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The California Sustainable Seafood Initiative State Delves into Seafood Labeling and Promotion

By *Natasha Benjamin*

Most of us are familiar with the role our states have taken in the promotion of seafood. Probably the best known – and certainly the best funded – has been the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute (ASMI) and its worldwide promotion of all fish caught in Alaska. Recently, as a result of BP's Gulf oil spill, the Louisiana Seafood Promotion & Marketing Board has been in the public's eye in its attempt to rebuild consumer confidence in that state's oyster, shrimp and crab fisheries.

Here on the West Coast, Oregon has a number of state government promotion entities, including its Trawl Commission (the former Otter Trawl Commission), Dungeness Crab Commission, Salmon Commission, and Albacore Commission. To the south in California, there is the California Salmon Council and the Sea Urchin Commission. An earlier California Seafood Council existed for a few years before some processors decided to pull the plug on the promotion of California-caught fish.

Now California is attempting to take a lead, going beyond fishing industry funded research and marketing boards, mostly housed in state agencies with agricultural promotion entities, to the labeling – and some might say the certifi-

cation – of its fish products. California is leading the way, according to the initiative's sponsors, to establish a statewide sustainable seafood label.

California is known for its celebrated fishing communities along its coast. With the success of this new labeling program, fishermen will be recognized and get value added for their product. There is a strong movement around the country to "buy local." This label would link that movement to seafood.

The questions that are being explored now are: which fisheries will get the label, what will it look like and how will the fishery get it? This is what the California Sustainable Seafood Initiative (CSSI) is attempting to do. Twenty-four members were selected as the Advisory Panel who will advise the Ocean Protection Council (OPC) to help California fisheries become certified in a way that at least meets United Nations Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) standards.

California legislation (AB 1217 - Monning) was passed in 2009 that established this Initiative. The charge of the CSSI is for the Advisory Panel members to explore opportunities for an economically viable sustainable seafood promotion program for California fisheries. The

Panel is comprised of twenty four representatives from: fishery management agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the commercial fishing industry, fish processors, fish retailers or traders, restaurateurs, public health/nutrition officials, fishing port officials, and the scientific community.

The panel's charge is to:

- Develop standards for sustainable fisheries that meet or exceed the Guidelines for the eco-labeling of fish and fishery products from marine capture fisheries promulgated by the Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations.
- Develop a marketing assistance program that consists of competitive grants and loans for discrete and limited activities to benefit participants in the fishing industry in California.
- Develop a grant and loan program for the purpose of assisting California fisheries in qualifying for certification to internationally accepted standards for sustainable seafood.
- Develop a label for California sustainable seafood.

The panel is not intended to be a permanent body. Once the provisions in this bill are implemented, the pan-



el will most likely disband, although it will be necessary for this Initiative to have continued support and participant involvement in order to make this program successful. This first phase of the program is just the beginning, the hard part will be implementing it and getting support from fishermen, distributors and restaurants.

When the CSSI was established, the intent was to have California fisheries certified to a standard that is at least as robust as the Marine Stewardship Council's (MSC) certification program. MSC is based on the FAO standards, but this has created some controversy and is also a very expensive process. Part of the motivation to pass this legislation was to alleviate some of these problems by establishing funding to help fisheries get certified. Although worldwide people will eat more farmed product than wild product this year, aquaculture will not be considered in this process as there are no internationally accepted standards for aquaculture at this time.

The Advisory Panel has met two times this past year, with an upcoming meeting October 13th and 14th (check the OPC website for more information). The first meeting was in May 2010, in Oakland, CA where panel advisors met to start discussing this concept. The second meeting was in Orange County in August 2010, where there was one day of presentations from existing certification schemes and other industries doing similar labeling. After these presentations the panel started to discuss how California

would label its seafood and what fisheries might be used.

The more informed consumers and purveyors are of where their seafood comes from and how it was caught, the more educated the consumer public.

History of Sustainable Seafood Movement

In light of recent books, such as Paul Greenberg's *Four Fish: The Future of the Last Wild Food*, and numerous articles about the end of seafood, this initiative is well timed, as consumers are asking more questions about our seafood. The sustainable seafood movement started more than ten years ago with the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch Program and the creation of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) to certify and label seafood worldwide. Since then dozens of seafood recommendation schemes and labels have been developed.

The recent trend is to develop common criteria, after years of conflicting approaches and recommendations. This hasn't been accomplished yet, but California is trying to be consistent with other programs yet at the same time raise the bar. Each scheme comes up with slightly different recommendations, depending on its purpose, and so different results arise. This is confusing to the consumer and diminishes the effectiveness of this movement. Only if the label system is ubiquitous will the effect be meaningful. Global standards must be the goal, with local programs leading the way.

