From Sea to Solution: Working Together on Ghost Gear Management in Atlantic Canada

March 26-27, 2026
Shediac, New Brunswick
Workshop Summary

NatureNB
naturenb.ca

New Nouveau Brunswick
Your Environmental Trust Fund at Work
Votre Fonds en fiducie pour l'environnement

Wele'k Pemjajika'q Siknikt
Côtes en santé N.-B. Healthy Coasts NB

New Brunswick Environmental Network

Réseau environnemental du Nouveau-Brunswick

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EXECUTIVE WORKSHOP SUMMARY

In March 2026, approximately 40 passionate individuals—including fishers and fishing organizations, Indigenous representatives, environmental groups, and government officials—gathered in Shediac, New Brunswick for a two-day workshop to collaboratively address challenges related to abandoned, lost, or otherwise discarded fishing gear, also known as "ghost gear" in Atlantic Canada.

Building on a 2024 workshop led by Nature NB and the New Brunswick Environmental Network, this session expanded participation and focused on identifying root causes, addressing barriers to responsible gear disposal, and advancing priority actions for regional ghost gear management.

The workshop opened with remarks from Mi'gmaw Elder Constance (Connie) Sewell of Oinpegitjoig (Pabineau First Nation), who grounded the gathering in shared intentions of respect, responsibility, and care for the waters, reflecting the longstanding stewardship of Indigenous Peoples.

Participants then heard from Caitlin Frenkel with the Global Ghost Gear Initiative on key drivers of ghost gear and global approaches to addressing them. The group engaged in small group discussions to identify regional challenges and solutions, drawing inspiration from past successes and approaches in other regions.

A presentation from Darlene Norman-Brown of the Fundy North Fishermen's Association highlighted the risks and dangers of at-sea retrieval, the significant voluntary efforts by fishers, and ongoing challenges related to disposal, including limited recycling infrastructure and reliance on temporary stockpile storage. This presentation informed a subsequent group discussion focused on barriers and opportunities related to the collection and disposal of ghost gear.

To open the second day of the workshop, Lindsay Hunt from Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) presented on ghost gear management in Canada through DFO's ghost gear program, touching on successes from the Ghost Gear Fund and indicating future directions for DFO's ghost gear action plan.

Demonstrations were then held by Lewnanny Richardson from Nature NB on how to disassemble a lobster trap on the beach for easy transportation and by Canadian Wildlife Federation who showcased their on-demand gear systems through their CanFISH gear lending program.

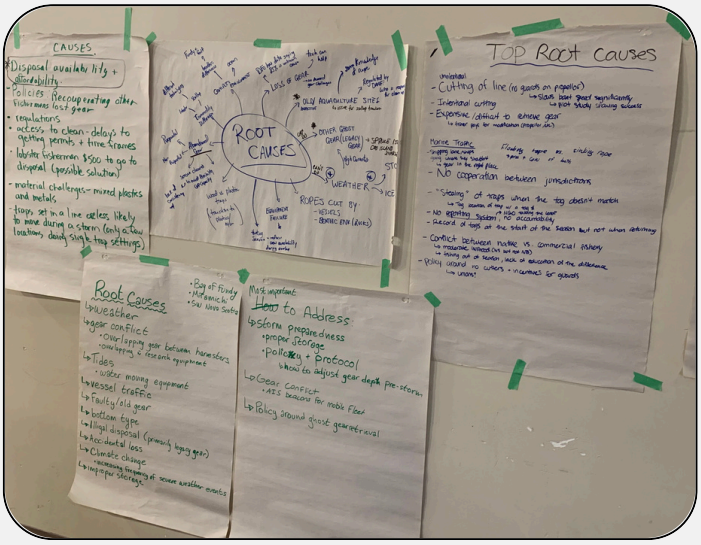
The workshop concluded with a focus on next steps, including strengthening funding pathways and partnerships, increasing regional recycling capacity, enhancing awareness of reporting systems, and improving public understanding of ghost gear retrieval efforts.

