 of the Fisheries Standard ("the Standard"), providing an overview of the proposals in both documents. The **consultation is open for 60 days from 10 July 2025**. During this time, stakeholders are invited to review the proposals and provide feedback.

Stakeholders are encouraged to read the following summaries alongside the drafted proposals in the Toolbox and the Standard, where detailed changes are highlighted.

About the Toolbox Review

Version 3.0 of the MSC Fisheries Standard was published on 26 October 2022 following a five-year review, with an amended version (3.1) published in July 2024. Alongside Version 3 of the Standard, MSC introduced a new normative document – the MSC Fisheries Standard Toolbox.

The Toolbox contains a set of mandatory and optional procedures used by assessors when assessing fisheries against Version 3 of the Standard.

Feedback received from stakeholders following implementation highlighted a number of issues, many of which related to the Toolbox. This included feedback that, in some cases, Toolbox requirements may not align with MSC intent. In other cases, requirements are perceived to be unfeasible for many currently certified, high-performing fisheries. The issues raised focused on two mandatory procedures – the Evidence Requirements Framework (ERF) and the Risk-based Framework (RBF).

In July 2024, MSC launched a review of the Toolbox. The goals of this review are to improve the clarity of the ERF and its consistency with the Standard, explore technical and efficiency improvements to the RBF, and to ensure that expectations set for fisheries align with widely adopted science and management practices.

Where to find summaries in this document

To review the proposals for the ERF and associated areas of the Standard, see Page 2.

To review the proposals for prescriptive monitoring thresholds, see Page 6.

To review the proposals for the RBF, see Page 9.

Changes to the Evidence Requirements Framework (ERF)

The ERF is a method for evaluating the information used to assess a fishery's sustainability against the MSC Fisheries Standard. Assessors must use the ERF for specific Performance Indicators within the Standard.

The Toolbox Review has led to significant proposed changes to the ERF's structure and requirements. The MSC is also proposing related changes to sections of the Standard where the ERF is mandatory[1].

What are the proposals and how do they differ from Version 3?

The ERF remains a tool for assessors to evaluate evidence. However, the proposals have refined the scope of the ERF to provide assessors with a clear structure for undertaking and documenting that evaluation. Requirements for fishery performance, such as requirements related to catch monitoring, have been removed and placed back within the Standard (see pg. 6).

1. **The redrafted ERF is a set of procedural requirements for assessors to follow when evaluating evidence.**

To simplify the process of using the ERF, the proposal removes the multi-step scoring system of the original version, which included specific 'trueness' and 'precision' guideposts as benchmarks of information quality. Assessors are still required to directly consider the accuracy of information available about a fishery. To do this, assessors are required to consider the objectivity, relevance, completeness, and consistency of information sources and how any potential bias is mitigated. Through these requirements, the core concepts that define information accuracy are retained in the new proposal without interim guideposts in the ERF.

The consideration of accuracy then informs the team's determination of whether information is adequate to meet the requirements of the Standard. Assessors must document how they used the ERF to arrive at final scoring conclusions.

In the revised ERF, information *accuracy* is a key consideration in the process, which ultimately informs a judgment about the overall *adequacy* of information to meet the scoring guidepost.