Some believe that Cali-

fornia should let MSC continue to certify all fisheries and stay out of the labeling business. But the reality is that MSC certification is very costly and also was initially set up to certify fisheries with lots of stock assessment and data. Recently they have adapted their program to accommodate smaller fisheries that don't have a lot of scientific information, but it is still a very expensive process.

This is especially a problem for some of these struggling fisheries that are trying to do the right thing, but are getting pushed out of the market place by less sustainable cheaper product, usually from foreign sources. The CSSI would be an opportunity for some of these products to stand out in the marketplace.

California Fisheries

It is important to note that most of California fisheries landings are based on three species: sardines, squid and anchovy. Most of that product is sent overseas to be processed and/or sold. This issue is probably one of the biggest concerns with promoting California product. The demand for most of its seafood is elsewhere.

There are many barriers to developing sustainable California fisheries that are critical for the Initiative to identify. These include lack of local infrastructure at ports, which leads to more shipping of product overseas for processing. In addition there are not adequate local markets for some of these products, and therefore there is the need to make a strong push to educate and market California seafood locally.

Existing Seafood Labeling

There has been much discussion on which guidelines the CSSI should follow. The Advisory Panel is looking to a number of different groups for ideas on how to structure their labeling scheme. These include: MSC, Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute, Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) certification, and the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance.

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) has developed an international certification and labeling scheme, which is probably the most well recognized and established one worldwide. MSC is based on both the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and on FAO Guidelines for Ecolabelling Fishery Products. However, groups such as Greenpeace have criticized them and feel that MSC's standards and criteria aren't strong enough. One of the main issues that Greenpeace addresses with the MSC is its failure to address "destructive" gear types, and that MSC allows certification of some fisheries targeting depleted stocks.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) conducted a study published December 2009, *Assessment of on-pack, wild capture seafood sustainability certification programs and seafood ecolabels*. The study concluded that none of the ecolabels assessed were fully compliant in standard setting, certification structures, procedures and fisheries management and ecological dimensions.

The MSC came closest to the criteria compliance threshold based on this



study, although it could be argued that WWF helped create the MSC and so there might be some bias there. The study also revealed significant differences in transparency, structure and accuracy in each program.

There was another review published in January, 2010 by the Fish Sustainability Information Group (FSIG), an international consortium representing a variety of national organizations concerned with seafood trade. The review was an assessment of certification schemes and recommendation lists for both capture fisheries and aquaculture.

The study argues that while certification schemes and recommendations lists have substantial success in increasing awareness of the issues associated with sustainable fishing within a limited number of mainly developed country markets, the proliferation of schemes has been accompanied by increasing consumer confusion, industry concern, retailer guardedness, and a reduction in confidence, resulting from inconsistent approaches and contradictory advice.

MSC started certifying fisheries in 1999 and now reports that approximately 8 percent of the world's edible wild caught fish are either certified or in assessment. This is definitely an indication that there is a demand for information on seafood sustainability. Evidence for the rapid expansion of these schemes over a relatively short period of time includes the fact that WWF Germany has moved from printing 10,000 copies of its seafood list in 1997 to printing some

1.5 million copies of this document ten years later.

The Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute (ASMI) has a similar initiative with the goal of having their state's seafood source-labeled. Their Board of Directors announced in March 2010, that Global Trust Certification Ltd. has been chosen to perform an independent, third-party certification of Alaska's fisheries management systems. Under the agreed model, each major Alaska fishery will be assessed for conformance to both the United Nations Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and the FAO Guidelines for Ecolabelling Fishery Products. Because the certification is being provided through ASMI, it will be free to all Alaska customers.

However, ASMI is not attempting to develop a new front facing eco-label. This effort is intended merely to provide independent third party assurance that Alaska's fisheries are sustainably managed.

Iceland has also started an assessment process with Global Trust with this new approach of certifying their management structure directly against the FAO Codes. Both of these initiatives were driven by the industry, not the government directly, while in California the State is leading this effort.

What Should California Do?

If California follows the Alaskan and Icelandic model, we would be assuming that all of our fisheries are inherently sustainable because of our management system. But

that is just not the case in the United States and California. There are still many fisheries that are mismanaged and many data-poor fisheries that would not qualify under the FAO codes. This is not to say that we should avoid these fisheries, but these are the ones that need help and encouragement to modify fishing pressure and gear use. But the ASMI and Icelandic model will be difficult to implement in California. Sustainable fishing has been built into Alaska's constitution and is a \$1.7 billion industry.

There have not been any comprehensive studies on the true value of the ecolabel, which makes this process the more difficult. We still don't know the most effective way to develop one of these programs because existing programs haven't been transparent or global enough to accurately evaluate their effectiveness. Existing programs, such as MSC's, still come under criticism for not being stringent enough to be truly sustainable.

