

Environmental Studies Research Fund

Annual Report 2023 - 2024



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MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

On behalf of the ESRF Management Board, I am pleased to submit the Environmental Studies Research Fund (ESRF) 2023-2024 Annual Report.

2023-2024 was an exciting year for ESRF as researchers conducted significant field work on commercially and traditionally important species as well as species at risk. This year, ESRF continued funding field research looking at the effect of seismic sound on groundfish species, the migratory behaviour of Atlantic salmon, and the distribution of Leach's Storm-petrel and potential mortality drivers in regions of offshore oil and gas activities.

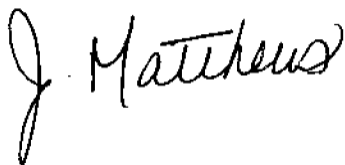
New funding this year has focussed on a series of projects to support the publication of past ESRF-sponsored studies and data into the peer-reviewed scientific literature. This initiative ensures that research conducted under the Fund is widely available to support regulatory decision-making and to increase the visibility of the Fund. Another new multi-year research project is exploring Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) of the First Nations on the East Coast of Canada. This project aims to enhance the capacity of First Nations to use their IKS to provide recommendations and advice to the offshore oil and gas sector, regulatory processes, and broader public policy initiatives.

The 2024-2025 ESRF levy rates for the Southern Region have been approved by the Honourable Jonathan Wilkinson, Minister of Energy and Natural Resources. This approval acknowledges the important work of the ESRF Management Board and has allowed us to start considering the research priority areas for the next five years (2025-2030) and potentially the next research call in the fall of 2024.

The Fund's ongoing support of research in Canada's frontier lands would not be possible without the dedication of the ESRF Management Board members and the Secretariat. This year, I would like to dedicate this 36th annual report to our dear member, Daniel Van Vliet, who recently passed away. Daniel had been very involved within the ESRF over the past six years and his contribution to the Fund will be remembered by all.

We would also like to extend our outermost appreciation to David Taylor, who has recently retired as the Regional Research Manager after having contributed to this research fund for over two decades. His contributions, first as a Public Board member and later as the Regional Research Manager for the Atlantic region, his expert scientific advice, and his sense of humour will be dearly missed.

In closing, best of luck to all researchers this field season and we look forward to discussing your progress and research findings in the coming year.



Jennifer Matthews
Chairperson, ESRF Management Board
May 30, 2024



MANDATE

The Environmental Studies Research Fund (ESRF) is a research program that sponsors studies on environmental and social implications related to oil and gas exploration and development in Canada's frontier lands.

The information arising from these studies is designed to assist all involved stakeholders, including citizens, industry, and government, in their decision making related to oil and gas exploration and development.

Initiated in 1983 under the *Canada Oil and Gas Act (COGA)*, the ESRF now receives its legislated mandate through the superseding legislation, the *Canada Petroleum Resources Act (CPRA)*, proclaimed in February 1987. As well, the *Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Atlantic Accord Implementation Act* and the *Canada-Nova Scotia Offshore Petroleum Resources Accord Implementation Act* provide legislative direction in the Fund's Southern Regions.



Testing catch rates of commercial snow crab before, during and after seismic survey.
Credit: Corey Morris, DFO

ESRF research is funded by levies on oil and gas companies that hold licenses for exploration and development in Canada's frontier lands.

The Minister of Energy and Natural Resources is responsible for the administration of the ESRF South Account for regions mainly south of 60° latitude, including the Hudson Bay, and the Minister of Northern Affairs is responsible for the administration of the North Account for regions north of 60° (See Annex 1 for a map of ESRF Prescribed Regions).

ESRF MANAGEMENT BOARD

The ESRF is directed by a twelve-member joint government/industry/public Management Board and is administered by a Secretariat that resides within the Offshore Petroleum Management Division of Natural Resources Canada.

