DEMONSTRATING SEAFOOD SUSTAINABILITY

Along with food safety and quality, the seafood industry now considers the measurement of its sustainability as a driving force toward better management of our natural resources, the health and safety of its workers, and the operating efficiency of its business.

No one can underestimate the importance of ensuring that seafood is sourced sustainably from the planet’s lakes, rivers and oceans. However, it was not so long ago that consumers, the media and the food industry itself overlooked the importance of the social and economic aspects of sustainability.

A sustainable seafood business is one that is financially viable, measures and protects all aspects of its global supply chain and is respectful to both employee and community rights.

BENCHMARKING SUSTAINABILITY IN AQUACULTURE SOURCING

Different markets have different requirements for seafood products, their sourcing and their management systems. Keeping up to date with the latest developments and submitting to multiple audits is a time-consuming and expensive exercise. But help may be on the horizon.

Three food and seafood specific standard-setting organisations are working together to increase efficiency and reduce duplication in the auditing process. In April, at the Global Seafood Expo in Brussels, the Global Aquaculture Alliance (GAA), Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) and GlobalG.A.P. took the significant step of agreeing to combine checklists for farms seeking to achieve certification against more than one standard.

A combined checklist minimises the duplication of audit points between certification programmes and comprises all audit points of one standard supplemented by specific add-on clauses for other standard(s). A farm pursuing multiple certifications can select any one of the three programmes as the primary standard and then select the desired add-ons.

Streamlining checklists in this way enables the farming industry to shift the focus of their expenditures from repetitive audits toward sustainable corrective actions. Businesses will likely see a reduction in the management time and money spent on certification activities, thereby making them more efficient and therefore, more sustainable.

CLARITY IN SUSTAINABILITY

As discussed, the range of certification programmes can be confusing, and choosing the most appropriate solution for a business is not always straightforward. To address this issue, the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI), an alliance between partners from different sectors including retailers, seafood processors, foodservice and NGOs, is developing a benchmarking tool to provide transparency between labelling and seafood certification programmes. This tool may be useful for seafood businesses, as it will enable comparison between different certification programmes, to help make sourcing decisions.

Work has been ongoing for two years, with three expert working groups covering aquaculture, fisheries, and the procedural, institutional and evaluation processes of seafood certification. To keep stakeholders up to date with progress the GSSI has launched a new website: http://www.ourgssi.org.

In combination with GAA, ASC and GlobalG.A.P. checklist streamlining, there is significant potential for the seafood supply chain to become more efficient in its audit and certification programmes, at the same time as creating a more sustainable business model, through better decision-making and eradicating duplication of effort. Another major promoter of seafood sustainability certification, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), which sets standards for sustainable fishing and seafood traceability, has welcomed the GSSI initiative1.

1 Marine Stewardship Council - Statement on Proposed Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative
SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability does not end with traditional sustainable certification schemes. These have largely focussed on good husbandry and environmental practices but commercial client and consumers are now asking more questions about the treatment of the workforce across a range of topics.

For many seafood brands, the “Road to Social Accountability” often began from a demand for compliance to one or more global customer’s Code of Conduct which focussed on these topics. That initial demand has now accelerated from the seafood processor back to the feed mill and includes not only direct employees but also temporary labour and contractors. Whilst many schemes are in place and are actively monitoring conditions in factories and processors, the complexity of monitoring fishing fleets remains the industry’s “elephant in the room”. Companies looking to have an assurance about the social sustainability standards in their supply chain must therefore carefully apply those principles to a more dynamic and moving environment with variations in jurisdiction, local law, vessel safety, labour contracts, worker health and safety, availability of ship board records and time at sea. In doing this they also need to take account of auditor safety, especially if they are sending individuals to monitor conditions on board. Moreover, the seafood industry leaders are recognizing that investments in the social accountability programs provide essential information not only for benchmarking and brand protection but also for supplier evaluation.

In the past year alone, there has been greater attention and action from the global governing bodies and the media. The US State Department’s Trafficking in Persons Report, the European Commission, and numerous media stories have highlighted the exploitative employment practices and illegal fishing activities within the industry. Moreover, a substantial number of independent seafood processing plant audits are still yielding unsatisfactory results in worker health and safety, working hour violations against common codes, excessive labour recruiting fees, and discriminatory employment practices. As the seafood industry comes to a common understanding of these issues and begins to engage both their supply chain partners and their relevant host country governments in sustainable practices, the industry will enhance its reputation as a truly sustainable one.

Social responsibility now means more than meeting internationally agreed labour standards. Equally competitive retail markets and global supply chains within the softgoods, toy and electronics industries have provided many case studies from which the seafood industry can learn. In addition, the seafood industry is now well-versed in the power of social media to demand stronger attention to socially responsible supply chains and to focus attention on their efforts in building sustainable solutions. By supporting the continuous improvement of the social performance of suppliers the industry can, in return, improve public perception of the industry and reassure customers.

CERTIFIED FOR SUCCESS

Whether for environmental management systems, business integrity or social responsibility, sustainability audits demonstrate the degree of compliance, identify shortcomings and best practices and provide information or recommend certification, as appropriate to the requirements of the sustainability standard.

The benefits of sustainability are twofold. Not only does it allow the seafood supply chain to provide information demonstrating its credentials to customers, but it also gives individual businesses a framework for ensuring that responsible sourcing, welfare at work, and other indicators are implemented and maintained within their own organisation. Together with investments in food safety and quality, the returns from investments in sustainability are demonstrating a measurable impact on the long term viability of the seafood industry.

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