GSA Removes MSC Reference in Guidlines

Wednesday, 25 September 2013

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

Alaska Senator Mark Begich convened a hearing Tuesday before the Senate Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries and the Coast Guard to explore ways to make sure current and future sustainability certifications benefit both the seafood industry and consumers. Begich and others have been at odds with organizations that rely solely on the Marine Stewardship Council’s sustainability endorsement in choosing seafood– especially since Alaska salmon no longer carries the MSC stamp of approval.

To start the meeting, Begich had Sam Rauch, the acting assistant administrator for the National Marine Fisheries Service, and Darren Blue of the General Services Administration explain how their agencies formulate procurement procedures, which in at least one case this year prompted the National Parks Service to declare Alaska salmon unsuitable for serving in parks. Before describing how those decisions were made though, Blue had an announcement for the subcommittee:

“I’d like to establish GSA’s view that US managed fisheries do not require third-party certification to demonstrate responsible practices. GSA has worked with HHS, NOAA, and other agencies to revise our health and sustainability guidelines for federal concessions and vending operations to ensure they provide absolute clarity on this matter,” Blue said, adding, “Chairman Begich, I’m pleased to report that in the days since we provided you with our written statement, GSA and HHS have finalized the revised guidelines, and they no longer reference a third-party certification requirement.”

Rauch pointed out that all stocks managed by NOAA Fisheries should be considered sustainable.

“We are required to manage for sustainability. When people ask me why it’s sustainable, I can tell them why. It is a transparent process that is adaptive. It’s not a point in time. You have to have a system that will constantly evaluate the fishery and adjust as appropriate. That’s what we have with the federal system, that’s what the State of Alaska has for salmon,” Rauch said. “So I would agree with you Federally-managed and in certain cases, state-managed fisheries are the pinnacle of sustainability.”

Also in attendance was Jeffrey Rice, the senior director of sustainability for Walmart Stores, which was going to ditch Alaska salmon over lack of MSC certification. He said the company is open to more certification schemes, including the one promoted by the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute.

“We believe strongly that there can and should be multiple standards and certifications that demonstrate sustainable fisheries,” Rice said. “We are not experts on sustainability, and we are certainly not experts on fisheries management. Because of the emergence of these new certification schemes, including the ASMI-initiated Responsible Fisheries Management certification, we have asked the Sustainability consortium to lead an open process to develop criteria and principals to evaluate new standards that are emerging. The principals and criteria developed through this process will allow us to know with confidence which standards lead to sustainable fisheries, and will identify opportunities for improvement in those standards that don’t.”

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Montelongo, the senior vice president of public policy for Sodexo, a major government contractor, also seemed open to considering other sustainability certifications.

“In 2012, Sodexo purchased more than $22-million in seafood from the Last Frontier state. That’s 6-million pounds of seafood, including nearly 119-tons of Alaska salmon,” Montelongo said. “It’s important to note that Sodexo’s expertise is not in seafood certification or fishery management practices. We review our sustainability criteria for each species on an annual basis and make determinations if we serve those species, if they should be certified, or if there should be other types of controls in place. To that end, Sodexo is very willing to consider alternative strategies in conjunction with other external organizations to help ensure our commitment to sustainability is based on robust science and addresses consumer demand.”

In a statement after the hearing, Begich expressed satisfaction with what he heard from thefederal agencies, Walmart and Sodexo.