This workshop underscored both the urgency and the opportunity to strengthen ghost gear management in Atlantic Canada. Continued collaboration, sustained investment, and coordinated action will be essential to advancing practical, long-term solutions.

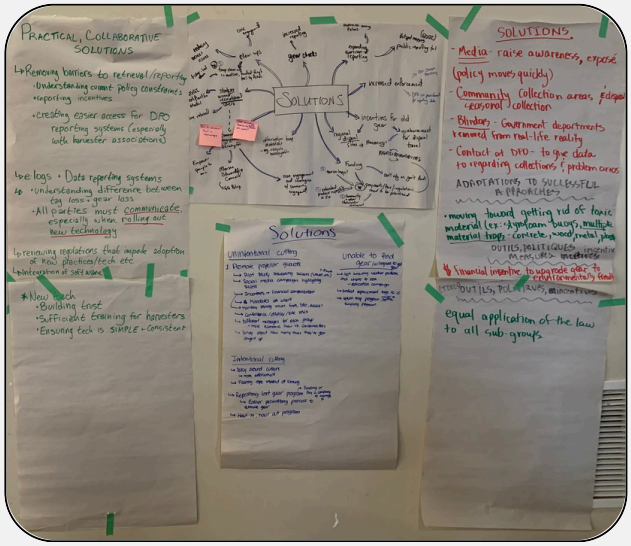
ROOT CAUSES OF GHOST GEAR

Throughout group discussions, several key root causes and barriers to ghost gear management were identified. These causes centered around 3 main themes, summarized below.

- Intentional Gear Loss
- Accidental Gear Loss
- Policy, Regulations, and Enforcement



Key Barriers mind map



Practical Solutions mind map

Intentional Gear Loss

Participants agreed that fishers do not intend to harm wildlife or lose gear, given the associated costs and operational impacts. However, it was acknowledged that gear loss may sometimes be intentional. Examples included the illegal disposal of old or unwanted gear at sea to obtain replacement tags for new gear, linked to limited enforcement of lost gear reporting data by Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

Participants identified several potential mitigation measures of intentional gear abandonment, including limiting the number of replacement tags per season, improving analysis within DFO's gear reporting system to strengthen compliance tracking, and increasing enforcement and penalties for misuse.

Propeller-mounted rope cutting devices were also noted as a contributor to ghost gear. While recognized as an important safety measure, participants emphasized balancing safety with practices that minimize additional loss. Alternatives such as propeller guards—already used in parts of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia—were highlighted as effective, with some wharves requiring them.

Concerns were also raised about intentional damage or vandalism of gear, particularly related to competition between fishers and tensions between commercial and Indigenous fisheries. Participants recommended increased education and public awareness to support understanding and acceptance of differences between commercial and native fisheries, alongside stronger enforcement and penalties to address deliberate harm.

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Accidental Gear Loss

Fishing gear is most commonly lost accidentally due to a range of environmental and operational factors. Key drivers of accidental loss identified during the workshop included storms and ocean currents, interactions with marine traffic (e.g., propeller entanglement or line cutting), equipment failure, and the accumulation of legacy gear that increases the risk of snagging.

Storm events were highlighted as a growing concern, particularly in the context of climate change. Participants emphasized the need for practical mitigation measures, such as promoting the use of trawl systems over single traps where feasible, as they are less likely to be displaced. Additional recommendations included the development of pre-storm retrieval protocols led by port authorities, requiring the removal of gear ahead of major storm events, and the introduction of incentive programs to support the adoption of gear tracking technologies to aid in post-storm recovery.

Marine traffic was also identified as a significant contributor to gear loss, particularly in areas with overlapping multispecies fishing zones, aquaculture, and commercial shipping lanes. Increased vessel activity raises the likelihood of gear being cut or displaced, while also contributing to the accumulation of legacy gear and associated snag risks. To address this, participants recommended improved communication among vessels operating in high-traffic or high-risk areas, the use of sonar technologies to identify and avoid snag-prone zones, and consideration of stronger enforcement or policies to manage vessel traffic in key fishing areas.

