

Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Alaska (Pacific) Cod – Freezer Longline



Photo provided courtesy of Bering Select Seafoods Company



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SPECIES Cod (*Gadus macrocephalus*)

FISHING METHOD Bottom hook and line gear (longline)

COUNTRY United States

LOCATION



Pacific Ocean, in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands

FISHERY TONNAGE 103,000 tonnes (2009)

“IN 2005, THERE were concerns over cod in the North Sea, cod in the Baltic Sea and even cod in the Barents Sea,” says Paul Gilliland, Managing Director of Bering Select Seafoods. “People said: ‘I don’t know which cod is the responsible buying choice any more. I’m not going to buy cod.’ At that time, awareness of the sustainability of Alaska cod was not well recognised. We took this fishery down the MSC route to demonstrate that, with the science-based MSC programme, consumers could buy this product with confidence.”

That product was MSC-certified Alaska cod, caught by longline and frozen at sea on vessels ranging from 35m to 60m in length. This historically important fish is salted or made into battered fillets, fishcakes or fish fingers (or breaded and battered fish sticks). Like other Alaska fisheries, this one has been well managed by the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service, which operates a programme of monitoring and enforcement. The Alaska cod fishery “obtained excellent results,” the MSC certifiers said in 2006, and stock is maintained at levels that ensure the abundance of Alaska cod and the safety of the ecosystem.

Minimizing environmental impacts

In longlining, a ground line is laid in a straight line along the seabed, having been baited automatically on a drum that adds tension to it as the gear is set. This tautness minimises movement of the gear and damage to the sea floor. Hours later, the gear is lifted upwards – not dragged sideways – by the retrieving vessel. “Talk to anyone in the business, and they will tell you longline gear doesn’t damage the seabed,” Gilliland says.

In fact, only three issues were of sufficient concern to warrant a special condition from the certifier – two of them environmental, one to do with management practices. The fishery

must address these conditions in order to remain MSC-certified. The first concerned bycatch of Northern fulmars, birds which, like other species, can dive on baited hooks and become entangled; the other concerned damage to the seabed by longline gear engaged in fishing or lost at sea. In both cases, not enough scientific research had been done to know the extent of any impacts. The fishery pledged to identify and monitor any such research in the future – and Bering Select, along with other longline companies, has been pressing the federal government to approve a \$500,000 federal grant for research into impacts from lost longline gear.

Access to new markets

Prior to certification, Bering Select’s markets were primarily specialised in the salted Alaska cod, either wet or dried, that is traditionally eaten in Italy, France, Portugal, Spain and Brazil. “Very little of our Alaska cod during the past 15 years went into value-added, breaded and battered products,” Gilliland reports. “This is an emerging and large market for us, and that came as a result of MSC certification. We are seeing new customers – initially for consumption in the UK, though volumes are starting to grow elsewhere in Europe.” Asda, Sainsbury’s and Young’s Seafood are among the major companies selling MSC-certified Alaska cod.

Gilliland estimates that the premium paid for MSC-certified Alaska cod has been as much as two to three percent when demand was strong, but “the most significant benefit has been the access to new markets,” he says, “and these continue to expand. Japan will be a market of growth, though the interest there is more in traceability than in sustainability. Fortunately, traceability is an inherent part of the MSC programme too.”

“ Hook-and-line is one of our preferred, low-impact fishing methods and we are delighted to offer line-caught Alaska cod, certified as sustainable by the MSC. As the world leader in certification of wild capture fisheries, the MSC is a fundamental component of our fish sourcing policies ”

Ally Dingwall, Aquaculture and Fisheries Manager, Sainsbury’s PLC



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