

# Terms of Reference for the MSC Fisheries Program Revisions 2025-2027

30 June 2025

These Terms of Reference cover the 'wider' review mandated by the MSC Board of Trustees in June 2025, now known as Fisheries Program Revisions.

These Terms have been developed following the ISEAL Code of Good Practice for Sustainability Systems v1.0 and the MSC Standard Setting Procedure, including MSC Early Review Methodology.

This document is publicly available on the MSC website ([www.msc.org](http://www.msc.org))

Comments are welcome and appreciated. All feedback should be submitted to [standards@msc.org](mailto:standards@msc.org).

## Document history

Version	Release date	Description of amendment
1.0	July 2025	New document

## 1. Introduction to the MSC

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) was created in 1997 when two global organisations, WWF and Unilever, came together with the common vision of improving the sustainability of the world's fisheries. Together they founded the MSC – an international non-profit organisation set up to help transform the seafood market to a sustainable basis. Between 1997 and 1999, the MSC consulted over 200 scientists, environmentalists and stakeholders to establish a worldwide certification system for fisheries using environmentally sustainable practices.

The MSC runs the leading global certification and ecolabelling program for wild-capture fisheries consistent with the [ISEAL Code of Good Practice for Setting Social and Environmental Standards](#) and the [United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries](#) (FAO, 2009) that is [recognised](#) and [benchmarked](#) by the [Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative](#) (GSSI, 2017).

The MSC works with fishers, seafood companies, scientists, conservation groups and the public to promote fisheries best practices through its certification program and seafood ecolabel. When any buyer chooses to purchase MSC-ecolabelled fish, certified fisheries are rewarded for their sustainable practices through market preference. The MSC and its partners encourage processors, suppliers, retailers, and consumers to give priority to purchasing seafood from MSC-certified fisheries and to demonstrate this through use of the MSC ecolabel.

The vision of the MSC is of the world's oceans teeming with life, and seafood supplies safeguarded for this and future generations. The MSC's mission is to use our ecolabel and fishery certification program to contribute to the health of the world's oceans. The MSC does this by recognising and rewarding sustainable fishing practices, influencing the choices people make when buying seafood and working with our partners to transform the seafood market.

## 2. Background

The Marine Stewardship Council has been in existence for over 25 years and much has changed through that time. The first Principles and Criteria were published in 1998, and over time the Standard was developed and then replaced the Principles and Criteria to become the formal MSC Fishery Standard. It continues to be reviewed and revised to evolve alongside global fisheries practices. Our most recent Fisheries Standard Review (FSR) began in 2018 and concluded in October 2022 with the publication of Fisheries Standard v3.0, Fisheries Certification Process v3.0 and a new normative document– the MSC Fisheries Standard Toolbox. The purpose of the Fisheries Standard Toolbox is to house a suite of mandatory and optional MSC-endorsed assessment tools and associated requirements that could be applied as part of a fishery assessment against Version 3 of the Fisheries Standard.

Throughout the FSR and after publication of the revised the Standard, stakeholders raised concerns. They noted that the new Standard lacked clarity, was difficult to audit, and could create barriers for some of the best-performing fisheries that had been certified under the previous version (v2.01). Following stakeholder input and experiences from assessment processes, the MSC Board announced the need for a review in June 2024. This included exploring several potential workstreams for further development.

As a result, the MSC established an internal steering committee including representatives from the Executive Committee, Science and Standards and Fisheries Outreach. Following several formal discussions, the Executive formed a plan for a further review process to make targeted

revisions to resolve specific challenges identified throughout the implementation of v3.0 and v3.1. The 'wider' review that was previously discussed has been renamed as Fisheries Program Revisions better to reflect the targeted nature of the process.

This Terms of Reference document outlines the process for making these targeted revisions. This process constitutes an "early review" under the MSC Standard Setting Procedure – meaning it is being conducted outside of the regular five-year policy review cycle. The early review has been triggered due to the following circumstances being met:

- **Unforeseen Consequences:** The implementation of a standard or certification requirement leads to significant unintended negative consequences.
- **Systemic Inconsistencies:** Evidence of widespread and irreconcilable inconsistencies in the interpretation or application of the standards or policies, compromising the integrity of the MSC certification process.

### 3. About this Terms of Reference (ToR)

This document provides an overview of the process for these Fisheries Program Revisions.

