

American Albacore Fishing Association Pacific Albacore Tuna



DATE CERTIFIED 23 August 2007

SPECIES **Albacore tuna**
(*Thunnus alalunga*)

FISHING METHOD **Pole-and-line; troll and jig**

COUNTRY **United States**

LOCATION



North Pacific fishery: waters off the US Pacific coast (California, Oregon and Washington) and British Columbia, Canada; South Pacific fishery: waters of the South Pacific

FISHERY TONNAGE **About 10,000 tonnes**
(both fisheries)

“IN THE LATE 1990s, my husband would finish the season here in November, do some work on the boat, then head off for the South Pacific,” says Natalie Webster, Director of Operations for the American Albacore Fishing Association (AAFA). “He’d fish that, come back in April, then start all over again in June – so he was fishing for ten months of the year.” Now, due to the high price of fuel, only four or five boats make the long trip from their fishing communities in California, Oregon and Washington state to ply the waters off Fiji, Tahiti, Pago Pago and Samoa. Many more fish closer to home in the North Pacific fishery. In 2008, more than 50 vessels were recognised as meeting AAFA requirements. Together, AAFA fishermen account for more than half of all albacore tuna landed on the West Coast.

Traditional fishing methods

Apart from the names of the islands, the ‘pole and troll’ fishing they do is no less romantic. One method is pole-and-line, in which up to six fishers per boat use a stout pole, with a short line and a single barbless hook attached, to flick the wriggling tuna (each weighing 8-9kg) on to the deck of their 20m long boat. Immediately they cast the line again, catching a fish every few seconds.

In troll-and-jig fishing, an artificial lure (again with a barbless hook) is towed on a line behind a boat at about six knots. On striking the jig, the fish is pulled up immediately with a hydraulic gurdy or line-puller. Both are ‘clean’ methods that catch only one fish at a time. Bycatch is negligible and discards are low. Schools of albacore tend to be segregated by size, and fishers avoid smaller fish – not just for conservation reasons, but because they fetch lower prices.

“This is how it all started,” Webster points out. “Tuna harvesting began as pole and troll.” Over time, it was overtaken by other fishing methods which, depending on their application, can have bigger impacts on the environment and on tuna stocks. “Maybe we have to step back, rather than just plough on forward,” Webster says. “Our fishery was always sustainable.”

New markets in Europe

However, pole and troll tuna was not

marketed as a niche product but “pushed into the tuna commodity trading programme with the rest,” Webster explains. “Due to low prices, there wasn’t a good future – and because of instability, the next generation wasn’t following in the traditional footsteps of their parents and grandparents. In our minds, the fishery would cease to exist because the fishers were all in their late fifties.”

Then, five years ago, AAFA heard about the MSC. “We felt it would be one of the building blocks in telling our story, the story of our families, in more of an international forum,” says Webster. “We went through full assessment and, in the interim, established good relationships in Europe. People were waiting for our certification. As soon as it went through, they began ordering.”

Consumers then began to learn about the ‘pole and troll’ albacore fishery and its community of traditional fishing families. “They wanted to support this fishery as a source of high quality, sustainable tuna,” Webster says.

Stable prices and socio-economic benefits

Assured of their new market in Europe, the fishermen were able to set a stable price for the whole season instead of being at the whim of dockside price-setting. In April, the AAFA board agreed a price of \$2,260 per short tonne compared to a typical market price of \$1,700, meaning fishermen could invest in repairing crumbling vessels knowing there was a future for them and for the fishery. “It was historical,” Webster says.

“Without the MSC, that would not have happened,” she adds. “We couldn’t have created the new market without the ecolabel.” Now, that label is conspicuous on AAFA albacore sold in jars, in cans and as a smoked product. “We have good penetration in Switzerland, Germany and France,” Webster confirms. “Our product was never in the UK before, but now Sainsbury’s, Tesco and all the big chains stock our albacore. Thailand is looking at processing it; the Loblaw’s grocery chain in Canada is demanding it from a processor in British Columbia. It’s an example for fisheries around the world.”



“ The MSC has allowed us to develop new markets and create more awareness of sustainable fisheries around the world – such as the AAFA, which has been using sustainable fishing methods for generations. That is why we work together. MSC certification was another acknowledgement of their efforts made in sustainable tuna fishing ”

Andrew Bassford, Operations Manager, Fishes Wholesale BV



“ With the MSC, consumers can be reassured that sustainability is not just a word on a label. Our albacore tuna is traceable back to the vessel that harvested it – which has helped us tell our story to the world. The more market we build, the more stability we are creating for our fishery ”

Natalie Webster, Director of Operations, AAFA