The ESRF Management Board members are selected for their expertise and specialized technical knowledge relative to the mandate of the Fund. Management Board members are appointed jointly by the Minister of Northern Affairs, and the Minister of Natural Resources.

The ESRF Management Board directs the business of the Fund, sets priorities for study topics, determines the program budget and facilitates the development of study proposals.

MEMBERS

Private Sector

Jennifer Matthews, Chairperson
Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers

Sherry Becker
Imperial

Steve Bettles
Cenovus Energy

Thomas McKeever
Equinor Canada Ltd

Public Sector

Julie vanTol
Southern Regions

Vicki Sahanatien
Northern Regions

Government of Canada

Appointment in progress
Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada

Laura Maclean
Environment and Climate Change Canada

Liisa Peramaki
Fisheries and Oceans Canada

Genevieve Carr
Canada Energy Regulator

Offshore Petroleum Boards

Dena Murphy
Canada-Nova Scotia Offshore Petroleum Board

Elizabeth Young
Canada-Newfoundland & Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board

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Website: www.esrfunds.org



ESRF Management Board members (October 2022)
Credit: Julie Marcil

ESRF RESEARCH PRIORITY AREAS 2020-2025

The ESRF Management Board (Board) sets its research priority areas by considering the issues and data gaps in the context of its mandate. The composition of the Board and the collective experience of its members provides a means to this end, as does the advice from the Board's East Coast Advisory Committee and Northern Advisory Committee. Those advisory groups are comprised of a diverse group of stakeholders from each specific regions with interests in, and concerns for, offshore oil and gas development.

Due to the [Order Prohibiting Certain Activities in Arctic Offshore Waters, 2022](#), no funding for research is levied in the northern region at this time. However, the Environmental Studies Research Fund is currently funding one marine monitoring project using funds levied prior to the 2016 moratorium.

SEABIRDS

From the beginning of oil and gas production operations on the East Coast in the 1990s, there has been concern over the effect of oil spills on seabirds and the possible issue of seabird attraction to offshore oil and gas installations. Environmental assessments on the East Coast have consistently identified the potential effects of oil spills on seabird populations as significant. Consequently, the Fund has supported seabird studies including, but not limited to:

- updating baseline data on seabird population distributions across the East Coast Offshore,
- considering the effects of low levels of hydrocarbons on seabird feathers,
- experimental studies on the ability of observers to detect and track actual and surrogate seabird carcasses in support of estimates of seabird mortality due to oil spills; and,
- seabird attraction to offshore platforms

In the coming years, the Fund will support projects to further study seabird attraction to offshore oil and gas platforms, with a specific emphasis on Leach's storm-petrel, a threatened species ([COSEWIC, 2020](#)), that is declining on the East Coast. These initial studies will provide the basis for making research decisions on a broader research program that may include experimental work on attraction of seabirds to offshore installations.

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

The recent Regional Assessment of Offshore Oil and Gas Exploratory Drilling East of Newfoundland and Labrador highlighted Indigenous communities' concerns over the implications of offshore oil and gas development for Atlantic Salmon survival at sea. The Fund is currently supporting work on this topic by a research consortium led by Fisheries and Oceans Canada. This project involves a tagging and tracking study that will document the migratory behavior of Atlantic Salmon from their natal rivers in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec in relation to areas of concentrated oil and gas activities in the Northwest Atlantic.

In collaboration with the Atlantic Policy Conference of First Nations Chiefs Secretariat, the Fund has supported a webinar project to communicate Indigenous perspectives to stakeholders engaged in offshore oil and gas development and regulation.

CLIMATE CHANGE

The Board recognizes that climate change is a global challenge and factor in all exploration and development considerations and is cognizant of the large and growing body of research both domestically and internationally in this space.

The Board will continue to consider potential research priorities that would contribute to our understanding of climate change in the specific context of regulatory decision-making for oil and gas activities in frontier regions.