For the reference of all interested parties. It explains:

- Background to the MSC Fisheries Standard and MSC's mission and vision
- Objectives of the Fishery Program Revisions
- Scope of the Revisions
- Stakeholder participation and opportunities for input
- Revisions process and working approach
- Governance structure and decision-making procedure
- Assessment and mitigation of risks
- Contact information

The Fisheries Program Revisions process will follow the ToR in this document. The ToR has been developed following the ISEAL Code of Good Practice for Sustainability Systems v1.0 and the MSC Standard Setting Procedure.

### 4. The MSC Fisheries Standard

Through international stakeholder consultation, the MSC has developed globally recognised standards for sustainable fishing and seafood traceability. These standards ensure that MSC-labelled seafood comes from, and can be traced back to, a sustainable wild-capture fishery.

The MSC Fisheries Standard sets requirements that a fishery must meet to enable it to claim that its fish come from a well-managed and sustainable source. MSC standards and requirements meet global best practice guidelines for certification and ecolabelling programs.

Throughout the world fisheries are using good management practices to safeguard jobs, secure fish stocks for the future and help protect the marine environment. The science-based MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing offers fisheries irrespective of scale and geography a way to confirm sustainability, using a credible, independent third-party assessment

process. It means sustainable fisheries can be recognised and rewarded in the marketplace and gives an assurance to consumers that their seafood comes from a well-managed and sustainable source.

The MSC Fisheries Standard applies to wild-capture fisheries that meet the scope requirements provided in MSC Fisheries Standard v3.1 Section 1. The MSC Fisheries Standard has three core principles that every fishery must meet:

<b>Principle 1: Sustainable target fish stocks</b>	A fishery must be conducted in a manner that does not lead to over-fishing or depletion of the exploited populations and, for those populations that are depleted, the fishery must be conducted in a manner that demonstrably leads to their recovery.
<b>Principle 2: Environmental impact of fishing</b>	Fishing operations should allow for the maintenance of the structure, productivity, function and diversity of the ecosystem (including habitat and associated dependent and ecologically related species) on which the fishery depends.
<b>Principle 3: Effective management</b>	The fishery is subject to an effective management system that respects local, national and international laws and standards and incorporates institutional and operational frameworks that require use of the resource to be responsible and sustainable.

## 5. Objectives of the Fisheries Program Revisions

The MSC Fisheries Standard v3.0 was released on 26th October 2022 following a five-year Fisheries Standard Review process. Given negative feedback from multiple stakeholders, the MSC Board approved a plan in January 2024 to address the issues raised, resulting in the creation of a dedicated MSC Implementation team. The initial work of the Implementation team was to make clarification and consistency amendments to v3.0, resulting in the publication of v3.1 of the Standard in July 2024. In June 2024, the MSC Board also announced a Holistic Review process, inclusive of several workstreams: the Toolbox Review; a review of the 2018-2022 Fisheries Standard Review process; and a ‘wider’ review of outstanding issues with the MSC Fisheries Standard. The ‘wider’ review is now what is presented here as the Fisheries Program Revisions.

In addition to being guided by the MSC’s Standard Setting Procedure, the MSC also sets objectives for each Fisheries Standard Review that reflect organisational priorities. The previous Fisheries Standard Review objectives were linked to the 2017-2020 Integrated Strategic Plan, whereas the current revisions process reflects the more recent [4<sup>th</sup> Integrated Strategic Plan](#) 2023 - 2030. Most importantly, the issues raised by stakeholders in the period since the publication of MSC Fisheries Standard v3.0 in October 2022 have been used to formulate the scope of this revision process to ensure the program continues to support the MSC in achieving its [vision and mission](#).

The present process constitutes an “early review” of the Fisheries Standard versions 3.0 and 3.1, and associated documents per the MSC Standard Setting Procedure, carried out outside the regular 5-year review cycle. The present situation meets the following Early Review criteria:

- Unforeseen Consequences: The implementation of a standard or certification requirement leads to significant unintended negative consequences.

- Systemic Inconsistencies: Evidence of widespread and irreconcilable inconsistencies in the interpretation or application of the standards or policies, compromising the integrity of the MSC certification process.

Periodic standard reviews and any subsequent revisions to the Standard are expected to improve the effectiveness of the program, its credibility and ability, through the leadership of our partners, to accelerate the delivery of the MSC's vision and mission.