As California goes forward it must consider some emerging issues that have not traditionally been included in ecolabeling, such as human health, climate change and the socioeconomics of the fisheries.

Human Health

There has been discussion among the Advisory Panel on whether to include human health information on the label. There are some that believe that it would be irresponsible to label and promote a product that is considered environmentally sustainable, but contains high levels of mercury or other

contaminants.

There are others that believe that this is beyond the charge of the CSSI. In addition, testing for contaminants is not done on a regular basis and the information is not readily available. Surveillance of domestic seafood for toxicity is conducted by independent studies and is not regularly done by the government. This is still under discussion by the Advisory Panel.

Climate Change

Other labeling schemes, which include the Marine Stewardship Council's, have only focused on the sustainability of the fisheries. They have not included carbon footprint and social aspects of the fisheries. Is this something California can take on? Can we have a label that would include the impact the fisheries has on climate change and whether the fisheries are considered "fair trade"? These are critical aspects of labeling, but very difficult to implement. Some international labels incorporate the social or socioeconomic aspects of the fishery into their label, but on a regional basis.

There has been discussion within the sustainable seafood movement on whether to include carbon footprint in assessing the sustainability of seafood products. A proxy indicator for climate change impacts might be "food miles," where labeling schemes would record the number of food miles a product travels throughout its supply chain. Although there still isn't national or global agreement on calculating food miles, "life cycle assessments" have already been



used for seafood.

A matrix for measuring politically correct seafood consumption trends is far from formulated. Economic pressures will always trump environmentally correct behavior in the global market for fish, but this Initiative is the beginning of the path toward a sustainable future.

Socioeconomic Issues

The social and ethical trade issues, although critical in fisheries, are very complex to decipher in a label. One of the challenges with including these issues on an ecolabel is the level at which the assessment is going to occur: at a macro level (fisheries management) or micro level (individual boats). Some labels have managed to do this at the local level, such as KRAV, a Swedish organic label, which also includes seafood.

Can we have sustainable fisheries without sustainable communities? For example, a large multi-national corporation may own all the quota or IFQs for a specific fishery and be harvesting within or under catch limits, but if the profits and jobs do not stay in the local community whose waters are being fished then how is that sustainable? True sustainability takes into consideration both the natural resources harvest and the implications on the human economies that depend on those resources.

The Institute for Fisheries Resources (IFR) has a program called the Local &

Sustainable Seafood Program (www.ifrfish.org/localseafood), which connects local fishermen to the fish buying public. Eating local fresh seafood means that you are accessing the freshest and highest quality seafood.

Additionally, supporting local seafood harvesters ensures that local small family-operated fishing communities will be able to compete with large processors and maintain traditional coastal communities. Eating locally caught seafood ensures that the fish caught is sustainable. Buying directly from fishermen ensures a fresh product and ensures the fishermen receives a fair wage for his or her labor. IFR acts as a conduit to connect the seafood eating public with local commercial fishermen who can provide fresh, high quality, healthy, sustainable seafood.

What the California Label Might Include

The CSSI has come up with some core components of what the California label would look like, including:

- Certify fisheries to international standards (i.e., FAO guidelines at a minimum). Use MSC standards and certification or FAO standards with 3rd party verification.
- Include additional criteria that go beyond the international standards. Have an ecolabel that includes the following components: at which port the fish was landed, and a green/sustainable component.
- Create a database of

additional information to accompany the ecolabel.

- Establish as a long-term goal the certification of all California fisheries that are managed by the state.
- Ensure consistency with existing OPC programs.
- Conduct a study for the State of California based on the UK's Sussex study model. This would evaluate fisheries against the FAO guidelines and additional certification criteria. This study would essentially flesh out the fisheries matrix information. The finding of the study would prioritize fisheries for certification. The thought is that two or three fisheries would be certified at a time.
- Work with the California Department of Food & Agriculture (CDFA) on a marketing program.
- OPC will pay for capital costs for initial certification, and fisheries will pay for maintenance costs of certification and recertification. Additional funding bodies need to be identified for the long term.
- Include a traceability component.
- Long-term vision: embarking on a long process to make all California fisheries sustainable.

Conclusion

The CSSI has a unique opportunity to develop a California labeling program which can help distinguish local product, but most importantly revitalize local fishing communities and help encourage domestic sales. Infrastructure is lacking

in many ports and marketing of more California local product would be a boost to local economies and encourage more seafood to stay in local markets. Stay tuned for the development of this new California seafood label.

For more information about the CSSI go to: www.opc.ca.gov/2010/03/california-sustainable-seafood-initiative. 🐟

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