Innovative gear solutions were also discussed, including ropeless (on-demand) fishing systems, which significantly reduce the risk of entanglement and gear displacement. These systems have been trialed across Atlantic Canada and are available to fishers through lending programs offered by organizations such as the Canadian Wildlife Federation. Participants noted that improving awareness, accessibility, and affordability of these technologies will be critical to supporting broader adoption.

Canadian Wildlife Federation CanFISH gear lending program on-demand gear demonstration booth

Policy, Regulations, and Enforcement

While many root causes of gear loss are linked to the intentional and accidental factors outlined above, participants stressed that regulatory and enforcement gaps remain a primary barrier to both prevention and retrieval of ghost gear. There was strong consensus that the most effective preventative solutions need to happen at the policy and government level.

Key challenges related to policy, regulations, and enforcement include inconsistent monitoring and enforcement of illegal gear dumping, barriers to obtaining permits for gear retrieval at-sea and on the shoreline, and absence of a clear, accessible, and consistently enforced lost gear reporting system. Together, these gaps contribute to the persistence of ghost gear and increased risks to navigation.

Although less prominent in Atlantic Canada, illegal practices and improper disposal of gear continue to add to the problem. Prominent examples from participants included abandoned aquaculture infrastructure, gear set in inappropriate high-traffic areas, weak penalties for repeated loss or non-compliance of reporting requirements, and limited at-sea enforcement to deter intentional damage—reinforcing the need for stronger, more consistent oversight from fishery and compliance officers.

Regulatory constraints also limit fishers' ability to assist with retrieval. Licensing rules restrict carrying others' gear without permits and confine retrieval to the active fishing season, when time and capacity are limited. Delayed recovery allows gear to drift or degrade, reducing the likelihood of successful retrieval later on. To address these issues, participants called for a streamlined and more flexible permitting process, including post-season retrieval windows to improve efficiency and reduce marine traffic. Exceptions to the permitting requirements for at-sea retrieval or greater communication with the fishery and compliance officers may also improve the success of ghost gear retrieval.

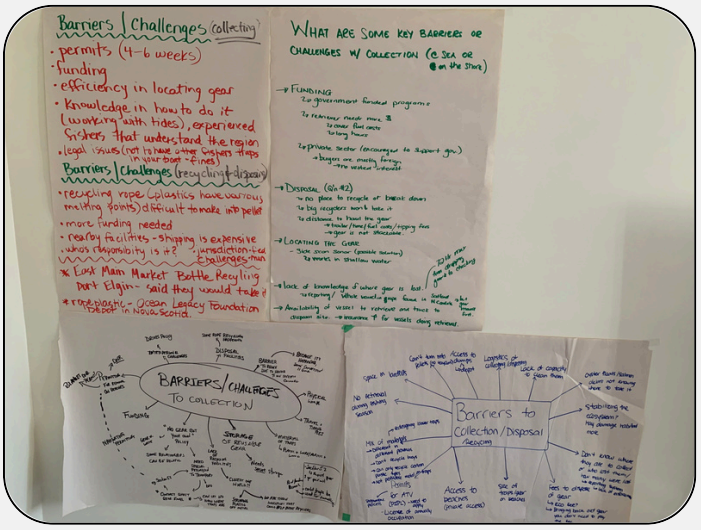
Finally, participants identified some shortcomings in the current lost fishing gear reporting system (FGRS). While fishers are required to report their own lost gear, the system is seen as inaccessible, underutilized, and weakly enforced. Limitations of the system include the inability to report on other fisher's lost gear, lack of integration between the FGRS and DFO's Gear Tag Service Provider Portal for recording replacement tags, and no requirement for fishers to reconcile gear counts at season's end.