For the Fisheries Standard Review leading to version 3.0/3.1, there were five objectives as follows:

- Reduce standard complexity to reduce barriers for new fisheries seeking certification and aid in retention of currently certified fisheries.
- Increase standard applicability and accessibility for fisheries in the global south, for high priority large marine ecosystems and for high priority species.
- Improve data collection to enable rigorous monitoring and evaluation and improve evidence-based decision-making.
- Enhance program credibility and legitimacy by addressing emerging issues from implementation of Fisheries Standard v2.
- Incorporate improved scientific understanding and fishery management practice into the Fisheries Standard consistent with MSC policy.

It is acknowledged that the first two of these objectives (reduced complexity, increased applicability and accessibility) were not met during the Fisheries Standard Review and therefore roll into the present Revision process.

## 6. Scope of the Revisions

The process will make targeted revisions to the Fisheries Standard, Fisheries Certification Process, Fisheries Standard Toolbox and other scheme documents – such as reporting templates - as needed.

Topics that are subject to review and targeted revisions as part of this process include the following:

- **Requirements for endangered, threatened and protected and out-of-scope species**, including the categorisation of all out-of-scope species with endangered, threatened, and protected species as well as the performance requirements for outcome, management and information.
- **Risk-Based Framework**, including its triggering criteria and the requirements on Productivity Susceptibility Analysis and Consequence Spatial Analysis
- **Fisheries Certification Process**, including process and reporting requirements and associated normative documents, such as reporting and other templates.
- Requirements for the assessment of **inseparable and practicably inseparable species**
- **Scope of application of Section SE to non-tuna RFMOs**

In addition to these topics, there may be a need to make minor changes and editorial clarifications throughout the program documents. For example, this may be required where the use of a

particular term is revisited or redefined as part of one of these projects. Recognising the importance of avoiding “scope creep”, an internal committee will provide oversight of any proposed changes outside of the specific topic areas and will determine whether these are sufficiently minor to be considered as edits and clarifications.

Revisions proposed because of this review may affect components of the following existing program documents:

- MSC Fisheries Standard
- MSC Fisheries Certification Process
- MSC Fisheries Standard Toolbox
- MSC General Certification Requirements
- MSC / MSCI Vocabulary
- Templates

## 7. Stakeholder participation and opportunities for input

Throughout the revisions process, the MSC will follow an open and transparent consultation process. We seek to engage all interested stakeholders to ensure that the Standard meets the stated Objectives of the Fisheries .

The MSC's processes for consultation on a new or revised standard follow the [ISEAL Code of Good Practice for Setting Social and Environmental Standards](#).

There will be at least one round of 60-day public consultation, open to anyone interested in participating, on the revision to any scheme documents. Public consultation will be open to all stakeholders, who will be informed in a timely manner of opportunities to engage.

Where substantive, unresolved issues persist after the consultation round, or where insufficient feedback was received in total or from specific stakeholder groups, the MSC may carry out either additional public consultation or targeted consultation with specific stakeholder groups, as necessary.

The table below describes the key stakeholder groups involved or impacted by revisions to MSC fishery scheme documents. This includes the importance of each group to the success and credibility of the Program and engagement methods that may be used to ensure effective consultation and collaboration.

Stakeholder Group	Importance of Group for MSC	Engagement Methods
Fisheries	Most directly affected group. For the standard to be effective, requirements must be practical and achievable for sustainable fisheries.	Online consultation, in-person regional workshops, possible participation in pilot studies.
Governments and Policymakers	The standard may influence information requests to fishers, impacting research priorities and legislative or policy processes.	Email communication, MSC website, in-person workshops, webinars.
Environmental NGOs (eNGOs)	Ensure the standard supports sustainability outcomes relevant to	Email communication, workshops, website

	their missions and does not hinder conservation goals.	content, webinars, online consultation.
Scientists and Academics	Ensure scientific best practices and methodologies are accurately reflected in the standard.	Peer review invitations, expert workshops, involvement in impact assessments.
Seafood Industry (Processing and Trade)	Affected by changes in supply chain dynamics, certified product availability, and demand.	Email communication, workshops, MSC website, webinars, online consultation.
Conformity Assessment Bodies (CABs) and Assessor Community	Ensure the standard is auditable, practical, and aligns with standard auditing practices and business models.	Email communication, workshops, MSC website, webinars, online consultation.
Assurance Services International (ASI)	Responsible for auditing CABs; interested in ensuring the standard system supports effective oversight and auditability.	Auditability reviews, pilot testing, workshops.
Overlapping organisations	Includes other standards bodies or initiatives. Key to identifying synergies, avoiding duplication, and incorporating best practices from other fisheries-related standards, pledges or rating schemes.	Email communication, workshops, online meetings, website updates, webinars.

