

Public Opinion Research Study: Oceans Protection Plan – Canadians Confidence in Marine Safety

Summary

Prepared for Transport Canada

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The largest investment ever made to protect Canada's coasts and waterways, the Oceans Protection Plan, was launched in late 2016 to improve marine safety and responsible shipping, protect Canada's marine environment, and offer new possibilities for Indigenous Peoples and coastal communities. This national strategy is intended to help establish a world-leading marine safety system that provides economic opportunities for Canadians today while protecting our coastlines for generations to come. Through partnerships with Indigenous Peoples of Canada – particularly in coastal communities, the Government of Canada looks for their cooperation and for them to play an active role in decisions about marine safety.

Transport Canada identified a need for public opinion research to measure Canadians' and, specifically, Indigenous groups' confidence in Canada's marine safety system, and their awareness of the Oceans Protection Plan. This research will inform communications planning, outreach, and engagement, as well as serve to measure improvement in relationships with Indigenous populations.

The survey is comprised of 3,407 completed cases, including 2,168 with the general public and 1,239 with Indigenous Peoples in Canada, with findings reported separately for each. The survey relied on a mix of panel and random public sources, with collection taking place online and through a team of trained, bilingual interviews between mid-February and mid-March 2018.

In a second phase, qualitative interviews were conducted by telephone with 15 individuals representing Indigenous coastal communities. This includes seven interviews conducted in the Pacific Region, two in the Arctic Region, five in Quebec, and one in the Atlantic Region. Interviews were conducted between March and June 2018.

Findings

Public Awareness, Perceived Importance and Confidence

There is limited awareness in the Canadian public regarding marine safety, including safe shipping practices in Canada and marine environment protection. Fewer than one in five in the survey rated themselves as aware and roughly half said they are unaware. Awareness is marginally higher among Indigenous Peoples in Canada and residents of coastal communities (about one in four). Most Canadians (75 to 83 percent) however, feel that marine safety and protecting the marine environment are important. The same level of importance is also found among Canada's Indigenous Peoples and those living in coastal communities.

Public confidence is modest with three in ten members of the general public as well as Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Confidence is even lower in coastal communities. Key sources of weaker confidence stem from stories people have heard or read in the news (half), what is witnessed in the community (one in five), or what people say on social media (one in nine). The results also suggest,

however, that the trend is toward a slight bolstering of their confidence, given that one in five feel their in Canada's marine safety system has increased over the past five years, compared with 13 percent who feel it has eroded during that time. Results are largely the same among Indigenous Peoples in Canada, whereas erosion in confidence exceeds bolstered confidence in coastal communities.

Awareness and Perceived Importance of Government Programs

Awareness of marine programs, regulations, or activities operated by the Government of Canada in these areas is quite high. Three in four are aware the government has a program to respond to accidents, such as oil spills contributing to marine pollution. Another two-thirds think there is a program to prevent accidents or monitor marine pollution, and just under half think that the Government of Canada works closely with Indigenous Peoples and coastal communities to protect Canada's coasts and waterways. Awareness (or faith in the Government of Canada) is marginally lower among Indigenous Peoples in Canada and in coastal communities.

Slightly more than one in five said that they have heard or seen something about the Government of Canada's Oceans Protection Plan in the Canadian public and among Indigenous Peoples in Canada, although the awareness is marginally higher in coastal communities. While prompted awareness following a description of the program is substantially higher, self-reported recall is relatively low (just one in five have heard of the program). Key sources of awareness of the program are traditional media (television, newspapers and radio), as well as the Internet, followed at a distance by social media. The most prominent messages recalled relate to government efforts to prevent and respond to marine pollution and accidents, updating of regulatory and legislative regimes, and preserving and restoring the marine ecosystem. Recall of government collaboration with Indigenous Peoples and coastal communities is marginally lower among Indigenous respondents.

There is limited distinction regarding the importance of key elements of the Oceans Protection Program, although strengthening polluter-pay principles to ensure companies take responsibility for spills sits at the top of the list with more than eight in ten seeing the value of this aspect of the program. This is followed by preserving coastal marine ecosystems that are vulnerable to marine shipping. Three in four also feel that improving how the Government of Canada responds to marine pollution incidents, or prevents marine safety pollution incidents, restoring vulnerable coastal marine ecosystems, investing in scientific research to support marine safety decisions, and updating rules and laws to protect people, vessels, and the environment are important. Rated importance is even higher in coastal communities. Community Response Teams in Indigenous communities, towing capacity, and new lifeboat stations are accorded marginally less importance among the general public.