MARINE MAMMALS AND FISH

This research priority area has encompassed a wide variety of ESRF-funded studies in the past, including,

- mapping of fish spawning areas across the East Coast (2003-2010);
- modeling the effects of noise on marine mammals in Nova Scotia's Gully area (2015-2017);
- assessing the effects of oil platform operational discharges on larval stages of commercial fish species (2016-2018);
- testing the toxicity of crude oil with or without the addition of dispersant (2014-2020);
- assessing the effects of marine seismic survey noise on snow crabs and fish (2014-2020); and,
- comparing of various methods for detecting marine mammals at sea (2014-2019).

Research undertaken by ESRF often informs more than one research priority area. Current work on Atlantic Salmon described in the Indigenous knowledge priority area above is an example of cross-cutting research. Similarly, work on the East Coast marine soundscape noted under the Marine Noise priority area below, served to map the distribution of marine mammals across the East Coast offshore and detected the presence of bottle-nosed whales in an area not previously identified as a congregation area for the species in the past.

The Fund's current research priorities related to marine mammals and fish are building on past ESRF sponsored studies with a focus on the need to improve understanding of marine mammal distributions in the deeper waters of the Newfoundland and Labrador Offshore. This is of high importance as the oil and gas industry moves to explore and develop operations in the deep waters off the continental shelf. Equally important, especially in the context of climate change, is building understanding of fish spawning and rearing areas in the offshore and how they may change in the coming decades in response to changing oceanographic parameters such as temperature, salinity and acidity.

CORAL AND SPONGE COMMUNITIES

The Fund identified the topic of potential effects of drill cuttings on coral and sponge communities near offshore drilling operations as worthy of study. This is a concern given that oil and gas exploration and potential production operations are moving into deeper shelf slope and off-shelf waters.

In the early 2000s, the Fund supported an effort to map sponges and corals across the East Coast Offshore in collaboration with Fisheries and Oceans Canada. Since then, in the context of the marine protected areas initiative, the Federal Government has undertaken considerable research and policy development in this area.

In future calls for proposals, the Board will consider if targeted work on effects of drill cuttings on sponges and corals in relation to oil and gas activities is needed to support regulatory decision making.

OIL SPILL EFFECTS AND RESPONSE

The environmental implications of oil spills and responses to these events have long been a focus of East Coast environmental assessment processes and consequently for the Fund, reaching back to the Hibernia Project environmental assessment in the 1980s.

Pursuant to the Oceans Protection Plan, the Government of Canada has placed emphasis on improvements to Canada's oil spill response regime with research on alternative spill response measures, including the use of spill treating agents (e.g., dispersants). The Fund has conducted targeted research in this area for many years with recent projects focused on the toxicity of dispersed oil and dispersants to early life stages of commercially important fish and shellfish species. In addition, effects on seabirds from oil spills has also been a research focus as outlined under that research priority below.

The Fund's currently stated research priorities encompass timely and effective oil spill treatment strategies and spill fate and effects modeling. In this context, the Management Board is closely monitoring the Federal Multi-Partner Research Initiative under the Oceans Protection Plan to ensure any specific research projects it might fund complement and/or follow up on the outcomes of that initiative.

MARINE NOISE

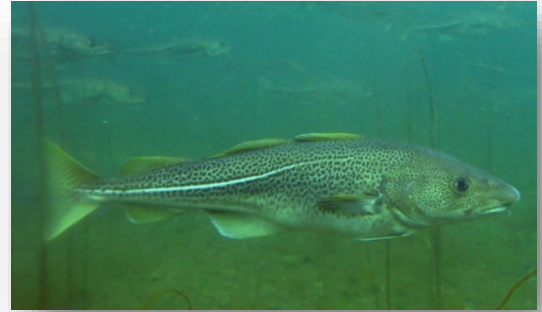
Stemming from the ongoing concerns of fishers for the effect of seismic surveys on catch rates of commercial fish species, the Fund is supporting cutting-edge research on the potential effects of 2D and 3D seismic on snow crab and groundfish in offshore Newfoundland and Labrador. It is currently supporting similar innovative work on commercial groundfish species.

