

The early bird gets the bird

First-mover adoption of the MSC was once an advantage. Not anymore.

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If ever there was a disgruntled Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) client, the At-Sea Processors Association (APA) is one.

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When the APA, which represents the US Alaska pollock industry, began the process of getting the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands pollock fishery certified, the group was so frustrated that in the middle of its certification it was blasting the MSC's policies as "shifting" and "undefined," and warned that the group's lack of organization could make the MSC "a promising, but failed, experiment."

In spite of that frustration, the APA hung in there, and a mere **half-million dollars later** -- no doubt much more with the subsequent recertifications -- it was certified, in 2005.

The APA has turned its frustration dial up to 11. On Tuesday, certifier Intertek Moody recommended that the Russian Sea of Okhotsk fishery receive certification to the MSC standard (a 15-day period for objections ends Feb. 12), in spite of strong opposition from both the APA and WWF.

Intertek Moody's announcement means that the nearly year-long game of chicken Alaska pollock producers and European buyers have been playing is effectively over, and US producers will be forced to swerve.

There are plenty of questions -- how much certified product will be available and when, for one -- that will ultimately determine what impact the news might have on the market.

Nobody expects any market tremors, but it's certainly not happy news for Alaska processors.

There's real reason for the frustration. Without the certification of Alaska salmon in 2000, it's likely that the MSC would not exist today. Without Alaska pollock's certification five years later, which brought massive volumes of fish and eco-labeled product to market, the MSC probably would not be a clear leader in sustainable fisheries certification.

The importance of those two fisheries for the MSC program has, unfortunately, faded.

Alaska salmon's MSC certification has lost its luster after Russia's wild salmon fisheries

began their slow march toward wide-scale certification, and there's no doubt the exodus from the program by the major Alaska processors one year ago was due in part to the fact that their time, money and effort only helped pave the way for other competing fisheries to complete the process in an easier fashion.

Alaska pollock is now facing the same erosion of its MSC unique selling proposition, and the same frustration that its first-mover efforts -- which resulted in an improvement of the MSC process overall -- won't end up giving producers any special market access after all.

With so many fisheries now certified by the MSC, there is no longer a first-mover advantage when it comes to species. That's unfortunate for the Alaska seafood industry, which put so much money and effort into meeting the bar, while dealing with the growing pains of the MSC at the same time.

The time and money spent by the Russian pollock association seeking MSC certification, meanwhile, will end up being a good investment. But not necessarily for the market access.

The seafood processing executives I spoke with yesterday all repeated the same message: whatever the market impact, it's a good thing for the Russian fishing industry if the fishery gets certified, and by virtue of that, a good thing for the seafood industry.

It may come as little comfort, but the US Alaska pollock industry can take a lot of credit for forcing the Russian pollock industry to get organized enough to jump into the MSC pool, even if they've made it a bit crowded.

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