Strong Policy, Weak Protection: Why Wild Salmon Continue to Decline in Canada

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Issue

- Wild Pacific salmon in Canada continue to decline despite ambitious conservation policies and legal protections.
- Conservation is being undermined by three governance failures: decline in monitoring (Figure 1), compromised scientific integrity, and lack of political willingness to act on evidence.
- Without stronger institutional safeguards, conservation commitments are unlikely to translate into effective protection.

Background

- Canada's Wild Salmon Policy was introduced in 2005 to implement a "conservation first" approach.
- The Policy relies on three core conditions for success: reliable monitoring, credible scientific assessment, and timely management intervention.
- Despite this framework, salmon have continued to decline across much of British Columbia.
- 47 at-risk Pacific salmon populations have not received formal protection under the Species at Risk Act (SARA; Figure 2).
- Continued declines raise a central question: why do strong conservation policies fail to deliver?

Considerations

- Climate change is amplifying risks to wild salmon and their habitats.
- Accelerating industrial development and weakening environmental safeguards increase conservation risk.

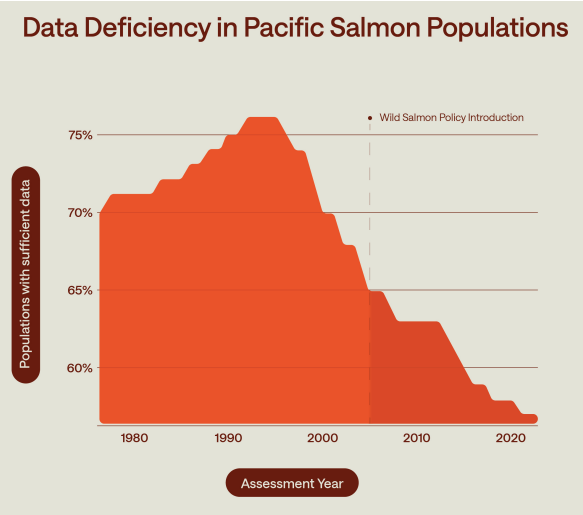

Figure 1. Percentage of Pacific salmon Conservation Units with sufficient data to assess risk status.

Figure 2. Number of at-risk Pacific salmon populations in BC eligible for protection under SARA. Each fish is one at-risk population; orange indicates populations awaiting listing decisions; red denotes those denied legal protection.

Solution

- Re-invest in long-term monitoring for spawning populations.
- Uphold and strengthen current environmental safeguards.
- Improve accountability and transparency in conservation decision-making.