CAITLIN FRENKEL
GLOBAL GHOST GEAR INITIATIVE

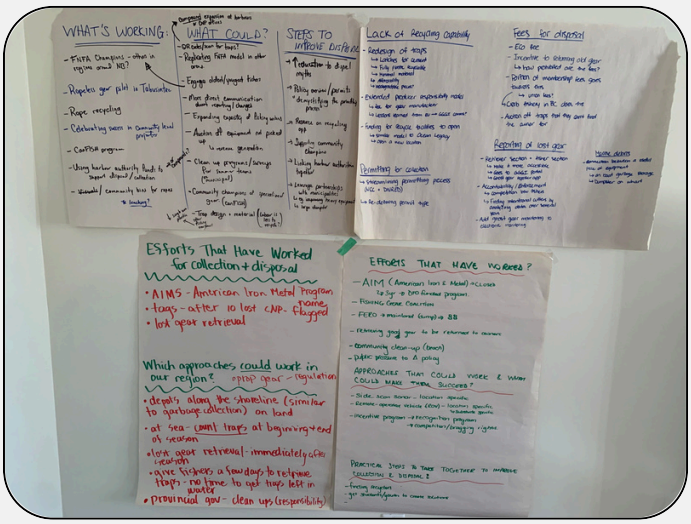
Enhanced reporting could support compliance tracking, identify hotspots for gear loss, and better target retrieval efforts. Participants recommended improving usability of the FGRS, enabling broader reporting of other fisher's lost gear on the same system and without needing to fill out a separate PDF or through an external app, strengthening enforcement and restrictions on replacement tags, and more rigorously analyzing and publicly reporting FGRS data. Mandatory reporting of traps and gear at ports and wharves at the start and end of each season was also proposed to improve accountability.

GEAR COLLECTION AND DISPOSAL

Building on findings from a 2024 workshop, barriers to the collection and disposal of ghost gear remain a significant constraint to achieving effective, full lifecycle management in Atlantic Canada. The following sections outline key challenges identified by participants, along with practical actions to address them.



Key Barriers mind map



Practical Solutions mind map

Barriers to Ghost Gear Collection

Although only the reporting of lost gear is required by Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO), many fishers and organizations actively support retrieval efforts by obtaining permits to collect ghost and legacy gear. DFO has also funded retrieval efforts through the Ghost Gear Fund; however, participants noted that funding often does not fully cover fishers' time or vessel repair costs, limiting long-term participation. Insurance premiums commonly increase on vessels doing retrieval and the vessels require specialized equipment, further limiting participation.

The group identified several key barriers to collection and retrieval of ghost gear, including the difficulty and safety risks of retrieval, insufficient and inconsistent funding to support the work, challenges with the equipment and expertise needed to locate, recover, and transport gear, and a lack of a streamlined permitting process for both at-sea and shoreline collection.

Locating gear was highlighted as a primary challenge. High costs associated with sonar and GPS-based retrieval technologies discourage adoption, as many fishers prioritize other operational expenses. To address this, participants suggested increasing awareness and uptake of these technologies through targeted training, demonstrations, and incentive, trial, or lending programs.

Funding was identified as a critical need to sustain retrieval efforts. Shortly after the workshop, on March 31, Canada announced the renewal of the Ghost Gear Fund, distributing $15M over three years (2026–2029). While this represents important progress, participants emphasized the need for consistent, long-term funding to ensure the durability and impact of these efforts.

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Barriers to Responsible Fishing Gear Disposal

Significant barriers remain to achieving a circular end-of-life model for fishing gear. Once collected, gear faces limited access to appropriate recycling and disposal facilities, high transportation and disposal costs, and challenges associated with breaking down and recycling mixed materials. Lobster traps, nets, and buoys often contain multiple material types, making them difficult to process, while existing local infrastructure lacks the capacity to fully recycle certain plastics in ropes and buoys.

Workshop participants identified several practical actions to address these challenges. To reduce issues associated with mixed materials, there was strong support for investing in research and redesign of fishing gear—particularly lobster traps and ropes—using biodegradable or single-material components to improve recyclability. Participants recommended that these initiatives be supported through programs such as the Ghost Gear Fund and other targeted funding streams such as NSERC.

Incentive-based approaches were also discussed. One proposed solution was the implementation of an environmental deposit or fee applied at the time of gear purchase, which would be refunded upon proper return or disposal. This model could help encourage responsible end-of-life management by reducing financial barriers for fishers.