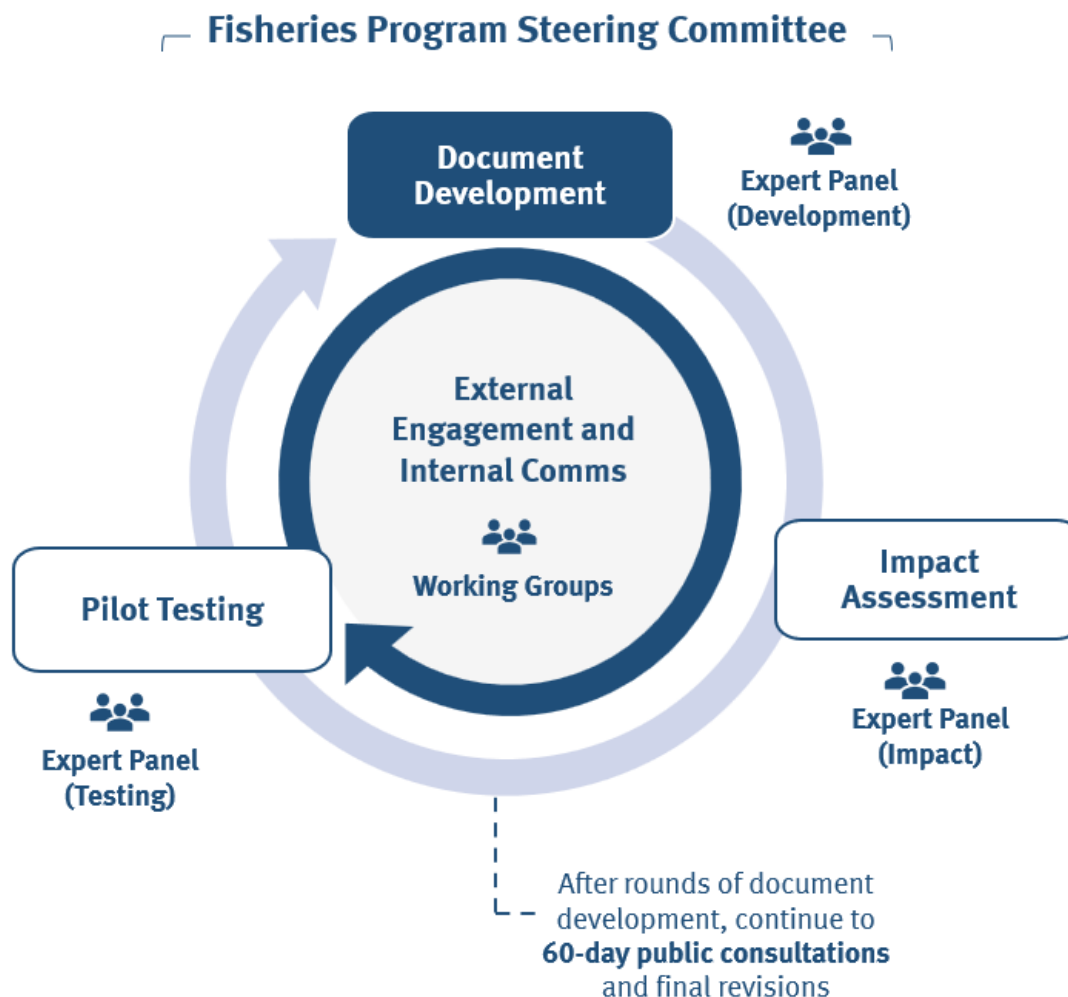
In addition to the engagement **methods outlined above, information about the revision process will be made available to stakeholders on the MSC website throughout the process.**

## 8. Revisions process and working approach

To meet the objectives outlined for the revisions to the Fisheries Program, the MSC is adopting an agile, collaborative approach to policy development. Central to this approach are expert panels that will work together to revise the Fisheries Standard and Fisheries Certification Process. These panels will assess the potential impacts of proposed changes and test revised scheme documents against fisheries currently engaged in the program.

