



Photos courtesy of Eilan Park for the Watershed Watch Salmon Society

MSC under fire

Pending Fraser River sockeye certification sparks controversy

By Lisa Duchene

With their ruby red flesh the sockeye salmon in British Columbia's Fraser River system are nothing short of magnificent: a delicious cornerstone of Canadian cuisine and culture. So when about 9 million sockeye spoiled government predictions and failed to return to the Fraser last summer, a firestorm followed.

The fishery was closed for the third straight year. The mystery of the vanished fish sparked bold headlines, a formal judicial inquiry and became the latest flashpoint for controversy over the Marine Stewardship Council and its pending certification of the fishery.

The Commission of Inquiry into the Decline of Sockeye Salmon in the Fraser River (informally the "Cohen Commission") is gathering

information about the stock's decline. Fishery management has been both called into question and ruled out. Many implicate the province's farmed salmon industry, which holds about 6,000 acres and 130 sites and actively farms 60 to 70 sites and 750 acres at any one time.

Two of the Fraser's subpopulations of sockeye, in Sakinaw Lake and Cultus Lake, have been listed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, but the federal government has decided against protection. By August, the Cohen Commission is due to report on the five previous formal inquiries into BC Fraser River sockeye since 1982. Its final report is due in May 2011. There have been eight other government reports on sockeye since 1982.

With all its issues, does Fraser River sockeye sound like a candidate for MSC certification and an eco-label in the seafood case?

The BC Salmon Marketing Council thinks so, as does the independent certifier, TAVEL Certification of Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, which determined the fishery should be certified as sustainable and well-managed after nine years of rigorous assessment.

Grant Snell, general manager of the BC Salmon Marketing Council, the applicant for sockeye certification, says MSC certification means management is appropriate. To Snell, the cancellation of the fishery indicates responsible regulation.

"I understand people's consternation. They say the return of the sockeye to the Fraser River is too low," says Snell. "But it's generally accepted that the management of the commercial fishery is not one of the causes. The fact that

Fraser River sockeye fishery may get the MSC nod despite being closed for three years.

those fish were not coming back last year was identified early in the summer by testing procedures and management actions were taken so that the commercial fishery did not impact the fish."

Four groups — three conservation and one representing indigenous people — have formally objected to the fishery's certification, pledging to pay up to about \$23,000 (15,000 British pounds) for an independent adjudicator to review the case and any related costs. MSC collects the actual costs from objectors at the end of the process.

Watershed Watch Salmon Society, David Suzuki Foundation and SkeenaWild Conservation Trust, along with the Gitskan native tribes, filed notices of objection on March 1. An independent adjudicator has been appointed to make sure MSC has followed all its rules and procedures and correctly applied the science. In their objection statement, the conservation groups argue the assessment is based upon self-scoring from Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

"The DFO self-assessment contained little or no referencing or data at all. This information is out-of-date and not credible given that it was a self-assessment by a politically-led agency that regularly has to lobby for support from within government," says their statement.

Daniel Pauly says MSC should not be certifying B.C. sockeye with a cloud hanging over it. Pauly is a fisheries biologist at the University of British Columbia and

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denigration of the Censea brand.

According to the article, the marketing director of The Hills Market said the store recently began to offer a "higher quality frozen, cooked cocktail shrimp by switching brands from Censea to Contessa Premium Foods." As a result, the store was able to offer discounts on its shrimp. Although it is nice that The Hills Market is able to buy Contessa shrimp (a brand with which we have no quarrel) at a price low enough to discount, it does not logically follow that Contessa's discountable shrimp is better than that of Censea. Moreover, a statement that one company's shrimp is of a better quality implies an objective fact, not just an opinion such as "we believe it tastes better." Yet, The Hills Market marketing director provided no basis whatsoever for her alleged factual statement.

The fact is Censea shrimp has long been prized throughout the United States. Our shrimp is carried at well-known specialty and gourmet stores like DiBruno Brothers in Philadelphia and Sendik's Food Markets in Milwaukee. We supply some of the finest retail and foodservice chains in the United States, not to mention upscale resorts in St. Maarten

and other parts of the Caribbean.

