Alaska Seafood Meeting with Walmart Went Well

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

Alaska seafood officials came away from a meeting Thursday with Walmart executives in Arkansas pleased with the conversation about the sustainability of Alaska salmon. The company announced earlier this year that it would not source seafood unless it had the Marine Stewardship Council, or MSC, stamp of approval. Alaska salmon does not carry the MSC endorsement.

KMXT reached Michael Cerne, the executive director of the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute, while he was on a layover at SeaTac Airport on his way back to Alaska. He said the presentation and conversation with the Walmart executives was productive:

“There was 16 people there, a lot of senior representation. We had an executive vice president for the first hour of the meeting – a three-and-a-half-hour meeting,” he said. “It was very engaging. They were very receptive. We spent the first half hour learning about their sustainability policy and we spent the preponderance of time just doing a formal presentation on the RFM certification.”

Cerne said it was clear Walmart was “very much open” to other certification programs:

“They just needed to learn more about the RFM, the Responsible Fisheries Management program that we have in place for all the Alaska fisheries,” Cerne said. “And they just wanted to know it was done by a third-part and that it was a credible system and they wanted to see what standards were in place, what criteria were used for assessing the fisheries.”

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Cerne said the Alaska delegation left a thick stack of reference material for the Walmart executives, who will look them over.

“Stay tuned,” he said. “You know we’re looking forward hearing back from Walmart in the next week. We appreciated the invite and the fact that had so many people there for such a long period of time I think demonstrates that there they’re very interested, and their senior leadership says they’re very interested in continuing to carry Alaska seafood.”

Both of Alaska’s U.S. senators expressed satisfaction with reports from the meeting. Senator Mark Begich brokered the meeting after Walmart’s announcement in June.

“We think that’s a great move by Walmart,” said the Senator. “And also one we would have expected from such a large company that knows good quality product when they see it.”

Begich said the Walmart executives seemed to understand that there’s more than one way to certify seafood as sustainable – especially when the product is the model of sustainability – Alaska salmon.

“They recognize this European labeling that was put on is not now the only game in town, and that there are other ways to determine sustainability of seafood product,” Begich said. “And we, I think, have a great case to show them: ‘We recognized your goal is to make sure you sell sustainable seafood; our goal is to produce sustainable seafood, which we are doing today.”

Walmart executives indicated they would release a statement this week. Given the positive reception the meeting had, Cerne and Begich are both hoping for a reversal of Walmart’s ban on non-MSC Alaska Salmon.