The process will be iterative: scheme documents will be updated, tested, and refined in successive phases. Internal and external experts will contribute at each stage, ensuring a robust and multi-stakeholder process. Once the revisions have been thoroughly pilot tested, the MSC will proceed with mock assessments and invite feedback through public consultations.





**Figure 1. Outer circle:** Proposed policy development cycle, starting with revisions by a dedicated panel of experts who will work from defined problem statements, followed by impact assessments and pilot testing. The cycle repeats until documents are ready for public consultation. **Inner circle:** A parallel expert panel will manage external engagement and communications during testing and consultations phases.

As the revisions go on, the work can be done concurrently where appropriate or cycle through the expert panels. For example, if the pilot testing group identifies a need for further changes to one or more of the scheme documents, the proposed changes can be returned to the document development group for additional work.

Each expert panel will have a lead and a group of members that will together focus on one of the three areas: developing the documents, pilot testing the revisions, or assessing the impact of changes. The expert panels will comprise MSC staff and a range of external stakeholders with different expertise and perspectives, ensuring that decisions are balanced. The involvement of external experts, including members of the Stakeholder Advisory Council (STAC) and the Technical Advisory Board (TAB), will enable transparency and inclusivity of diverse viewpoints in the policy development process.

'Testing' types are as follows:



- Pilot testing: asking CABs or auditors to apply changed requirements to fisheries, to see if they work in practice, are clear and deliver the intent.
- Mock assessments: application of the entire or whole sections of the Standard to test the changes as a whole and understand the impact on scores, conditions and retention.
- Auditability review: usually undertaken by Assurance Services International (ASI) to check how clear and auditable requirements are.

These testing types feed into the impact assessment process which sets out what the changes mean, as well as in combination with stakeholder consultation. The six impact types considered are auditability, effectiveness, acceptability, accessibility & retention, feasibility and simplicity.

## **9. Governance structure and decision-making procedure**

The MSC Board of Trustees is the MSC's governing body. With advice from the MSC Executive, which in turn receives advice from the Technical Advisory Board and Stakeholder Advisory Council, the Board sets the strategic direction of the MSC, monitors progress and ensures the MSC meets its objectives. In this context, the Board is responsible for final approval of the Standard and the Fisheries Certification Process.

The Technical Advisory Board (TAB) works in close collaboration with the MSC Executive to provide advice to the MSC Board of Trustees on technical and scientific matters relating to the MSC Standards and associated policies, including developing methodologies for certification and accreditation, as well as related scientific and technical research. Specifically, the TAB will provide assurance to the MSC Board of Trustees and advice to the Executive to ensure that the Fisheries Standard and normative documents are set in alignment with the Board's stated policy of reflecting new and widely adopted science and best practice fisheries management.

The MSC Stakeholder Advisory Council (STAC) works in close collaboration with the MSC Executive to provide advice to the MSC Board of Trustees on relevant strategic, policy or operational issues from a stakeholder perspective. It includes representatives from the seafood industry, conservation community, market sector and academia. Its membership reflects diverse expertise, experiences, regions, and interests in relation to the work of the MSC.

At a project management level, a streamlined governance model will support the delivery of revisions, structured around three core functions: strategic, coordinating, and operational. The MSC Executive Committee (ExCo) will provide strategic oversight, and the Fisheries Program Steering Committee, reporting to ExCo, will provide direction of the revisions. The Implementation team will provide a coordination, bridging and monitoring function. The revisions themselves will engage multiple Expert Panels that will involve MSC staff working in Science & Standards, Fisheries Outreach and the Research team, but will also include representatives from TAB and STAC and other external stakeholders and subject matter experts.

## **10. Assessment and mitigation of risks**

The review will be a complex, multi-stakeholder process requiring collaboration, extensive testing, broad consultation, and strong governance. These efforts are essential to ensure that both the process and final outputs align with MSC's strategic objectives.

The process will follow an expedited timeline compared to other recent reviews, with publication planned approximately 18 months after the project commencement in July 2025.

