

Canada Introduces Bill to Enhance Protections for Fish and Fish Habitat

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On February 7, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada announced proposed amendments to the Fisheries Act and related acts to undo changes made in 2012 by the previous federal Conservative government. The proposed Bill C-68 would restore past protections for all fish and fish habitats and create enhanced protections, which would include provisions to explicitly provide for Aboriginal interests. The proposed amendments essentially reverse the changes made to the Fisheries Act in 2012, as well as create new requirements for project approvals and environmental protection.

The proposed amendments in Bill C-68 would:

- Create protection for all fish and fish habitats, not just for those connected with commercial and recreational use or Aboriginal fisheries;
- Strengthen the role of indigenous peoples in project reviews, monitoring and policy development, including a requirement for the consideration of Aboriginal interests in habitat decisions;
- Promote restoration of degradation habitat and rebuilding of depleted fish stocks, **for which there are currently no provisions under the Fisheries Act**;
- Allow for the better management of large and small projects impacting fish and fish habitat through a new permitting framework and codes of practice;
- Create a public registry for projects to provide full transparency;
- Create new fisheries management tools to enhance the protection of fish and ecosystems;
- Strengthen the long-term protection of marine refuges for biodiversity;
- Help ensure that the economic benefits of fishing remain with the licence holders and their community by providing clear ability to enshrine current inshore fisheries policies into regulations; and
- Clarify and modernize enforcement powers to address emerging fisheries issues and to align with current provisions in other legislation.

As the title of Bill C-68 indicates, the substantial amendments would affect the Fisheries Act but consequential amendments would also affect the Access to Information Act, Canada Oil and Gas Operations Act, Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Atlantic Accord Implementation Act, Canada-Nova Scotia Offshore Petroleum Resources Accord Implementation Act, and Bridge to Strengthen Trade Act.

On a general level, the proposed amendments will broaden the application of **the Fisheries Act**. Fish and fish habitats that are not currently protected will now be subject to the Act and its requirements. This will in turn expand the number and type of **projects that must comply with the Fisheries Act and that must address the Fisheries Act regime in the review and approval process**.

The Bill received its First Reading in the House of Commons on February 6. As per the legislative process, the Bill will be referred to a committee after it receives a second reading. After the third reading, the Senate may consider and pass the bill following which it may receive Royal Assent and come into force.

The announcement of Bill C-68, entitled “An Act to amend the Fisheries Act and other Acts in consequence”, comes ahead of the Environmental Minister’s announcement of a new environmental assessment process on February 8. The announcements follow the federal Government’s year and a half long public consultation on environmental matters.

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