In addition, research on the soundscape and sound propagation at 20 locations across the East Coast offshore, with the objective of improving sound propagation modelling including marine mammals, was recently published under the Fund.

CURRENT RESEARCH PROJECTS 2023-2024

Assessment of Potential Risks of Seismic Surveys to Affect Groundfish Resources

Project Lead: Corey Morris
Organization: Fisheries and Oceans Canada
ESRF Funding: \$6,171,500 over five years



Credit: Corey Morris, DFO

Project Description

Oil and gas exploration in East Coast offshore has been very active at a time when the fishing industry in this same area is becoming increasingly reliant on rebuilding the groundfish fishery. The effects of ocean noise on marine life is a growing concern globally, however the specific impacts including non-lethal effects and how they are manifested remains poorly defined for many species groups including fish. This project will examine potential risks of seismic air gun surveys to affect commercially important and culturally important groundfish species, including commercial catchability, and fish behaviour (movement).

Atlantic salmon in the Eastern Canadian offshore regions: timing, duration and the effects of environmental variability and climate change

Project Lead: Martha Robertson
Organization: Fisheries and Oceans Canada
ESRF Funding: \$11,789,453 over five years



Team member holding a tagged salmon in the current after its recovery from the anesthetic and tagging procedures.

Credit: Kyle Denny

Project Description

Of the Atlantic Canadian fish species, Atlantic salmon has one of the most complex life histories and migration patterns. Post-spawned adult (kelt) and juvenile (post-smolt) salmon migrate from their native freshwater river to the Atlantic Ocean to feed, sometimes even as far as the Labrador Sea. This project is using acoustic and satellite tags with an array of tag tracking receivers and satellite telemetry to better understand the migratory behaviour (location and habitat use) of salmon while at sea. The objective of this project is to determine when, where and for how long Atlantic salmon from different life stages (juvenile post-smolt, post-spawned kelt and multi-sea winter adults) are in the Eastern Canadian offshore regions. Results will support regulatory decision making in Canada's areas of offshore oil and gas activity.

Project's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1620973028291992/>

Using tracking technologies to evaluate overlap of Leach’s storm-petrel with offshore oil and gas platforms

Project Lead: April Hedd

Organization: Environment and Climate Change Canada

ESRF Funding: \$561,500 over four years



Source: Laura MacFarlane Tranquilla

Project Description

Seabird attraction to offshore oil and gas installations and vessels in the East Coast offshore has been a topic of concern for more than 20 years. A basic understanding of the nature (if, when, how) and consequences of seabird attraction and interaction with offshore oil and gas platforms is still unavailable. This is of particular concern for Leach’s Storm-petrels, as it is threatened and thought to be one of the species most at risk. The focus of this project is to use emerging miniaturized tracking technologies to rigorously quantify the spatial overlap of breeding Leach’s Storm-petrel marine habitat with offshore oil and gas operations in the region. This project will enhance our understanding of Leach’s Storm-petrel habitat use in space and time in Canada East Coast offshore and contribute significantly to the regulatory decisions that need to be made with respect to the effect of offshore platforms on this species populations.

Integrated population modeling to understand the drivers of declining Leach’s Storm-petrels in Eastern Canada

Project Lead: Greg Robertson

Organization: Environment and Climate Change Canada

ESRF Funding: \$430,000 over three years

Project Description

Newfoundland and Labrador host the largest breeding colonies of Leach's Storm-petrel in the world and this species is considered most at risk of attraction and stranding at offshore installations in Atlantic Canada. Colony surveys have noted large declines in Atlantic Canada and adult survival rates are well below levels expected for this species. This project will use existing data and information sources to develop a population model for Leach’s Storm-petrel. The model will aim to determine the key demographic drivers responsible for the observed decline in many Leach’s Storm-petrel populations and evaluate the potential role that offshore oil and gas operations may be playing.