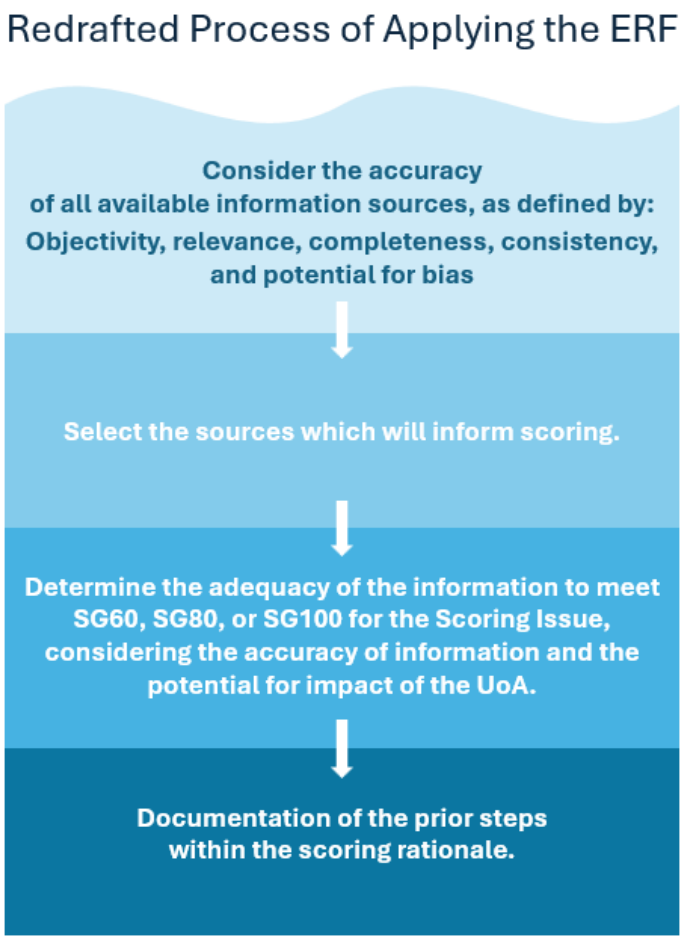
2. **Changes clarify when assessors can apply expert judgement.**

The proposal improves transparency around when assessors should apply their expert judgement, given the wide range of real-world fishery contexts. This proposal recognises

[1] The MSC is proposing changes to the scoring guideposts for the following Performance Indicators in the MSC Fisheries Standard, where the ERF is mandatory: PI 1.2.1 SI e, PI 2.1.2 SI d, PI 2.2.2 SI d, PI 2.1.3 SI a, PI 2.1.3 SI b, PI 2.2.3 SI a, PI 2.3.2 SI c, PI 2.3.3. SI b, and PI 3.2.3 SI c.

that a higher level of accuracy is required where a fishery has a greater potential for impact.

Assessors would be expected to require higher quality information or apply more precaution when scoring fisheries that are likely to have greater impacts and sustainability risks. Conversely, for fisheries where assessors can reasonably justify that there is a lower risk of impact, the team could conclude that lower quality information is still adequate to meet the requirements in the Standard. In all cases, these decisions must be clearly and robustly documented.



Why have changes also been made to the Fisheries Standard?

The ERF is mandatory for several Performance Indicators throughout the Standard.

Assessors must use the ERF to assess fisheries against the Standard and arrive at a scoring outcome for certain Performance Indicators. Changes were made to the language within scoring guideposts in the Standard to ensure consistency and coherence between the two documents.

The scoring guideposts in the Standard for which the ERF is mandatory have been grouped into “information”, “compliance information”, and “shark finning”. The proposed language is consistent within each of these groups.

How have 'information' guideposts changed in the proposal, compared to Version 3?

In Principle 2, assessors must use the ERF to evaluate information about a fishery's impact on (i) in-scope species, (ii) endangered, threatened, and protected (ETP) species and out-of-scope (OOS) species, as well as on (iii) habitats.

In Version 3 of the Standard, a fishery can pass certification without conditions if information is adequate to estimate the fishery's impact with a "high degree of accuracy" at the SG80 level or a "very high degree of accuracy" at the SG100 level. The ERF set out requirements to enable an understanding of whether these guideposts had been met.

The MSC proposes to remove references to "degrees of accuracy" from the scoring guideposts. Instead, assessors will consider accuracy as part of the process within the ERF and the guideposts would centre on **whether the information is "adequate to estimate"** the fishery's impact at SG80 and **"adequate to estimate with a high degree of certainty"** at SG100.

A key part of this proposal is a **new definition for "estimate"** in the context of Principle 2 and Principle 3, which reads**: "to make a numeric approximation based on at least some quantitative data"**. Therefore, a fishery would be required to have at least some quantitative information to enable it to pass at SG80 or would face a condition.

The proposal also seeks to ensure continued accessibility for smaller-scale fisheries and fisheries with less potential for sustainability impacts. This is in response to concerns about their ability to meet the Version 3 requirements and is achieved by allowing more room for the consideration of sustainability risks using expert judgement when scoring.