Additional funding mechanisms were explored, including allocating a portion of fishing union dues or port authority fees to support collection and disposal systems. Similar models have been successfully implemented in west coast crab fisheries and may offer a viable approach in Atlantic Canada with appropriate coordination and stakeholder support.

Participants also highlighted the role of infrastructure and partnerships. While some wharves and ports already serve as informal collection points for end-of-life gear, improved coordination with municipalities and recyclers is needed to ensure proper processing of these materials. Strengthening these partnerships will be key to managing existing stockpiles and improving overall system efficiency.

Finally, participants noted that previous investments through the DFO Ghost Gear Fund helped build capacity among local recyclers to process fishing gear. However, since the program ended, many recyclers have been unable to continue accepting gear due to the high costs and low economic return associated with processing mixed and low-value materials. As a result, increased and sustained investment in recycling infrastructure was identified as critical to supporting long-term, scalable solutions.

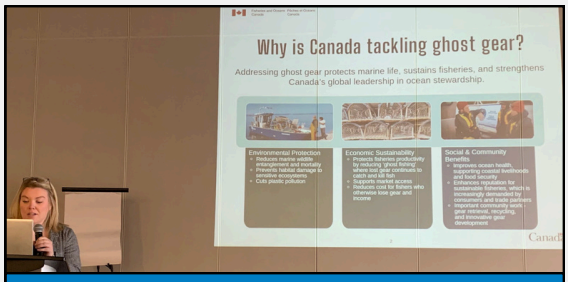
DARLENE NORMAN-BROWN
FUNDY NORTH FISHERMEN'S ASSOCIATION

CANADA'S GHOST GEAR PROGRAM

The group heard from Lindsay Hunt, Fisheries Management Officer with DFO, who presented the department's Ghost Gear Program. Since the program launch in 2019, Lindsay highlighted key achievements including mandating lost gear reporting in 2020 and establishing a Fishing Gear Reporting System (FGRS); implementing the Ghost Gear Fund; international leadership; strengthening regulations and policy frameworks; developing best management practices for fish harvesters; and enhancing compliance and ongoing stakeholder engagement.

Lindsay also highlighted key achievements of the Ghost Gear Fund since its launch in 2020, including distributing over $58M to 144 projects focused on retrieving and disposing of gear, and improving ghost gear technology and management in Canada and internationally. Currently in the second phase of the Canadian Ghost Gear Action Plan, the focus is on receiving input and feedback to inform the development of a prevention-focused strategy that addresses the complex issue of ghost gear. Participants appreciated hearing that consultations have been, and continue to be, held with relevant practitioners, recognizing that meaningful solutions will require broad, collaborative engagement across all stakeholders.

Participants were encouraged to see alignment between DFO's action plan and several of the outcomes from this workshop, and expressed strong interest in continued collaboration with DFO. They emphasized the value of maintaining a regional government contact to support coordination and sustained partnership moving forward.



LINDSAY HUNT
FISHERIES AND OCEANS CANADA

PRIORITY AREAS

Across the two-day workshop, numerous barriers to ghost gear management in Atlantic Canada were identified; however, three key themes emerged as priority areas for action. These areas will guide continued engagement and underpin efforts to advance positive policy and operational change.

Communication

Improving communication among all sector stakeholders is essential to foster collaboration and drive meaningful change for ghost gear management across Canada. Based on conversations at this workshop, the following areas are where there is the greatest need for improved communication.

- Greater awareness and accessibility of the DFO Fishing Gear Reporting System and between reported gear loss and compliance and fishery officers.
- More information sharing on lost gear reporting procedures, recycling locations, and requirements of fishers. This information could be provided annually when fishing licenses are approved—or through a mandatory online training module prior to license renewal.