Literature reviews on seabird attraction to artificial light and seabird detection methods for East Coast offshore oil and gas installations

Project Lead: Justin So
Organization: WSP E&I Canada Limited
ESRF Funding: \$265,790 over three years

Project Description

The objective of this project is to carry out a comprehensive and complementary literature reviews - one focused on the attraction of seabirds to artificial light and the second focused on methods of seabird detection that can prove potentially useful in an offshore oil and gas installation context. The Project will build on previous reviews of the scientific literature brought up to date with current peer reviewed literature, other relevant published and unpublished data and information and engagement with stakeholders and recognized experts.



Source: WSP

Using undersea autonomous glider technology to monitor marine mammals and ship noise in the eastern Beaufort Sea

Project Lead: Stephen Insley
Organization: Wildlife Conservation Society Canada
ESRF Funding: \$153,635 over four years

Project Description

Populations of bowhead whales have been difficult to find during the Beaufort Sea annual surveys. Researchers suspect that individuals may have migrated later and/or further offshore than usual, or even the possibility that some did not migrate at all. The use of an autonomous glider will allow to record sound continuously along acoustic transects and to go much further offshore than currently deployed acoustic receivers. The results will inform whether the bowhead migration route and timing has shifted further offshore and later in the season. In addition, the results will also supplement the core-use areas posted for both beluga and bowhead whales used in the Canadian Coast Guard Notice to mariners (NOTMAR) whale avoidance broadcasts and serve as important information for any future assessments of potential oil and gas activities in the area.



Source: Paul Nicklin

Exploring diversity in Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Community engagement by the Atlantic Regional Aboriginal Aquatic Resource and Oceans Management (AAROM) Organizations

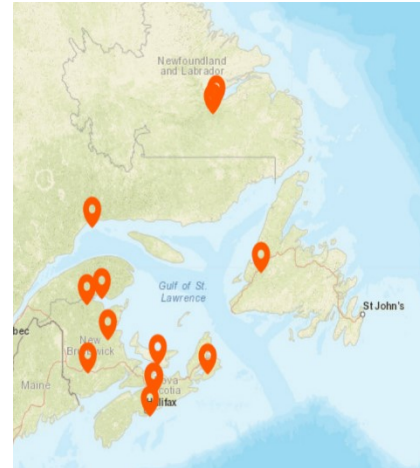
Project Lead: Melissa Nevin

Organization: Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs Secretariat

ESRF Funding: \$973,379 over four years

Project Description

Conceptualized as a knowledge system, IKS captures the understanding that knowledge is acquired in many ways. The knowledge itself is derived from practice, adaptation, and transmission, and is informed by values derived from an underlying belief system. IKS are dynamic, complex, ongoing, comprehensive, but more importantly, they are based on ways of knowing that is uniquely tribal and place based. As such, there may be as many Indigenous Knowledge Systems as there are Indigenous nations. The project will provide support and resources to AAROM organisations on Canada's East Coast to gather information and best practices, and to develop regional approaches to address the use of IKS in informed decision-making in the offshore.



Source: APC – AAROM locations

ESRF Publication Fund

ESRF Funding: \$125,000 over two years

Project Description

Technical reports from ESRF sponsored projects from 1985 onward are publicly available on the [ESRF publication page](#). However, those reports are sometimes considered grey literature by the regulatory community and not always taken into consideration when it comes to supporting or making regulatory decisions. The purpose of the ESRF Publication Fund is to support the publication of past ESRF-sponsored research into the peer-reviewed, open access literature, to ensure that ESRF-funded research is recognized by regulators, stakeholders and the public as a reliable and credible source of research and scientific information to support regulatory decision-making in Canada's offshore areas.



