Alaska Salmon Recertification Underway

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

Alaska's commercial salmon harvest will likely retain its Marine Stewardship Council seal of approval past this year, if it can pass another round of showing it is well-managed and sustainable. The current MSC certification is due to expire on October 29th, but the Seattle-based Purse Seine Vessel Owners Association recently signed a contract with Intertek Moody Marine to conduct the independent assessment required of the entire Alaska salmon fishery.

Bob Kehoe, executive director of the purse seine group, says his members decided to become the sponsoring party for MSC certification after several major processors pulled their support in favor of a program run by the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute.

"We were concerned that perhaps the processors had some issues or concerns other than fishermen at the forefront in terms of their decision not to seek certification," Kehoe said. And we decided that overall, it was a good thing to do to seek to have the fishery certified for another five years."

He said that the profile of Alaska salmon has benefitted from association with MSC in the past decade:

-- (MSC 2 21 sec "I don't think anybody can really dispute that MSC has played a role in creating worldwide demand for Alaska salmon. And that demand has translated into stable markets for our members, who are fishermen, and also stable fish prices.")

Kerry Coughlin is the regional director for the Americas with the Marine Stewardship Council. She says an MSC-certified fishery is at an advantage on the worldwide market:

-- (MSC 3 25 sec "The salmon fishery, in this case, can continue to sell fish to markets that have made MSC certification part of their sourcing policy, and are essentially demanding MSC certification for all the fish that they source. So what it really means is the Alaska salmon fishermen can continue to be proud to be MSC certified and get the business benefit of that as that fish go into those markets worldwide.")

Coughlin says many markets domestically, like Whole Foods, and abroad, like much of Europe, require the MSC label:

-- (MSC 4 20 sec "They really want the Alaska salmon fishers and processors to continue be in the MSC program. It's important that the processors as well are part of the client group or their own chain of custody certification, because for seafood to carry an MSC logo or claim through the supply chain there can't be a break in that link of traceability.")

Tyson Fick, the communications director for the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute in Juneau, says it was a business decision by the processors to pull out of MSC certification.

-- (MSC 5 20 sec "We've been asked by our member companies as well as our customers for an alternative. And that is FAO-based responsible fisheries management certification via Global Trust. And we feel that's a pretty good alternative and it is certainly cost-effective since there's not a logo licensing fee.")

He says many of the same processors who pulled out of the MSC salmon certification still participate in other Alaska fisheries that continue to carry the MSC label:

-- (MSC 6 16 sec "When you look around the state there are other fisheries that are MSC certified - it's not just salmon. You look at halibut, you look at pollock and there are certainly some others. And these are all the same companies that are involved in Alaska salmon. So we certainly have no hard feelings with the Marine Stewardship Council and wish them all the best.")

Kehoe and Coughlin wouldn't say exactly what the certification will cost, but did say the MSC has a policy to reimburse, up to 75 percent, fisheries seeking their third certification. If the Alaska salmon fishery does win MSC certification, those who want to put the label on their products will have to work out a deal with the Purse Seine Vessel Owners Association.