

# Overview of the Peer Review College

January 2019

## Introduction

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) is an international non-profit organisation established to address the problem of unsustainable fishing and safeguard seafood supplies for the future. MSC's vision is for the world's oceans to be teeming with life – today, tomorrow and for generations to come. The MSC runs the only certification and ecolabelling program for wild-capture fisheries that meets the best practice guidelines set by the United Nations Food & Agriculture Organization, the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI) and ISEAL, the global membership association for sustainability standards. By sourcing from fisheries that are certified to the MSC standards, retailers and food processors around the world are helping to safeguard seafood supplies.

The MSC believes in the importance of evidence-based standard setting, and seeks to deliver a robust, effective and accessible program that keeps up with the latest scientific knowledge and industry practices.

## The Peer Review College

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'.

The Peer Review College manages the peer review process for Conformity Assessment Bodies (CABs) to enhance the consistency, independence and impartiality of the process and give greater weight to the comments of peer reviewers.

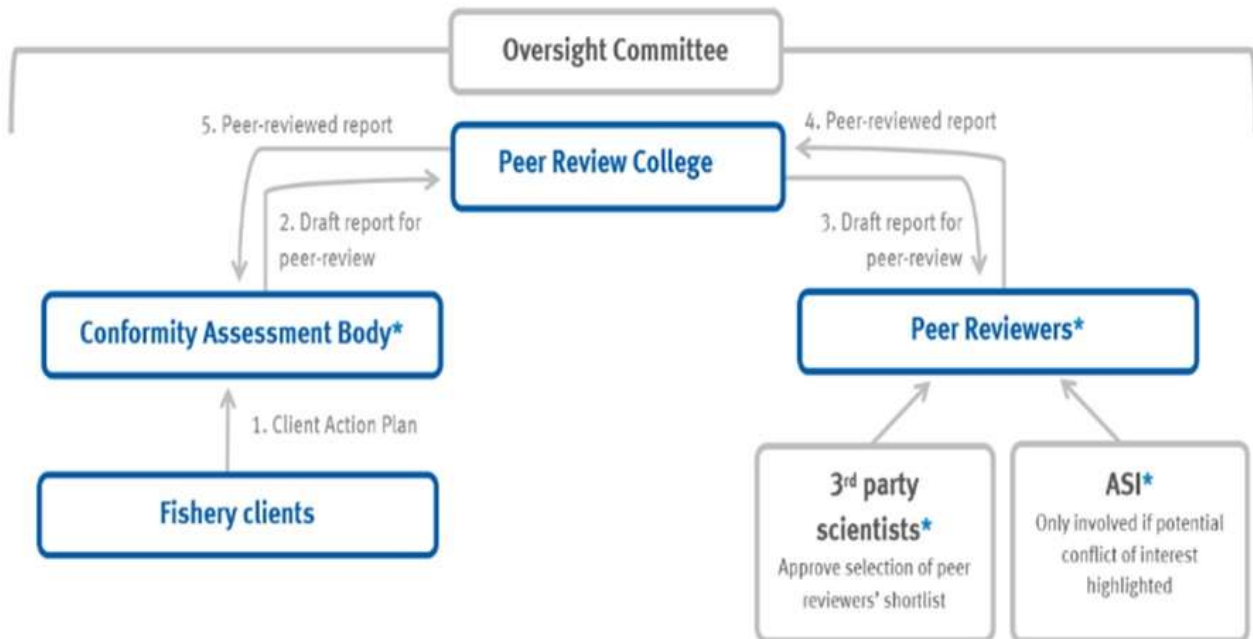
In setting up the Peer Review College the MSC aimed to fulfil the following objectives:

- Increase and maintain the independence 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 Annex 1). Fisheries that enter 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 MSC's Peer Review College team operates the College, under the supervision of an Oversight Body, and in consultation with independent third party scientists and Assurance Services International (ASI), as illustrated below.



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

The designated Peer Review College team operates the College on behalf of MSCI, with the primary tasks of managing the peer review process, liaising with 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 [Peer Review College Structures and Procedures v5.0 document](#).

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 contents of the College’s procedures and guidelines
- Overseeing the College’s implementation of the procedures and guidelines
- Reviewing the performance of the College in overseeing the day-to-day relationship with the CABs, peer reviewers and third party scientists
- Reviewing the College’s performance in terms of meeting delivery time commitments and quality commitments. The views of CABs and peer reviewers are sought to inform annual reviews.

