

Pelagic Freezer-Trawler Association North Sea Herring



© PFA



DATE CERTIFIED	9 May 2006
SPECIES	Herring (<i>Clupea harengus</i>)
FISHING METHOD	Pelagic trawl
COUNTRY	PFA vessels are based in the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Ireland and Lithuania
LOCATION	
FISHERY TONNAGE	About 65,000 tonnes

The North Sea and eastern English Channel

“WE WERE A kind of pioneer,” says Gerard van Balsfoort, President of the Pelagic Freezer-Trawler Association whose 26 vessels, up to 140m long, not only catch North Sea herring but grade, freeze and pack it on board. “There were some small fisheries certified before us, but we were the first major fishery in Europe to be certified. For the MSC, that was a bit of a breakthrough.”

Changing the face of EU fishing negotiations

Three years later, MSC certification appears to have become the norm. The Swedish, Danish and Scottish pelagic fleets have followed, and “During this year,” van Balsfoort says, “we expect that the majority of North Sea herring fisheries will be MSC certified.” That critical mass, he argues, has changed the face of EU fishing negotiations for this stock.

One pillar of the Common Fisheries Policy reform of 2002 was the creation of Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) which prepare recommendations on fisheries management and transmit them to the Commission or to the relevant national authorities. Scientists participate in meetings as experts, and representatives of member states may be present as observers. However, it is the fishery stakeholders (both from the industry and NGOs) that contribute most around the table.

“Our RAC deals with pelagic stocks,” van Balsfoort says, by which he means fish that swim in shoals in the middle of the water column rather than on the bottom. “All the major herring players in Europe are now MSC certified, or under assessment, and this has led to a certain kind of behaviour in the advisory process. From the point of view of stocks, you can’t just ask for a higher quota if it isn’t scientifically based. We all know the certifying bodies are looking at our conduct not just at sea, but in the process of advising on quotas. If we are certified, we must be precautionary. It is an MSC side effect.”

Stock rebuilding plan

With herring, this is especially pertinent. “We were certified in 2006 when stocks were at their highest,” van Balsfoort says. Since then, for complex biological reasons that have nothing to do with fishing, the number of herring in the North Sea has declined. “There has been a failure of recruitment, there are relatively few newcomers – so the stock has got smaller since then.”

In 2006, the MSC certifiers took into account such an eventuality. “To be certified, we had to sit down with scientists and make a stock rebuilding plan – and that is what we have done. Without the certificate, we would have done this only in the context of the Pelagic RAC.”

Even if a stock is sustainably exploited, he explains, “it flows and dips, it goes up and down. If you manage the downside well, you can still be certified. You have to adapt, and one adaptation we had to do was to make this stock recovery plan and accept strong cuts in the TAC.”

Demonstrating sustainability

It helped, too, that the herring fishery is selective, targeting one species with virtually no bycatch. “This is mostly because of the nature of the species” van Balsfoort says, because herring tend to swim in distinct shoals, meaning other species are rarely caught. There is a low level of discards, ranging from two to five per cent, he adds, and because the trawl is towed in midwater, impacts on the seabed are not an issue.

“That is why we went for MSC certification,” van Balsfoort says. “We knew we were responsible and sustainable, but we wanted to prove it. That is especially reassuring for consumers of herring – a well-known species that is close to the hearts and minds of all people who live around the North Sea.”



“As the only well recognised independent label, the MSC makes it easy for consumers to choose sustainable fish. By our own criteria on stock management, effects on the environment, bycatch and habitat destruction, MSC-certified North Sea herring gets a green light”

Christien Absil, Fisheries Policy Officer, North Sea Foundation