Given this accelerated schedule, it is important to acknowledge the risk of delays or challenges stemming from unforeseen internal or external pressures. To help mitigate these risks, it must be clearly established from the outset that there may be legitimate circumstances under which the scope, approach, or timeline of the revisions will need to be adjusted. Some of these risk categories and mitigation strategies are identified in the table below.

**Risk categories and triggers** that may warrant a change in timelines, scope or approach, and strategies that will be employed to mitigate against the likelihood or impact of these occurring. Note this list is not exhaustive.

Risk category	Risk trigger	Unmitigated risk level		Mitigation strategy	Mitigated risk level	
		Likelihood	Impact		Likelihood	Impact
<b>Reputational risk or significant public criticism</b>	Strong external criticism of revision approach or outcomes mid-process, e.g. extensive negative feedback following public consultation from multiple stakeholder groups.	High	High	Engage stakeholders early in the process, listen and respond to concerns.  Ensure comprehensive and clear external communications to maintain transparency of the process.	Medium	High
<b>Significant testing outputs</b>	Testing of proposed outputs shows a major retention, accessibility or credibility risk that could be detrimental to MSC mission.	Medium	High	Bring impact testing in early in the process and work iteratively to respond to results and feedback.	Low	High
<b>Insufficient breadth or depth of testing</b>	Revisions are not pilot tested as planned with sufficient breadth (e.g. fishery types not sufficiently represented in piloted case studies) or depth (e.g. insufficient information available to thoroughly test a revision)	Medium	High	Identify a large sample of fishery case studies to be used in pilot testing to ensure alternatives are available if needed  Assess the information available for each fishery case study in the main revision areas (e.g. ETP species, IPI species) as part of the selection process to ensure suitability for pilot testing  Ensure effective management and coordination of pilot testers to identify delays or testing	Low	High

				challenges early and apply mitigation actions quickly		
<b>External delays</b>	Delays in delivery of work from key consultants	High	High	<p>Plan in sufficient buffer time to allow for minor delays in work being delivered by consultants, this will be particularly important during pilot testing and mock assessment phases.</p> <p>Liaise regularly with consultants to detect possible delays early, and, if necessary, be prepared to replace external capacity before delays become a problem for the project.</p>	Medium	Medium
<b>Internal resource constraints</b>	Sudden unavailability of key team members due to ill health, staff changeover, etc.	High	High	<p>Work collectively as an internal team to avoid relying entirely on a select few individuals to drive forward work.</p> <p>Document key processes, narratives and responsibilities to ensure continuity if somebody leaves the organization.</p> <p>Expert panels to establish Ways of Working from outset.</p>	High	Medium
<b>Emerging issue with Standard</b>	Scope of work does not address a major emerging issue with the Standard	Medium	High	Continue to listen to and triage feedback beyond the scope of prioritized topics and respond as early as possible to these.	Medium	Medium
<b>Regulatory or policy changes</b>	Emergence of new guidelines or policies that may affect revision scope (e.g. policies on ecolabelling,	Medium	Medium	Be prepared to initiate impact review in response to emerging changes.	Medium	Low - Medium

	accreditation, FAO guidelines, etc.)			Divide responsibilities of product development working group by policy issues most/least affected by regulatory changes.		
<b>Force majeure events</b>	Global crises (e.g. pandemic, war, etc.) disrupt work and/or global stakeholder engagement	Medium	High	<p>Trigger efficient project management, prioritizing policy projects closest to completion and those with the highest cost-burden for fisheries undergoing assessment.</p> <p>Prepare internal MSC staff to complete targeted, desk-based, controlled pilot testing based on prior assessments.</p> <p>In an extremely disruptive scenario, be prepared to pause indefinitely until work can resume, with fisheries continuing on v2.01 until further notice.</p>	Medium	Medium
<b>Stakeholder consultation bottlenecks</b>	Volume of stakeholder feedback exceeds capacity for analysis within timeline	Medium	Medium	<p>Plan sufficient buffer time for reviewing stakeholder consultation feedback.</p> <p>Use available technology tools to organize and synthesize input and feedback.</p> <p>Use outcomes from impact assessments to filter feedback for highest-impact issues first</p>	Low	Low

				Design a uniform method for intaking feedback, coded for intensity of approval/disapproval.		
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## **11. Contact information**

Please contact [standards@msc.org](mailto:standards@msc.org) to submit any comments on this document and/or the MSC Fisheries Standard Review.