Perceived Impact of Programs

The perceived impact of the Oceans Protection Program (OPP) is generally high. Nearly two-thirds of the general public believe that the OPP will have a positive impact on the health of marine animals and plants and the health of Canada's coasts and waterways. Slightly fewer feel that the plan will have a positive impact on the safety of the shipping industry. Half think there will be a positive impact on the health of people living in Indigenous Peoples and other coastal communities or on local economies near Canada's coasts and waterways. These results are echoed among Indigenous Peoples in Canada, although faith in the program to have an impact on the health of Indigenous, coastal, and local communities is stronger. Perceived impact is not as strong however, in coastal communities. Related to the program's three primary objectives, roughly four in ten Canadians feel confident the OPP will improve marine safety and responsible shipping practices and protect Canada's marine environment, and one in three are confident it will offer new possibilities for Indigenous and coastal communities. Confidence is marginally higher, however, among Indigenous Peoples in Canada (43 to 45 percent). Public confidence in the Oil Spill Response System is similarly modest, with just under four in ten indicating confidence in the system's ability to clean up an oil spill and/or provide a timely response to a spill. Three in ten feel confident the system can ensure that responsible private industry parties meet their obligations.

Roles in Developing Marine Safety

Results highlight a strong public preference for having all three levels of government play a significant role in developing marine safety. Eight in ten members of the public believe the federal government should play a strong role, and just over six in ten say their provincial government should be similarly tasked. Half would like their local or regional government to play a significant role. Indigenous respondents are marginally less supportive of a federal role, and slightly more strongly advocate for local government involvement.

Public perceptions of the role taken thus far, however, are weaker. Four in ten members of the general public believe that the federal government has played a lead role. One in five feel the same about their provincial government and one in six believe their local government has played a strong part. Results are marginally stronger, however, with respect to provincial and local governments among Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

Two in three members of the public, and eight in ten Indigenous respondents, believe it is important that Indigenous Peoples and coastal communities work closely with the federal government. Half of the public and two in three Indigenous respondents feel it is important for citizens to provide input into these decisions.

One in four members of the public and Indigenous Peoples in Canada have looked for information about marine safety, largely looking to the Internet, Transport Canada or other Government of Canada websites, and news from traditional media as sources. More detailed involvement, through participation in engagement sessions, is very low at four percent in the general public, although it is reported at nine percent among Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

According to eight in ten respondents, there is strong value perceived in the Government of Canada's reporting to Canadians about its performance in improving marine safety. Incidence and record of clean up related to spills, as well as implementation of new regulations to safeguard shipping practices, are seen as good performance indicators. Another two in three members of the public and eight in ten Indigenous Peoples in Canada also feel it is a good idea to report on training activities for Indigenous and coastal community residents.

Highlights of Indigenous Stakeholder Interview Findings

For generations, the ocean has stimulated settlement along coastal communities and is a fundamental part of the culture, nourishment, transportation, and economy of indigenous coastal communities. The ocean has historically served as a vital route of trade and supplies, and marine shipping continues to be important for many communities to receive food, fuel, and other goods. However, particularly among Indigenous communities located close to shipping lanes, there is concern about marine safety and the ecological impacts of large shipping vessels along Canadian coasts.

Most Indigenous communities interviewed believe that the Government of Canada should have a lead role in marine safety. Given the federal government's national interest and ability to develop regulations, most see the need for the Government of Canada to support the prevention of and response to marine accidents. Most also stress the need for constitutional changes regarding consultations with Indigenous communities regarding marine safety. Indigenous people living along the coast have an extensive understanding of the waterways in their region and a profound interest in protecting their people, livelihoods, and ecosystems.

Most Indigenous communities interviewed initially heard about the Oceans Protection Plan through announcements in late 2016 by the Government of Canada. Many noted their initial enthusiasm for the plan, given the substantial funding and the need to increase and coordinate the protection of Canada's coasts. However, although most of those interviewed have participated in a workshop hosted by OPP or other presentations or briefings from Transport Canada, almost all key informants said they continue to have limited knowledge of the goals and activities of the OPP. Most key informants feel that through the OPP, Indigenous communities can play an active role in decisions about marine safety. Many key informants believe that meaningful partnerships can be created between the Government of Canada and Indigenous communities, however, any partnership must involve respect and trust and involve consultation during early stages of planning to identify the activities needed, rather than informing communities after decisions are made. Most believe that consultation, partnerships and training with Indigenous peoples involved in the Oceans Protection Plan can contribute to improving relationships with the Government of Canada.

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