How have 'compliance information' guideposts in the proposal changed compared to Version 3?

In parts of Principles 2 and 3, the ERF is used to assess information about compliance in fisheries. In Version 3 of the Standard, the guideposts progress through increasing "degrees of accuracy" at the SG80 and SG100 levels, with the ERF setting requirements that enable these guideposts to be met.

The proposal removes the reference to degrees of accuracy, refocusing the SG80 language on **whether information is "adequate to estimate" compliance**. As previously noted, accuracy will still be considered within the ERF. Given the proposed new definition of "estimate", a pass without a condition would require quantitative information about compliance. At SG100, assessors must determine **whether information is "adequate for a detailed understanding"** of fishery compliance.

These changes aim to highlight that assessors will often need to build a picture of compliance in a fishery using both qualitative and quantitative sources of information.

They also seek to acknowledge the complex, sensitive, and often difficult-to-access nature of compliance information - recognising that even some of the world's best monitoring systems may lack highly accurate data on compliance with certain regulations. At the same time, the changes enshrine the need for quantitative compliance data to achieve SG80.

How have shark finning guideposts in the proposal changed compared to Version 3?

The MSC prohibits shark finning in certified fisheries. When scoring Principles 1 and 2, assessors evaluate whether shark finning could be occurring. In Version 3, the ERF requires that either a Fins Naturally Attached (FNA) policy or a non-retention policy is in place and enforced.

The proposal **does not change this requirement for fisheries to have either an FNA or non-retention policy** for all sharks caught. Instead, it adds focus on the **information available** and **compliance** with that policy. This is intended to more clearly reflect the MSC's position that fisheries engaging in shark finning should not be eligible for certification.

The proposed changes bring the requirement for an FNA or non-retention policy into the scoring guidepost explicitly and adds that this policy is "expected to be effective". This replaces the previous requirement for a "high degree of certainty that shark finning is not occurring" in the guidepost.

As part of this change, the proposal explicitly defines what is meant by "expected to be effective". Assessors would only consider a policy as "expected to be effective" where:

- There is **adequate information to estimate compliance**, using the ERF to support this judgement; and
- There is **no objective and verifiable evidence of non-compliance** within the fishery.

The MSC recognizes that FNA or non-retention policies may be newly implemented and potentially introduced at the fishery level as an operational policy, for example in geographical areas without a historical practice of shark finning or where FNA regulations have not been introduced by management agencies. The language of "expected to be effective" is meant to capture a situation where there is credible evidence that a new policy will succeed in excluding shark finning from a fishery. For example, this could be based on a good understanding of the fishery's compliance with other regulations or operational policies, and evidence of successful initial implementation. Even in these circumstances, adequate information is still needed to pass.

Changes to prescriptive monitoring thresholds

What are the proposals?

The proposed changes maintain core expectations for all fisheries. To achieve an information score of **SG80** for (i) in-scope species and (ii) endangered, threatened, and protected species or out-of-scope (ETP/OOS) species, fisheries would need to have:

- **Self-reporting of catch** to relevant management authorities
- **A system enabling independent verification** of that catch data

For **fisheries operating on the high seas** – the areas of the ocean that are outside the jurisdiction of any individual nation – the proposal contains an additional requirement to achieve SG80 for information on ETP/OOS species of at least **20% independent observation** of fishing events. Independent observation refers to either at-sea human observers or electronic monitoring of catch using cameras.

An **exemption** is proposed for vessels using **pole-and-line, troll, or handline** gear on the high seas. These fisheries would not be subject to the 20% threshold but would still be required to meet the self-reporting and verification requirements outlined above.

No prescriptive numerical thresholds for monitoring are proposed at **SG60** or **SG100**.

How have the requirements in the proposal changed compared to Version 3?

In this proposal, prescriptive monitoring thresholds are found at the **SG80** level. where they were previously required at the **SG60** level.

Instead of having prescriptive thresholds like this in place, to reach SG60 assessors will be required to use the ERF to consider whether information is **adequate to broadly understand the impact of the UoA on the relevant species**.