- Broader information sharing about new innovative gear designs, collection and recycling initiatives, and success stories with both the fishing community and the public to build understanding and inspire broader adoption of new approaches.
- Highlight fisher success stories. Public perception of fishers and ghost gear tends to remain largely negative, it is therefore critical to highlight the positive steps they are taking to manage gear responsibly and contribute positively to solutions.
- Increased education of two-eyed seeing fishery management approaches especially with the general public and youth.
- Increased education and cooperation between commercial and Indigenous fisheries to promote joint efforts to address ghost gear challenges in Atlantic Canada.

Increased Local Recycling Capacity

A key limitation to sustainable ghost gear disposal in Atlantic Canada is the insufficient local recycling capacity. While initiatives such as AIM Recycling in New Brunswick, Ocean Legacy in Nova Scotia, and the Fishing Gear Coalition of Atlantic Canada have demonstrated success, significant gaps remain in the infrastructure needed to fully close the loop on end-of-life fishing gear.

Upgrades to existing facilities are needed to enable the complete reuse of plastics from ropes and nets, alongside expanded access to recycling and stockpile sites. Workshop participants emphasized the importance of sustained partnerships and funding—potentially through collaboration with municipalities, port and wharf authorities, and more diversified funding sources—to support long-term program viability.

Priority next steps include developing an updated online hub to map recycling and stockpile locations for greater awareness, strengthening partnerships with wharves and municipalities to improve infrastructure (such as gear collection bins), and piloting incentive programs to support continued engagement from recycling companies.

Sustainable Funding and Partnerships

Sustained, reliable funding is foundational to advancing solutions for ghost gear management in Atlantic Canada. However, funding alone is not enough—coordinated, cross-sector partnerships are essential to translate resources into meaningful, collective action.

While federal leadership and support from Fisheries and Oceans Canada are critical to guiding these efforts, engagement across all levels of government, municipal, provincial, and federal, is necessary to ensure effective management, shared accountability, and long-term success.

Participants emphasized the importance of expanding collaboration beyond government to include more harvesters, Indigenous communities, fishing gear and technology developers, aquaculture operators, recyclers, youth, fish and seafood processors, and funding organizations. Strengthening these partnerships will be key to driving innovation, scaling solutions, and sustaining progress.

As Elder Connie reminded us at the opening of the workshop, addressing ghost gear is a shared responsibility - advanced through sustained funding and strong, coordinated partnerships.

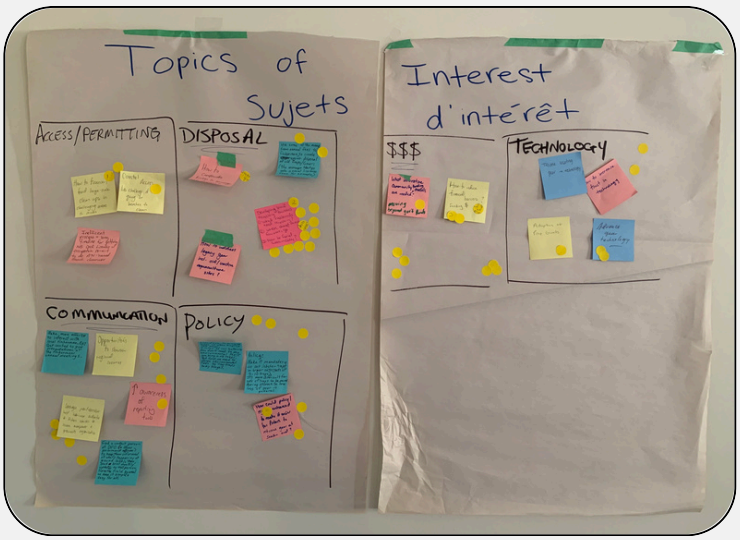
THANK YOU FROM THE PLANNING TEAM!

We would like to extend a sincere thank you to everyone who was able to attend the workshop. Your participation, expertise, and enthusiasm made this a highly productive session grounded in collaborative solutions to a very complex issue.

Looking ahead, we hope to build on this momentum together and move the identified priority areas forward in a collaborative spirit—supporting both Atlantic Canadian fishers' livelihoods and the health of our coastal and marine ecosystems.

