

Memo on Legal Implementation of the B.C. Coastal Marine Strategy – Accompanying Supplement & Summary for Policymakers

January 27, 2026

In July 2024, British Columbia released its first ever Coastal Marine Strategy (CMS), a long-term vision for stewarding coastal and marine resources in the province. In the CMS the government makes significant commitments aimed at protecting wild salmon, biodiversity and ecosystem health, safeguarding and growing our blue economy, and protecting communities from the impacts of climate change. As the Province focuses on strengthening BC and Canada's economic security in the face of economic threats, the CMS remains a critical strategy to advance. This is particularly so given the inclusion of the maritime and tourism sectors in BC's Look West 10-year economic strategy.

The CMS's goals support smart economic policy: marine-based tourism and recreation alone generate over \$5 billion annually,ⁱ and the global ocean economy is projected to double between 2010 and 2030, with employment growth outpacing that of the broader global workforce by 20%.ⁱⁱ With increasing climate impacts, the health of our coasts is critical for human safety and security, and responsible economic management – the “ecosystem services” (including flood protection, erosion control and water filtration) provided by coastal areas is massive. A 2023 Statistics Canada report found the value of carbon sequestration, harvested wild fish and seafood, and nature-based tourism provided by Canada's ocean and coastal ecosystems was \$7.1 billionⁱⁱⁱ – with other reports finding a significantly higher value, once more benefits are considered.^{iv}

To fully achieve the CMS goals, the strategy must be accompanied by new legislation and amendments to existing legislation. The Province itself acknowledges in the CMS that a “**key challenge to coastal management in B.C. is the absence of a legal framework specifically designed to govern and manage coastal marine areas**” and that “**new coastal zone legislation... [is] long overdue**.” And it commits to, “Assess the information needed and develop a proposal for coastal marine legislation, in partnership with First Nations.” In recognition of this necessity, many stakeholders – including First Nations, stakeholders, local governments and the Union of BC Municipalities – have been calling for the provincial government to legislate the CMS.

A new Coastal Marine Act cannot be achieved with existing tools but is necessary for a number of reasons:

1. **Creating new powers and requirements:** A new law and amendments to related legislation could create regulatory powers that currently do not exist, and that are required to achieve the following:
 - a. **Addressing marine pollution:** In the CMS, the Province commits to create a healthy shellfish initiative modelled off the successful program in Washington State. New legislation is needed to require shellfish pollution identification and correction programs be developed and implemented when shellfish beds are closed because of water pollution, as was done in Washington.
 - b. **Facilitating derelict vessel removal:** New legislation is required to establish a centralized provincial agency to conduct derelict vessel removal in accordance with federal legislation.
 - c. **Preventing debris from entering the marine environment:** Amendments to the *Local Government Act* and the *Community Charter* are needed to require all local governments to use a baseline of trash control measures (such as catch basins, filter sock inserts, berms, check dams and catchment screens) over storm drains, which capture debris and prevent it from entering the stormwater system and subsequently the coastal and marine environment.
 - d. **Standardized shoreline development regime:** Currently, shoreline development is governed by a patchwork of local government regulations (some local governments have no bylaws – and no

capacity to develop them, and others have detailed marine or shoreline development permit areas). This results in uncertainty for the public and industry. A new law is required to enact a clear, consistent and protective regime province-wide – to restrict new hard armouring structures except in rare circumstances and to require setbacks a certain distance from the high-water mark for any development that does occur. The existing regime in the freshwater context could be used as a starting point.

- e. **Facilitating shoreline restoration:** Amendments to the *Local Government Act* are required to incentivize “Green Shores” natural shoreline projects through tax exemptions, and new legislation is required to prevent waterfront property owners from vetoing public interest shoreline restoration projects.
- f. **Considering cumulative effects when issuing tenures in coastal marine areas:** In the CMS, the Province commits to updating its authorization requirements for tenures, in particular to ensure that impacts to wild salmon and First Nation’s traditional seafoods are considered. New legislation is needed to require overarching, mandatory factors to be considered in all tenuring decisions in coastal marine areas, including: impacts (including cumulative impacts) to ecological integrity and biodiversity; impacts to wild salmon; impacts to nearshore habitats and ecosystems that store blue carbon; and impact to First Nations access to traditional seafoods. These factors can be required by policy as a starting point, but the state of coastal ecosystems is such that legally requiring them is now critical.
- g. **Recognizing and standardizing marine plans:** The CMS places an emphasis on supporting marine planning. New legislation can recognize existing marine and coastal plans co-developed with First Nations and put in place standards that future marine planning must follow.

2. **Accountability and transparency:** A new law would require the government to report on its progress on CMS implementation to the legislature and to the public. It is also needed to establish a statutory mandate for implementation across relevant ministries that provides clear guidance for provincial staff. A reporting and mandate requirement has been done in other contexts, including for legislated climate commitments, and is particularly important for the CMS given its 20-year timeframe.

In the accompanying memo, we expand on the above reasons for why a new Coastal Marine Act and associated amendments to existing legislation will help achieve the CMS’s promises. We also list many other potential CMS activities that can be completed by amending or enacting new regulations under existing laws, creating new policies, or amending existing policies – all of which can be done without requiring a new bill be tabled in the Legislature. But ultimately, the comprehensive coastal management regime that was promised by the CMS cannot be achieved without new legislation.

ⁱ Big River Analytics Ltd. (2021). Economic Contribution Analysis: For the Economic Contribution of the Oceans Sector in Coastal BC. Unpublished and prepared privately for the governments of British Columbia and Canada.

ⁱⁱ OECD, The Ocean Economy in 2030 (2016), pp. 32, 204, online: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2016/04/the-ocean-economy-in-2030_g1g6439e.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Statistics Canada, Census of Environment: The value of selected ocean and coastal ecosystem services, 2023 (released 21 January 2026), online: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/260121/dq260121d-eng.htm>

^{iv} For example, this 2012 report found the marine areas of BC’s Lower Mainland provided \$22.6 billion in ecosystem services per year (which translates to almost \$32 billion as of 2026), and suggests this is a significant undervaluation due to a lack of data relating to certain ecosystem services: David Suzuki Foundation and Earth Economics: Nearshore Natural Capital Valuation (November 2012), pp. 67-68 (further studies valuing BC coastal ecosystems referenced at p. 33), online:

<https://davidsuzuki.org/science-learning-centre-article/nearshore-natural-capital-valuation-valuing-aquatic-benefits-british-columbias-lower-mainland/>