As outlined in the previous section, at **SG80**, the proposals require (1) reporting of catch information to management authorities, and (2) a system to enable the independent verification of that catch data for all fisheries. These would replace the current requirement for independent observation in all fisheries, effectively moving requirements from SG60 in Version 3 to the SG80 level in this proposal.

For **fisheries operating on the high seas**, Version 3 requires independent observation of 30% of fishing events to detect catch of ETP/OOS species. This has been reduced within the proposals to 20%, with new exemptions for vessels using pole-and-line, troll, or handline gear.

At **SG100**, Version 3 requires a catch monitoring system in place that monitored all catch events using independent observation. Under the proposal, assessors will instead need

to consider, using the ERF, whether **information is adequate to estimate the impact on the relevant species with a high degree of certainty.**

Why are these changes being proposed?

Clarification on the role of the Evidence Requirements Framework

In Version 3, the ERF includes both process requirements for assessors and performance requirements for fisheries. The revised ERF sets requirements for assessors only, with performance requirements for fisheries moved to the Standard for clarity.

Ensuring performance expectations reflect widely adopted best practice

Requiring independent verification at SG60 created a de facto pass/fail requirement for fisheries to have an observer or electronic monitoring program in place. It's important that MSC codify best practice correctly in the Standard, and whilst further research has shown observer or electronic monitoring programs are best practice, it was not appropriate to require them at the minimum acceptable level (SG60). Keeping this requirement at SG60 risked excluding many fisheries and undermining the MSC Theory of Change. Shifting the requirement to SG80 maintains the focus on verifying self-reported data, while encouraging improved data collection and providing fisheries time to adopt these context-appropriate verification methods.

At **SG80**, the term *independent verification* offers greater flexibility than the term used in Version 3, *independent observation*. This proposed change would allow for alternative verification methods beyond human observers or electronic monitoring to meet SG80 in some contexts. This avoids requiring observer programs to be implemented in fisheries where these may not be the most appropriate verification method, such as in shore-based shellfish fisheries. In these contexts, shore-based verification methods would be sufficient to reach SG80.

Most fisheries will still require some form of at-sea verification, but this could include, for example, a reference fleet or at-sea research surveys instead of in-situ observation. Assessors would determine whether the system in place is sufficient to verify catch data.

For **fisheries operating on the high seas**, a requirement of 20% observer coverage is widely accepted as a practical minimum – it aligns with many scientific recommendations, reflects growing momentum to increase coverage within Regional Fisheries Management Organisations, and offers a middle ground between data needs and feasibility. There is no single coverage rate that is a silver bullet, since information requirements vary depending on the species encountered and the fishing methods used. However, 20% does represent a credible baseline. The proposed exceptions - such as pole-and-line fisheries - reflect current regulatory norms and the widely accepted lower risk profile of certain gear types, whilst still incentivising the implementation of systems to verify catch data.

At **SG100**, the proposal acknowledges that in some contexts monitoring at rates less than 100% can still be effective at providing adequate information for a high degree of certainty about impacts. For example, with electronic monitoring, both camera coverage and review rates must be considered, with a 100% review rate rare outside of trials. The proposal requires assessors to consider whether the monitoring provides adequate information for a high degree of certainty about a fishery's impacts, considering the nature of the fishery as part of that determination rather than applying rigid rules.

Changes to the Risk-based Framework (RBF)

The RBF is a framework of mandatory tools used to assess and score fisheries in data-deficient scenarios against specific Performance Indicators. The tools include the Consequence Analysis, the Productivity Susceptibility Analysis, the Consequence Spatial Analysis and the Scale Intensity Consequence Analysis.

What are the proposals and how do they differ from Version 3?

The proposed changes to the RBF seek to address three areas: 1. Improving clarity and reducing inconsistencies; 2. Simplifying stakeholder involvement in the risk assessment process; and 3. Improving scoring in the Productivity Susceptibility Analysis (PSA) by providing clearer criteria for adjusting scores.

1. Clarifications to improve inconsistencies

There are two main proposals to improve clarity and reduce inconsistencies.

The first proposal is to provide further guidance as to when the RBF is mandatory to score the Performance Indicator on ETP/OOS outcome. The original Toolbox lacked clarity on what qualifies as an 'independent source' of data and therefore required further guidance on the MSC's intent for triggering the RBF for ETP/OOS species.