Source: freepik.com

FINANCIAL STATEMENTS

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

The ESRF Management Board is responsible for the presentation of the annual financial statements to the Ministers of Natural Resources and Northern Affairs pursuant to the *Canada Petroleum Resources Act*.

Levies are collected from oil and gas companies that hold licenses for exploration and development in Canada's frontier lands. In accordance with the *Canada Petroleum Resources Act*, when a license is issued during the course of the year, levies are collected for the current year and the two years prior. The collection of unpaid levies is pursued on an ongoing basis by the ESRF Secretariat.

Table 1 below shows the fiscal information for the annual expenditures for ESRF in the 2023-2024 fiscal year. All expenses are paid out of the fiscal year in which they are invoiced.

In 2023-2024, the total study expenditures for the ESRF amounted to \$2,897,195. Administration costs for this period were \$279,135. Revenues collected through levies were \$2,386,968, with a total \$690,149 remaining in outstanding levies in the South as of March 31, 2024 (refer to Table 2 for details).

Table 1 – ESRF Expenditures April 1, 2023, to March 31, 2024 (in dollars)

REGION	OPENING CASH BALANCE APRIL 1, 2023 (\$)	TOTAL REVENUE, LEVIES & RETURNS (\$)	ADMINISTRATION COSTS (\$)	STUDY PROGRAM COSTS (\$)	CLOSING BALANCE MARCH 31, 2024 (\$)
SOUTH REGION	5,401,537	2,386,968	279,135	2,894,195	4,615,174
NORTH REGION	51,187	0	0	0	51,187
TOTAL	5,452,724	2,386,968	279,135	2,897,195	4,666,361

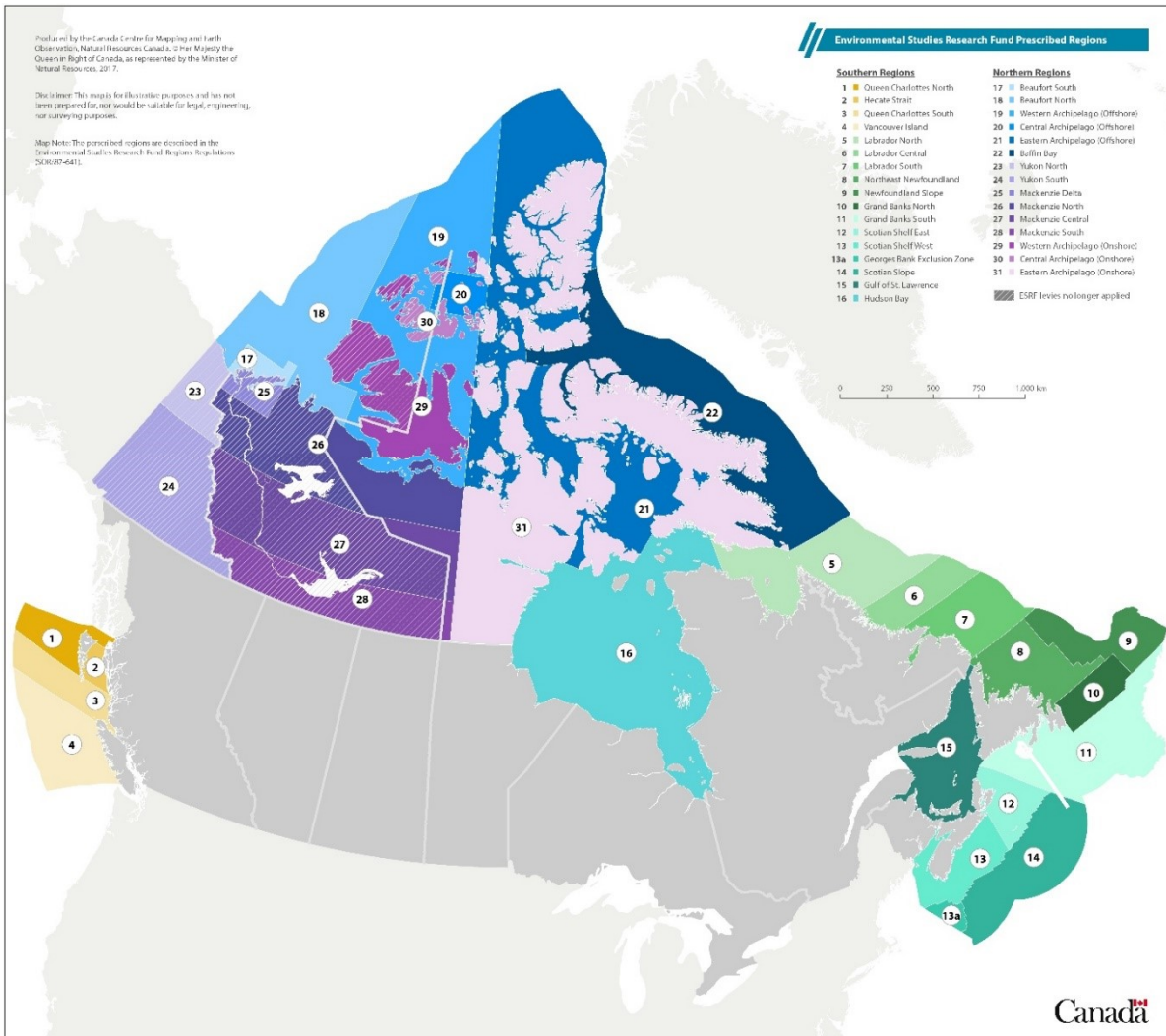
NOTE: The Public Accounts of Canada closing balances for the Southern and Northern Regions at the end of the 2023-2024 fiscal year may differ. Given accounting processes at year-end, the distribution of Administration Costs between the regional accounts is not possible until the new fiscal year. The Administration Costs in this table account for the redistribution of funds between the accounts.

