



Plot a course

Photo illustration by Laura Lee Dobson

How to create a sustainable seafood policy

By Lisa Duchene

elene York has a two-word answer for anyone who thinks creating a sustainable seafood purchasing policy is too expensive, too hard or otherwise impossible: Compass Group.

York, director of strategic initiatives for Bon Appetit Management Co., points to Compass Group USA, Bon Appetit's owner

and the country's largest contract foodservice company and the North American division of a United Kingdom-based parent.

Compass says its seafood supply overall is now 70 percent sustainable. Since announcing its policy in 2006, the company eliminated buys of 12 species labeled red/avoid by Monterey Bay Aquarium's Sea-

food Watch program for a total of 1 million pounds. It also purchased 5.5 million more pounds of green/best choice species like Alaska pollock, farmed Ecuadorian tilapia and Pacific halibut.

Along the way, says York, Compass Group helped to prove a huge, mainstream company could create and follow-through on a sustainable seafood policy. [See this issue's Top Story on page 18 for details on the relationships between seafood purchasers and NGOs.]

For those still skeptical, York has a few more choice words: "People who say this is impossible haven't tried. They're wimps," says York.

She probably didn't say it quite like that in 2006, when she presented Bon Appetit's seafood plan to Compass' executives and made the case for a corporate policy: to ensure long-term supplies of seafood at a reasonable price.

If your company is behind the ball on creating a policy, here are a few tips on how to get started:

Step 1: Do you need a policy?

Yes, says Howard Johnson, a seafood market analyst and president of H.M. Johnson & Associates in Jacksonville, Ore.

"In the past, seafood purchasing was all about balancing price and quality," says Johnson. "Now you need to add safety, traceability and sustainability."

A policy specifies the acceptable practices and spells out how sustainability will be defined, he says. Compass, for example,

There are four direct steps for setting up an in-house sustainability policy.

recognizes Monterey Bay Aquarium's definitions for which species and sources are sustainable — or not.

Retailers, chefs and foodservice operators, says Johnson, could incorporate Marine Stewardship Council certification for wild products and Global Aquaculture Alliance or World Wildlife Fund certification for farmed products.

"In some cases," says Johnson, "retailers may decide to keep offering red-list products (such as orange roughy) but explain to their customers that some conservation organizations have concerns. Other retailers may set requirements for the fishery to improve if they are to keep selling [its product]."

Making a commitment via a written policy is the first step identified in the Common Vision for Environmentally Sustainable Seafood, ratified by 14 conservation groups, that describes a new norm of healthy fisheries, aquaculture operations and communities that can sustain healthy oceans while meeting future global demand for seafood.

Compass' sustainability policy, which also includes replacing Atlantic cod and decreasing use of unsustainably farmed shrimp and salmon, helped inform the Common Vision's six key steps for seafood buyers found at www.solutionsforseafood.org.

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“Companies recognize it’s helpful to have that platform in place,” says Lydia Bergen, director of conservation for the New England Aquarium, which has advised Ahold USA, Darden Restaurants and Gorton’s on their sustainable purchasing policies. But the sequence of steps varies among companies, Bergen notes.

Step 2: Take stock

York recommends buyers look at their seafood supply and calculate how much of it is rated red/avoid, yellow/good alternative or green/best choice by the Seafood Watch program. New England Aquarium refers to this as a sustainable seafood risk assessment. That analysis, says Bergen, identifies a company’s leverage points and helps shape its policy.

The Common Vision specifies these details: common and scientific names, country of origin, the specific wild stock or farm, harvest method (fishing gear or aquaculture production method), producer, processor, volume and the product’s environmental

responsibility ranking. The Web site FishChoice.com serves as a one-stop shop for seafood buyers to evaluate seven seafood ranking or certification organizations. Once buyers register and pick a seafood ranking system, they can search for products based on that organization’s criteria.

Step 3: Green your supply

Once you’ve rated your current seafood supply, what can you do to shift it toward greener, more abundant products?

First, says York, look at alternatives to red-list species.

“No question,” she says, “shrimp is the hardest.” The small amount of shrimp Bon Appetit buys is wild American shrimp, she says. Compass Group says farmed shrimp and salmon are the most challenging since there is a lack of consensus among conservationists specifying sustainable farming of these popular species. Between 2007 and 2008, Compass dropped what it considered to be unsustainable shrimp purchases by 835,000 pounds and

unsustainable salmon purchases by 192,000 pounds.

Brainstorm to find alternatives, suggests York. “As we’ve demonstrated for salmon, there are wild Alaska products, Arctic char and then there are other fish that can be introduced to consumers with a little creativity,” she says.

Don’t focus on the cost difference of a single product. “You have to look at the whole group of seafood that’s being purchased,” says York. “What are the alternatives? Some are less expensive. Some are the same. Some are a little more. Fundamentally, it can be developed in a very cost-neutral way. Why? Because sustainable seafood is abundant. If it weren’t abundant, it wouldn’t be sustainable.”

Step 4: Transparency and traceability

The next step, according to the Common Vision, is for sellers to publish the policy, release annual status reports and make it easy for customers to find out the sustainability details of your fish: harvest method, origin and environmental

responsibility ranking.

That means buyers have to be able to trace each product to its source, which is a challenge.

“Most chains will insist that their suppliers provide full traceability on all items,” says Johnson. “This is the only way to assure a company is not misrepresenting the products they offer. Traceability will be mandatory in Europe next year and eventually in the United States.”

The next step

Throughout the process, education is key. New England Aquarium helps its partner companies inform their staff, buyers and executive team. And it’s a critical part of Compass Group’s “Phase 2” — to educate suppliers on ocean sustainability issues, work with salmon, shrimp and tilapia farmers on waste and escapes and cut buys of unsustainable shrimp and salmon by another 500,000 pounds over the next three years.

Contributing Editor Lisa Duchene lives in Bellefonte, Pa.

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