The second proposal is to clarify how the RBF interacts with the default tree in the Standard. Currently, when the RBF is used to score Principle 2 outcome Performance Indicators, the related management Performance Indicators are scored as normal, without referencing RBF-specific attributes. The proposed changes clarify that assessors should consider how the management strategy minimises impact on the species within the context of relevant risk attributes.

2. Stakeholder involvement

The RBF process can be complicated and time-consuming, often requiring repeated input from stakeholders involved in multiple fisheries. The proposed changes aim to streamline engagement and increase flexibility in order to reduce stakeholder fatigue.

a. Streamlining stakeholder engagement

In Version 3, the Toolbox provides detailed steps for stakeholder involvement in the RBF, beginning with a separate RBF announcement at the Fishery Announcement stage. Assessors gather information before the site visit and discuss how it will inform scoring with stakeholders during the visit. If, during the visit, the need to use the RBF is identified, then a new announcement, an additional 30-day consultation period, and another site visit are required. Final RBF scores are first shared in the Public Comment Draft Report.

The proposal simplifies the process by including the RBF announcement in the template for the Fishery Announcement. Assessors would gather scoring information before the

Announcement, rather than before the site visit. This information would be included in the Announcement Comment Draft Report to highlight data gaps or provide draft scores, giving stakeholders earlier visibility into areas where input may be needed. The information and input from stakeholders would then be discussed at the site visit.

If the need to use the RBF is identified after the Announcement, the original RBF announcement form would still be used, but an extra site visit would no longer be required. Instead, assessors would consult stakeholders through the most suitable method, with a 30-day consultation period.