Censea's customers value the consistently high quality of our shrimp. They often tell us how much they appreciate the fact that we are one of the few companies that still sells shrimp in see-through bags that allow the customers to see the high quality of the product they are getting, rather than just a pretty picture of what the shrimp is supposed to look like.

It is in the interest of the marketing director for The Hills Market to try to put the best light on the product it is now carrying. There was no basis for *SeaFood Business* to take the comments from the marketing director of a small store like The Hills as fact and in the process demean the Censea brand. For some 50 years, Censea has been known as one of the quality leaders of the industry. We want your readers to be made aware of the facts about the quality of Censea shrimp.

Lee Feigon, president
Censea
Northfield, Ill.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

SeaFood Business is committed to accurate reporting, which regularly includes fact-checks and quote checks. The article includes the opinion of a buyer; we are committed to reporting the views of buyers and sellers, both big and small.

Going Green

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principal investigator of the Sea Around Us Project, which studies fisheries' impact on marine ecosystems. The sockeye issue illustrates how the council is drifting from its mission and leaning toward industry interests, he says.

Pauly also publicly criticized MSC in an article published in the September 2009 issue of *The New Republic*.

"[MSC] has lost its mooring in conservation and is certifying fisheries that are well-run in the sense of having good chain of custody, etc., but this has nothing to do with environmental sustainability," Pauly told *SeaFood Business*. "The pressure is intense for them to make lots of fish available. But if lots of fish were sustainably managed, we wouldn't have the crisis of fisheries we have, and that's the dilemma we find ourselves in." Pauly worries that in five to 10 years, the promised improvements in the water won't materialize.

MSC is no stranger to controversy. Starting with its creation in 1997 by Unilever and the World Wildlife Fund, the London-based nonprofit has walked a fine line between commercial and conservation interests. It was under fire in 2004 during certification of the Alaska pollock fishery. Two studies, financed separately by Pew Charitable Trusts and the Packard Foundation, that year criticized

the MSC for lax application of standards and a lack of credibility with conservation groups.

The sockeye controversy has reignited the debate about MSC certification.

"What [MSC] certification means is that the stock is being managed sustainably," says Kerry Coughlin, MSC's regional director of the Americas. "That doesn't mean it necessarily equates with abundance at any one time if the management response is appropriate."

Continues Coughlin: "The MSC looks at [the questions]: Is the fishing activity at a level that's sustainable for the fish population? Are fishing operations managed to maintain the structure, productivity, function and diversity of the ecosystem? Is there management in place to respond to changing circumstances and maintain sustainability?"

MSC has been building a critical mass: 3,800 eco-labeled seafood products on sale in 62 countries worth an estimated \$1.5 billion. Walmart has pledged to sell 100 percent MSC-certified fish by 2011. Carrefour, the world's second-largest retailer, has pledged to increase the number of its MSC-eco-labeled products.

On the supply side, 69 fisheries, as of late March, are certified to the MSC standard, 118 are under assessment, and 40 to 50 are confidentially talking to a certifier. Certified fisheries represent a

catch of 4 million metric tons and those in assessment total another 3 million metric tons, roughly 12 percent of the global wild catch.

Coughlin defends MSC on two counts. MSC is helping to drive environmental responsibility and improvement on the water, she says, as fisheries often clean up problems before they apply for assessment.

"People can have whatever perceptions they want about the program," she adds. "But the [MSC] standard is written and well-documented, the methodology is written and well-documented, the certifiers are independent and overseen by an independent organization. The procedure of assessing a fishery requires extensive input to the certifier from stakeholders. It requires peer review, up to and including independent adjudication."

It's all for a reason, Coughlin says. "All of that is designed to eliminate agendas and opinion coming into it and base [certification] as close as anyone can in the complex world of fishery science on the science and the data," she says.

As demand for certification grows, expect the debate about the strength of MSC's teeth to only continue.

Contributing Editor Lisa Duchene writes about environment and business from Bellefonte, Pa.