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MSC certification of Gulf of Alaska Cod suspended, remains for Bering Sea and Aleutians; RFM certification remains in place

Wrangell, Alaska (Friday, March 6, 2020) — Today, MRAG Americas, Inc. published a notice of suspension for the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification of Pacific cod in the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) region with an effective date of April 5, 2020. The harvest of GOA Pacific cod is approximately 6% of the total catch of Pacific cod from Alaska. The MSC certification for the remaining 94% of Pacific cod from the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) regions will remain in place. The suspension is based on a recent review of new information regarding stock assessment in the GOA provided by NOAA Fisheries. According to MRAG Americas, an independent auditing and certification body for the MSC standard, “This suspension is not due to overfishing or a lack of a responsible management response, rather, the depressed stocks of Pacific cod in the Gulf of Alaska below B20% limit is climate driven and caused by the Gulf of Alaska marine heat wave.”

Since 2017, the GOA Pacific cod stock has declined due to the effects of an anomalous warm water event in 2014-2016. This marine heat wave, among other things, reduced food availability for cod and dramatically increased natural mortality. In response, federal and state fishery managers took swift and immediate action to severely restrict commercial fishing efforts — a responsible and precautionary management decision responding to ecosystem uncertainty. In 2018 and 2019, harvests were reduced by 80% to maintain the future viability of the fishery. In 2020, commercial fishing was closed in the federal GOA fishery and the small state fishery was further reduced. Fishery managers and fishermen are confident that this response will allow stocks to recover quickly.

“As the Client for the Alaska Pacific cod fishery, AFDF is disappointed that the MSC certificate in the GOA is being suspended, despite fishery managers taking responsible actions in the face of ocean conditions beyond their control,” explains AFDF Executive Director, Julie Decker. “We believe that responsible management should be rewarded and hope this unfortunate situation will be a catalyst for the MSC program to make changes to address future scenarios such as this.”

According to the MSC standard, a fishery is suspended if it fails to meet the minimum scoring benchmark for any indicator. In this case, the stock status indicator requires that the stock is above the point where recruitment would be impaired (Performance Indicator 1.1.1, MSC standard v2.1). For Tier 3 federally managed stocks in the U.S., the Limit Reference Point

(corresponding to the point where recruitment would be impaired) is set at 20% of the unfished biomass (or B20%). If the stock falls below this point (B20%), or does not have a 70% probability of being above this point, it no longer meets the minimum scoring benchmark for this indicator, and, consequently, is suspended. In 2020, the GOA Pacific cod stock is estimated to be at B17.6% and, consequently, the MSC certification for the GOA will be suspended, effective on April 5, 2020.

Scientific studies of the fishery show that the reduced abundance in the GOA is caused by the environmental conditions and not fishing pressure or mismanagement. In fact, in the expedited audit report, MRAG Americas affirms that the “GOA Pacific cod stock and fishery continue to be extremely well managed and monitored as indicated by the other Principle 1 scores.” However, the MSC certification standard for stock status is separate from responsible fishery management actions under this principle.

What does this mean for sales of MSC certified Pacific cod from Alaska?

All Pacific cod from Alaska harvested from January 1, 2020 through April 5, 2020, can be sold as MSC certified by companies with the appropriate Chain of Custody (CoC) certification in place. GOA Pacific cod harvested after the effective date of the suspension on April 5, 2020, can no longer be sold as MSC certified. The majority (94%) of Alaska Pacific cod is from the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands and will remain MSC certified.

What will happen to the RFM certification of Alaska cod?

The Responsible Fisheries Management (RFM) sustainability certification program is an internationally accredited ecolabel for Alaska fisheries. The RFM certification is in good standing for all Pacific cod harvested from Alaska. After a normal annual audit is completed later this year, AFDF anticipates that the RFM certification will likely remain in place due to differences between the MSC and RFM standards. Specifically, the RFM standard does not require an automatic suspension when a fishery drops below B20%, rather, it assesses the management responses as well. As such, all of the Pacific cod harvested from Alaska, even in the GOA after April 5, can be sold as RFM certified. RFM CoC certification audits can be done in conjunction with those for MSC. Interested companies can find more information [here](#).