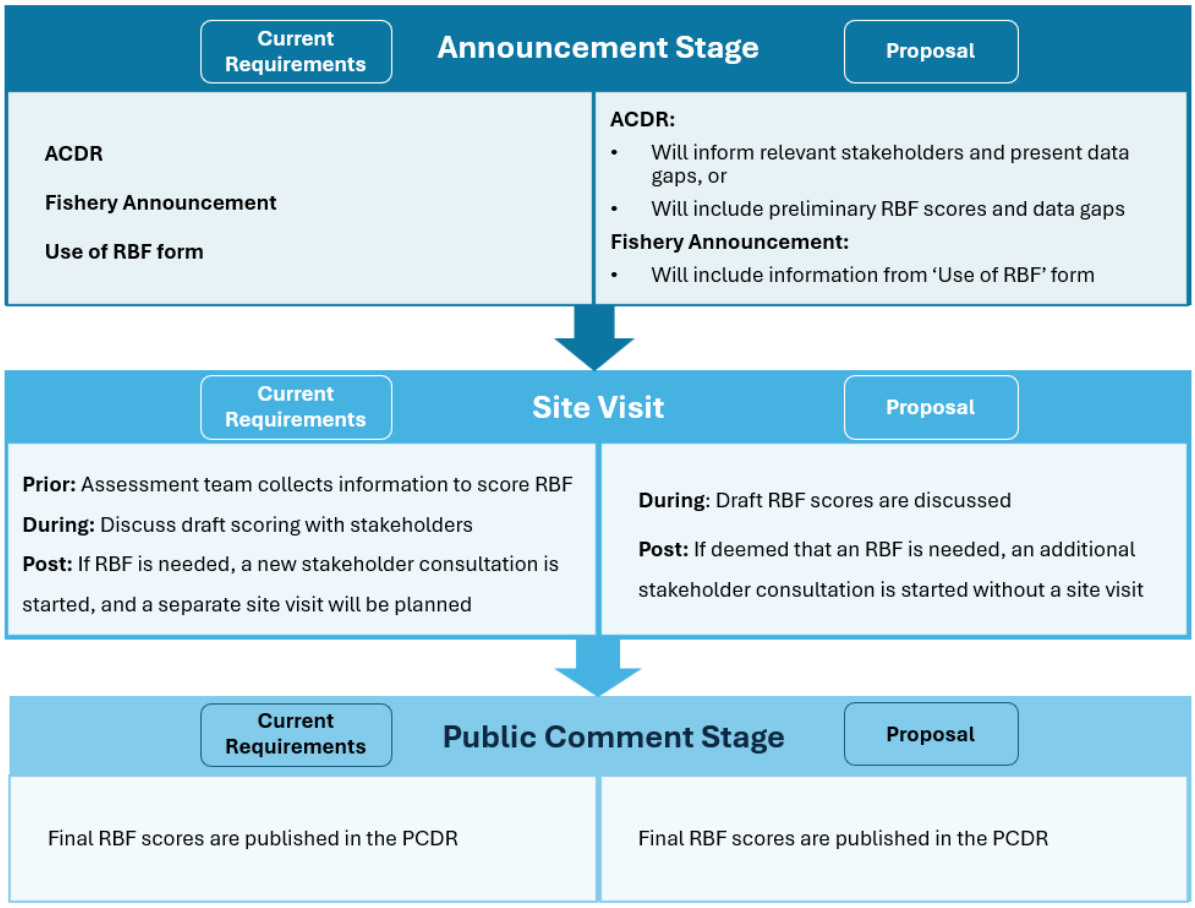


Figure 1 The RBF scoring process comparing current and proposed requirements

b. Increasing flexibility in stakeholder engagement

One cause of stakeholder fatigue is the rigid process for collecting RBF-related input. Assessors must currently consult a wide range of stakeholders via in-person or remote meetings, with no flexibility to use other methods. There is also no requirement to describe the consultation strategy in assessment reports, limiting transparency. When stakeholders don't reach consensus during discussions, assessors must apply a precautionary approach to scoring.

The proposal makes stakeholder consultation more flexible and less prescriptive. Instead of always requiring broad participation, assessors must engage stakeholders with relevant fishery or scoring knowledge. The requirement for mandatory meetings would be

removed, allowing assessors more freedom to choose the most effective engagement methods. To improve transparency, assessors must describe their consultation strategy in assessment reports. The proposal places emphasis on the use of objective evidence from stakeholders, while still emphasising the need for the precautionary approach where information is limited or uncertain.

3. Using an optional Residual Risk Analysis to adjust scoring element scores when using the PSA

The PSA is a tool used to assess species vulnerability to fishing pressure by evaluating the species' productivity and susceptibility to capture or harm. It is used in data-deficient situations to score the in-scope and ETP/OOS species outcome Performance Indicators.

The PSA is designed to be more precautionary than the Standard's default tree. However, there are concerns that current requirements may sometimes be overly conservative, especially for low-productivity species. Even with strong management and low susceptibility, PSA scores can still be low, making it difficult for fisheries to create action plans to address conditions and demonstrate improvements.

Assessors can currently adjust PSA scores when evidence supports doing so. For birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians, assessors can lower certain susceptibility scores if mitigation measures are in place[2]. Additionally, for all species, assessors can adjust a PSA-derived score by up to 10 points if justified by additional information[3]. However, unclear guidance on what qualifies as "additional information" makes these adjustments hard to audit and often insufficient to address conditions despite effective management.

The proposals **introduce an optional, Residual Risk Analysis (RRA) tool** to support PSA score adjustments. Based on Australia's ecological risk assessment procedure, it would allow PSA scores to be raised when specific, clearly defined criteria are met.

To use the tool, a species must first be shown to have a stable or increasing population. If eligible, assessors consider the three defined criteria in the RRA tool. These criteria reflect the effectiveness of management measures at reducing the inherent risk of a species to fishing. **All criteria must be met to adjust a score** – raising scores from below 60 to 60, or scores from 60-79 to 80. The tool's use is limited in subsequent assessments. This approach aligns with standard RRA practice: assess inherent risk first, then consider mitigating measures that reduce that risk.

The proposal limits susceptibility scoring for ETP/OOS species to inherent risk only, removing the option to factor in mitigation measures directly in the PSA. These measures would instead be assessed through the RRA. The option to adjust scores by 10 points would also be removed, with the RRA providing a more robust and auditable alternative.

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[2] Fisheries Standard Toolbox v1.2 - Clauses A4.4.7.1.a and A4.4.8.1.a

[3] Fisheries Standard Toolbox v1.2 - Clause A5.3.1.1