Table 2 – ESRF Regional sub accounts – Levy income 2023-2024 (in dollars)

REGION	LEVY RATE Levy 35 2023-2024 (\$/Hectare)	REVENUES Levy 35 2023-2024 (\$)	REVENUES Back Levies (\$)	TOTAL LEVY INCOME (\$)
1	Queen Charlottes North	0	-	-
2	Hecate Strait	0	-	-
3	Queen Charlottes South	0	-	-
4	Vancouver Island	0	-	-
5	Labrador North	1.1734	8,524	8,524
6	Labrador Central	1.1734	17,810	17,810
7	Labrador South	1.1734	6,622	6,622
8	Northeast Newfoundland	1.1734	303,744	303,744
9	Newfoundland Slope	0.3048	590,922	590,922
10	Grand Banks North	1.1734	1,050,229	1,050,229
11	Grand Banks South	1.1734	281,523	281,523
12	Scotian Shelf East	1.1001	127,594	127,594
13	Scotian Shelf West	1.1001	-	-
14	Scotian Slope	1.1001	-	-
15	Gulf of St. Lawrence	1.1734	- ¹	-
16	Hudson Bay	0	-	-
	Total South		\$2,386,968	\$0
				\$2,386,968
17	Beaufort South	0	-	-
18	Beaufort North	0	-	-
19	Western Archipelago- Offshore	0	-	-
20	Central Archipelago-Offshore	0	-	-
21	Eastern Archipelago-Offshore	0	-	-
22	Baffin Bay	0	-	-
23	Yukon North	0	-	-
24	Yukon South	0	-	-
25	Mackenzie Delta	0	-	-
26	Mackenzie North	0	-	-
27	Mackenzie Central	0	-	-
28	Mackenzie South	0	-	-
29	Western Archipelago-Onshore	0	-	-
30	Central Archipelago-Onshore	0	-	-
31	Eastern Archipelago-Onshore	0	-	-
	Total North		\$0	\$0
	TOTAL			\$2,386,968

¹ A levy of \$690,149 remains outstanding in this region as of March 31, 2024.

