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Russian Fisheries Look to Corner a Piece of the Growing Sustainable Seafood Market With New Eco-Certification

Demand for sustainable seafood from North America and Europe drives environmental change on remote Kamchatka Peninsula

September 15, 2016, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Russian Federation – The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) announced this week that three wild salmon fisheries in the Russian Far East (RFE) will be awarded MSC certification, the highest bar eco-label for fish. The certification comes as a result of extensive improvements in fishing practices led by Russian fishing companies, Vityaz-Avto Ltd. and Delta Ltd. It marks the first time that Kamchatka fisheries have sought MSC certification for salmon species typically sold in commodity markets and the certification will add as much as 28,000 metric tons of pink, chum, and coho salmon to the sustainable seafood supply.

“The demand for sustainable seafood has reached even the most remote corners of Russia. Improvements in these fisheries demonstrate the impact that environmentally-savvy shoppers and forward-looking companies are having on global fishing practices,” says Brian Caouette of Ocean Outcomes, a fishery improvement organization working in Kamchatka.

Fisheries in Kamchatka bring in 15% of the world’s wild salmon, second only to Alaska, and fish from the region are exported to the U.S., Europe, and Asia. However, unlike their Alaskan counterparts, Russian fisheries have not always been known for sustainable fishing.

“A decade ago, illegal fishing was rampant,” explains Caouette. “Poachers were scooping up tens of thousands of fish on a regular basis. We would see mountains of fish carcasses rotting in the sun along the rivers – fish left to rot after poachers slashed female fish and scraped out their eggs for black market caviar. No one was monitoring how many salmon were returning to spawn each year. There were no private property rights associated with fishing. It was a free for all.”

In contrast, fisheries now come together to hire and train their own security guards to patrol the rivers and protect spawning salmon. Commercial fishermen have secured 20-year leases for fishing sites, providing a long-term incentive to properly monitor and manage the fish and habitat in the
region. Fishing companies have invested millions in state of the art processing and cold storage facilities, and these value-added improvements have benefited local economies.

Since 2008, four Russian salmon fisheries and Sea of Okhotsk pollock received MSC certification, and both Russian crab and cod entered into formal fishery improvement projects with the goal of becoming more sustainable.

"The key is that commercial fishermen are leading these efforts," says Caouette. "They are doing the hard work to meet sustainability requirements, and they’re seeing a return on their investment."

A growing alignment of environmental and business interests has helped drive this change. Over a hundred grocery and food-service companies in North America and Europe – from Walmart to Whole Foods to IKEA – have made commitments to sell sustainable seafood and are looking for certified, sustainable products. Several companies, including Nestle, High Liner Foods, Gorton’s Seafood, Albion, and Fishin’ Co., have also invested in partnerships with conservation groups and fisheries to increase the global supply of sustainable wild salmon.

"Sustainability is a growing worldwide phenomenon," says Andrei Bokov, Chief Technologist for Vityaz-Avto and Delta. "More and more seafood companies are looking for new sources of sustainable seafood, and Russia can meet this demand."

With wild sustainable salmon selling for as much as $15/pound retail in Western grocery stores; the market for sustainable fish bringing in $11.5 billion in last year; and favorable exchange rates on the ruble, the potential profits for Russian fishing companies are high – and so are the environmental benefits.

After several years of improvement efforts – including better enforcement of fishing regulations and the development of new systems to track and verify product from harvest to primary processor – these fisheries now meet all of the core sustainability principles of the MSC certification. Due in part to these efforts, Kamchatka’s salmon fisheries saw historic runs this year.

However, these fisheries are not perfect. The MSC certification identified six conditions that the fisheries must address within five years to keep the new eco-label. These include improving methods to track the number of salmon that return to spawn each year and continued monitoring, controls on fishing, and surveillance activities.

“This is a story of creating change in difficult places, not instant success,” says Caouette. “The global fishery crisis took decades to develop, and we’re not going to solve everything overnight. It takes persistence – you have to roll up your sleeves and get in the trenches with people. It’s not always pretty, but real progress is possible – it’s happening.”
Additional resources:
- Link to media photos
- Ocean Outcomes website
- Marine Stewardship Council website
- State of Sustainability Initiatives report