

## UK retailers split on MSC as more tuna vessels apply for certification

Over the past few months several companies have announced that their tuna fleets are entering Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification, and retailers in Europe seem keen to take advantage of that.

The Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) islands fishery remains the largest tuna purse seine fishery in the world, and at last count almost 300 vessels had applied for full chain-of-custody certification there.

"This is consumer and market-driven," said Maurice Brownjohn, PNA commercial manager, recently. "Retailers and consumers are very mindful of sustainability of the resources and this is why companies are looking towards MSC as being the gold standard for such practices."

Sainsbury's has been the MSC's strongest supporter of the UK retailers for the past five years, selling £149 million worth of the blue eco-labeled seafood in 2013- 14. This was gathered from sales of 163 different MSC products.

"In Sainsbury's 20x20 plan we have an aim on sustainable seafood," the retailer told *Undercurrent News*. "That is to ensure all the fish we sell will be independently certified as sustainable, and we'll strengthen our position as the leading retailer for sustainable seafood."

"Sainsbury's... recognizes the value of third party labeling that consumers can trust. Others must follow their lead if they want to maintain growth in market share over the long term," said Toby Middleton, MSC UK country manager, when the eco-label announced Sainsbury's strong lead.

Second in terms of UK sales of MSC products is Waitrose, with 79 certified seafood products.

"We're keen for our tuna to be 100% MSC certified," the retailer confirmed to *Undercurrent* when asked whether the increasing number of vessels looking for certification was of interest.

“At the moment 100% of our skipjack tuna is MSC certified (all tuna in salads, sandwiches etc as well as all tinned), and our fish team is working on certification for all our yellowfin tuna at the moment.”

“We're keen to achieve this as soon as possible, as it will mean that 100% of our 'big five' species are independently certified.”

Other UK retailers though seem to be less committed to MSC products – which of course is not to say their sourcing is any less sustainable, but just that they might stand less with one single body.

Tesco has stalled with the number of MSC eco-labeled products on its shelves going from 17 in 2010 to 18 in 2014, and Wm Morrison Supermarkets' commitment to the label has dropped from 12 to eight, with Asda's similarly falling from 27 to 21 certified products over the same period.

“We see MSC certification of supply chains as an important tool in the selection of high value wild caught seafood products, such as tuna, where the risk of illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing activity may be increased,” Morrisons' seafood buyer Huw Thomas told *Undercurrent*.

Tesco, meanwhile, directed *Undercurrent* to its website, which states:

“As the UK's largest fishmonger with over 600 counters, we believe we have an important role to play, together with our suppliers, national and international bodies, to maintain and increase our commitment to sustainable fishing.”

It recognizes the worth of MSC, it said, and also works with other bodies within the UK Sustainable Seafood Coalition (SSC), “to ensure transparency and consistency when it comes to how we communicate sustainability to our customers”.

As one source positioned in the tuna supply chain outside of Europe told *Undercurrent*: “I think you will see more big companies developing their own in-house standards for sustainability, or maybe even industry-wide guidelines, rather than depending solely upon MSC.”

“As long as the consumer buys whatever 'proof' of sustainability ends up on the package, it will fly. I think the hope is that sustainability efforts help to reduce fishing effort a bit, eventually trimming back the number of players in the fishing game.

“This should help to stabilize the fish price at level that everyone in the supply chain can live with. Stabilize is the key word; it is the ups and downs that hurt.”

The SSC, set up by NGO ClientEarth and backed by the majority of the UK's main retailers and processors, is designed to give consumers certainty about what environmental claims on fish and seafood actually mean.

There is also an onus on signatories to devise plans for the improvement of medium or high risk fisheries or farms – the type of issue which was raised towards the end of 2014 when the EU banned Sri Lankan imports, despite numerous UK partners working to improve the yellowfin fishery there.

### **PNA popularity**

As well as the 295 vessels looking for MSC certification in the PNA fishery, 14 more recently went public with the South Pacific Tuna Corporation signing a memorandum of understanding with PNA's marketing arm Pacifical.

Tri Marine too announced it is seeking MSC certification for its ten tuna purse seiners catching in the Western and Central Pacific, in January 2015.

MSC certification for the PNA fishery has been long sought by retailers in Europe, such as Denmark's Dansk Supermarket, Dutch distributor Anova and Spar in Austria. There has been a significant ramp up in interest in recent months as companies better understand the world recognized MSC ecolabel, said Brownjohn.

Around a year ago, the managing director of Pacifical, Henk Brus, warned that the fact that there was around 400,000 metric tons of certified fish, and huge demand, but hardly any sales since the certification, meant MSC's impact on the fishery had been disappointing.

He suggested the chain of custody was losing \$1 million every day.

Source : <http://www.undercurrentnews.com/2015/02/03/uk-retailers-split-on-msc-as-more-tuna-vessels-apply-for-certification/>