ANNEX 1: ESRF REGIONAL MAP



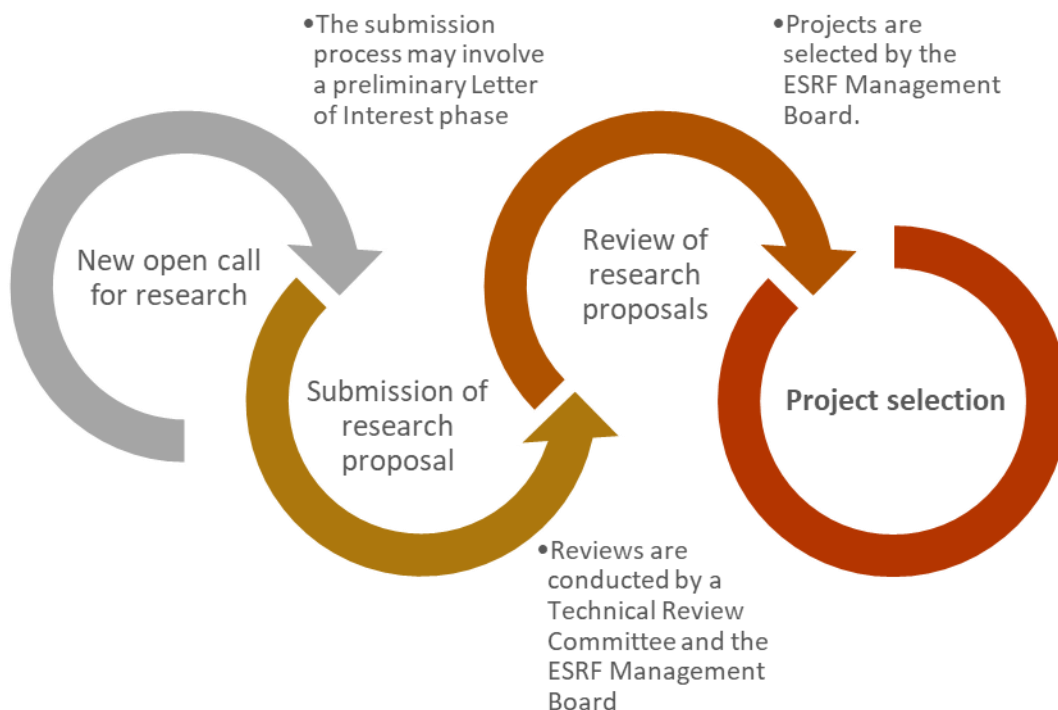
ANNEX 2: OPEN CALL FOR RESEARCH & STUDY SELECTION PROCESS

ESRF uses an open call for research proposals to select new projects. These calls are based on research priority areas previously identified by the ESRF Management Board. Open calls are posted on the [Fund's website](#) and distributed via the ESRF mailing list. Anyone interested in being added to the mailing list can contact the [ESRF Secretariat](#).

ELIGIBLE FUNDING RECIPIENTS must be:

- Legal entities validly incorporated or registered in Canada, including:
 - For profit and not for profit organizations such as companies, industry associations, research associations, etc.;
 - Indigenous organizations and groups;
 - Community groups; and
 - Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions; or
- Federal, provincial, territorial, regional and municipal governments and their departments, agencies and research centres.

THE STUDY SELECTION PROCESS FOLLOWS FOUR DISTINCT PHASES



ANNEX 3: BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PAST ESRF PUBLICATIONS, 1985 - 2023

All ESRF studies are subject to a scientific/technical peer review. Reports that are deemed to be scientifically or technically significant are published in the ESRF Technical Report Series. Since its inception in 1983, the ESRF has published over 220 reports and related studies.

All published reports and studies are available for download through the ESRF website:
<https://www.esrfunds.org/publications>

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