

MSC Called to Parliament to Answer Questions About its PNA Tuna Recertification

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The MSC was called to a parliamentary meeting with the UK Fisheries minister and nine Members of Parliament who are supporting the UK 'On the Hook' Campaign which has opened up a significant challenge to the MSC's certification of sustainable tuna.

The On the Hook Group was started by celebrity British Chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall who led the hugely popular 'fish fight' campaign. It asks the simple question of how the MSC can assure UK consumers that its label stands for sustainability, when they allow the very same vessels and companies that catch free swimming tuna to also catch FAD tuna, not

approved by the MSC, on the same trip.

The group and its parliamentary supporters object to the MSC allowing of 'Compartmentalization' in order to recertify the PNA tuna fishery. They say it is hypocritical to allow a portion of the fishery to use unsustainable practices, and to certify another portion of the fishery, and then tell consumers that they are buying fish from a sustainable and certified fishery.

FAD's, or fish aggregating devices, are still largely unregulated, and are an efficient means of aggregating tuna for purse seiners, but have been linked to higher bycatch of sharks and turtles, and more juvenile fish. For this reason, many NGO's have claimed that FAD tuna cannot be considered sustainable, at least until the regulations and technology address the bycatch and juvenile issue.

The Western and Central Pacific Tuna Commission is having trouble getting agreement on expanding closed seasons for FADs, let alone the next step of certifying and regulating them. Currently there are no controls on the type and number of FADs deployed, and with new sensors, companies can release FADs to drift in the central pacific and only retrieve them when the sensor indicates they have fish. Poorly constructed and abandoned FADs then become ghost fishing gear, entangling some animals. The cost of the FAD is miniscule compared to the cost of the fuel to send a vessel to set on it.

Sets on free swimming schools are much cleaner, in the sense that the fish are closer to each other in age, and are generally in single species aggregations without accompanying sharks and sea turtles that tend to be attracted to the FADs.

In order to initially certify the PNA fishery, which was the first purse seine tuna fishery in the MSC program, the MSC standard allowed certification so long as free swimming tuna was separated in the hold from tuna caught on FADs.

The recertification after the five year review has opened up this controversy again as the NGO and retailer position on tuna has shifted. This is highlighted by the number of retailers who are making commitments to

only pole and line, or in other cases, MSC certified, tuna.

The Members of Parliament addressing this issue say it is consumer fraud for the MSC to put its logo on tuna where the same vessels and nets that are supplying the certified fish are used the same day to fish on non-compliant tuna.

Although the entire board of the MSC was invited to the parliamentary meeting, only the CEO Rupert Howes and the management team attended.

The Fisheries Minister Richard Benyon, who is the parliamentary spokesman for the group, expressed disappointment that the entire board did not attend.

He said, "We are pleased that the CEO and management team of the MSC came to Parliament to explain their position on the certification of fisheries which undertake unsustainable fishing. However, we are extremely disappointed that the MSC's Board did not find the time to join us for the meeting. We will be inviting them to come to Parliament and meet with the On The Hook MPs in January.

"Before the MSC accepted our invitation for a meeting, we scheduled a debate about the Standard and the re-certification of the PNA. The debate was set to take place next week. However, in the expectation that the MSC will be acting urgently to address our concerns, we have postponed the debate until we have received their response."

"We hope that raising our concerns in the House of Commons will not be necessary but we need to be clear; the MSC must act now so that consumers can trust that products with the MSC logo are from fisheries that do not cause harm to our oceans' ecosystems. There can be no further obfuscation or delay."

It seems that the MSC is now in the position that unless it responds satisfactorily to the public questions about its standards and recertification of the PNA tuna fishery, the UK parliament will make a finding that the MSC is misleading consumers.

This movement of the standard discussion out of the technical realm of stakeholder comments that are not transparently addressed and into the public arena is highly overdue. If the MSC wants to put itself forward as a trusted brand, it has to develop the transparency and responsiveness to match.

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