[The third party scientists](#) are contracted with MSCI and provide independent expertise at critical decision points in the peer review process. The third party scientists are experts in fisheries science and the MSC system (see competence requirements in the Structures and Procedures document) and are responsible for:

- Confirming the admittance of peer reviewers to the College initially
- Confirming the shortlist of candidate peer reviewers
- Performing 6 monthly quality assurance reviews of peer reviews

Assurance Services International (ASI) is an accreditation body for sustainability standards systems. ASI is contracted by MSCI. ASI's responsibilities include:

- Reviewing the Peer Review College team's conflict of interest (COI) procedures
- Reviewing any potential COIs concerning the shortlist of peer reviewers which have been raised by stakeholders, and advising the Peer Review College team on whether:
  - any unacceptable COIs exist and the reviewer(s) affected should be removed from the shortlist
  - no COI exists, or
  - the COIs which do exist can be effectively managed, where stakeholder concerns have been raised
- Investigating stakeholder complaints against the selection of peer reviewers due to perceived COI

Conformity Assessment Bodies (CABs) are third party organisations independent to the MSC Program that perform assessment services. The CABs gather inputs from different stakeholders to assist with the process of assessing a fishery. 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' responsibilities include:

- Communicating effectively with the peer review college to call for peer reviews of assessments
- Responding to the peer review comments (as reported in the Public Comment Draft Report and Final Report stages of an assessment)

Peer reviewers are contracted by MSCI to undertake training as required and to provide high-quality, unbiased reviews of fishery assessment reports.

## The peer review process

The peer review process, including the sequence of events and responsibilities of the different parties at each main assessment stage is outlined below, based on the full details in the [Structures and Procedures v5.0](#) document and in the MSC Fisheries Certification Requirements (FCR v2.0)<sup>1</sup>. 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 the minimal 1-2 species or gear types. A shortlist of peer reviewers to be used for the fishery is initially selected by the College team. This is checked with the candidate PRs to confirm their availability and potential conflicts of interest. The third party scientists are also required 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 stakeholder consultation on any potential COIs of the shortlisted peer reviewers. Where preferred, CABs are allowed to 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 allowing for any feedback, and in 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.

<sup>1</sup> The procedure is slightly different in the MSC's new Fisheries Certification Process, v2.1, which enters into force 28 February 2019. In that process, the client prepares their action plan at the same time as the peer reviewers are reviewing the CAB's draft report, and the client action plan is not included in the peer review. The other procedures outlined here remain the same between both FCR v2.0 and FCP v2.1.

After the team has completed scoring of the fishery, the CAB issues a Preliminary Draft Report for the client's review. 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.

Once the client action plan is complete, the draft report is passed to the selected peer reviewers who use a template to give their opinion on the conclusions reached, taking into account:

- the scores assigned to the fishery by the assessment team,
- the rationales for these scores,
- the conclusions reached by the team,
- the conditions raised,
- the client action plan which details how the fishery client will address any conditions raised (only in FCR v2.0).

From their release date in December 2018, peer reviewers have been requested to use spreadsheet-format templates for their reviews, as provided by MSC on its [CABs webpage](#).

These peer reviews are provided anonymously to the CAB, which 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 document in the certification process and includes a draft determination of whether or not the fishery is recommended for certification. 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 by the College to review the CAB's responses to their earlier reviews and provide further comments if they do not believe that their points have been adequately considered.

The Final Report is then submitted by the CAB after the assessment team has considered the comments received during the PCDR consultation period, including any submitted by the peer reviewers, and has revised the report appropriately. The Final Report includes the team's final determination of whether or not 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 reviewers

Peer reviewers are independent consultants appointed by the College to review the Preliminary Draft Report once the CAB has scored the fishery. Peer reviews normally take two days to complete, but may be longer for more complex fisheries. As noted above, the peer reviewers are also requested by the College to comment on the CAB's responses to their initial reviews, as provided in the Public Certification Draft Report.

Reviewers are contracted by the MSC to provide high quality unbiased reviews of fishery assessment reports. The criteria for admitting reviewers to the College are similar to those for fishery team members and the third party scientists confirm reviewers' membership of the College initially. They are required to undertake MSC training relating to the role and to sign the MSC Peer Reviewer Code of Conduct which includes a commitment to inform the Peer Review College of any potential COIs with the fishery being assessed. It also includes commitments that all peer reviewers must act impartially and not allow any commercial, financial or other pressures to compromise their impartiality. Before being shortlisted for a peer review, reviewers also have to complete a COI form detailing any potential COI with the fishery under assessment, which is reviewed by the College. As at January 2019, the College has over 90 peer reviewers registered to operate.



## Annex 1. The Peer Review College Pilot

The Peer Review College was piloted to test the effectiveness and efficiency of the system between January 2016 and March 2017. The entire peer review process from the initial announcement and shortlisting phases through to the Public Comment Draft Report and Final Report stages were tested during the pilot for 12 different fisheries assessed by 7 different CABs. The timeline of the pilot was extended to ensure that at least 10 fisheries were included.

The timeline for the trial was as given below:

Activity	Date
Set up College: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish Peer Reviewer database</li> <li>• Review applications, approve peer reviewers for College membership with third party scientists</li> <li>• Set up contracts between MSC and third party scientists, CABs and peer reviewers</li> <li>• Train peer reviewers</li> </ul>	July 2015 – Jan 2016
15 month pilot	Jan 2016 - March 2017
Third party scientist technical review & PRC team process review	April 2017
Oversight Committee consider technical & process reviews	May 2017
Report to Technical Advisory Board Working Group	July 2017
Board sign-off and launch of College for new assessments under FCR v2.0	June-July 2017

The pilot phase is now completed. The Oversight Committee and MSC Board both approved the progression of the College into the full implementation phase, based on the progress reports provided, and with some minor changes to procedures.