-Adam Cheeseman, Zaheera Denath, Jill Young, Emilie Diesbourg

PHOTO COLLAGE



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Global Ghost Gear Initiative (GGGI):

Projects — The Global Ghost Gear Initiative
News — The Global Ghost Gear Initiative
Resources — The Global Ghost Gear Initiative
Data Portal — The Global Ghost Gear Initiative
Ghost Gear Reporter App

Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO):

Canada's Ghost Gear Action Plan virtual engagement sessions (see page below)
Ghost Gear Funded Projects

Canada's Ghost Gear Fund Announcement March 31 2026

Lost Fishing Gear Reporting System

Contact information: DFO.GGProgram-ProgrammeEF.MPO@dfo-mpo.gc.ca

Canadian Wildlife Federation (CWF):

CanFISH on-demand gear lending program information

Canadian Whale Institute (CWI):

WhaleALERT app

Canada's Ghost Gear Action Plan

Fisheries and Oceans Canada's Ghost Gear Program is developing the Canada's Ghost Gear Action Plan. We want to keep working with you on important issues and priority actions. These include reducing risks, retrieving ghost gear, reporting lost gear, storing and disposing of gear, and improving traceability.

Between December 2025 and March 2026, we held in-person workshops but we know that not everyone was able to attend. To make sure everyone has a chance to share their views, we are now offering **virtual engagement sessions**.

We have scheduled several virtual workshops, listed below.

- Some sessions are designed for specific groups or topics, such as recycling and disposal or environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs). These sessions support more focused discussions.
- Other sessions, called National Engagement Workshops 1 to 9, are open to everyone.

Please select your preferred date and time and register for FREE through the Eventbrite link.

Date	Time / Heure (NST/HNT)	Meeting focus / Thème de la réunion:	Eventbrite Link / Lien Eventbrite
April 21, 2026	14:30-18:00	National Engagement Workshop 1 (English)	National Engagement Workshop 1 (English)
22 avril 2026	14:30-18:00	Atelier sur l'engagement national 2 (Français)	National Engagement Workshop 2 (French)
April 23, 2026	13:00-16:30	National Engagement Workshop 3 (English)	National Engagement Workshop 3 (English)
April 27, 2026	13:30-17:00	Indigenous (English)	Ghost Gear Engagement - Indigenous (English)
April 28, 2026	17:30-21:00	National Engagement Workshop 4 (English)	National Engagement Workshop 4 (English)
April 29, 2026	13:30-17:00	National Engagement Workshop 5 (English)	National Engagement Workshop 5 (English)
May 5, 2026	14:30-18:00	ENGOs (English)	Ghost Gear Engagement - ENGO's (English)
May 7, 2026	14:30-18:00	Disposal/Recycling Industry (English)	Ghost Gear Engagement - Disposal/Recycling Industry (English)
May 11, 2026	17:30-21:00	Indigenous (English)	Ghost Gear Engagement - Indigenous (English)
May 12, 2026	14:30-18:00	Governments (Territorial, Federal, Provincial, Municipal) (English)	Ghost Gear Engagement - Governments (Territorial, Federal, Provincial, Municipal) (English)
May 14, 2026	17:30-21:00	National Engagement Workshop 6 (English)	National Engagement Workshop 6 (English)
May 19, 2026	13:30-17:00	National Engagement Workshop 7 (English)	National Engagement Workshop 7 (English)
May 20, 2026	14:30-18:00	National Aquaculture workshop (English)	National Aquaculture Workshop (English)
May 21, 2026	13:30-17:00	Indigenous (English)	Ghost Gear Engagement - Indigenous (English)
May 25, 2026	14:30-18:00	National Engagement Workshop 8 (English)	National Engagement Workshop 8 (English)
26 mai 2026	14:30-18:00	Atelier sur l'engagement national 9 (Français)	National Engagement Workshop 9 (French)

If you have questions or comments or are unable to register online, please contact:
TheGhost Gear Program

Email: DFO.GGProgram-ProgrammeEF.MPO@dfo-mpo.gc.ca

For more information on the Ghost Gear Program, please visit our website:
Canada.ca/ghostgear