

# Scottish Pelagic Sustainability Group Western Mackerel



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SPECIES Mackerel  
(*Scomber scombrus*)

FISHING METHOD Pelagic trawl

COUNTRY United Kingdom

LOCATION



The Northeast Atlantic and North Sea – specifically off the west coast of the United Kingdom, Ireland and France, targeting the western component of the stock

FISHERY TONNAGE 140,000 tonnes  
(2009 quota)

“THE WESTERN COMPONENT is where we derive almost all our mackerel quota from,” says Derek Duthie, Company Secretary of the Scottish Pelagic Sustainability Group (SPSG), explaining how a fishery catching Northeast Atlantic mackerel – a depleted stock in some areas – can be certified as sustainable. In fact, it is only the North Sea component (spawning in waters to the east of Britain) that continues to require special protection measures following overfishing in the 1960s, while the western component is “in a good state”, according to the MSC certification report.

Like the SPSG North Sea herring fishery certified in July 2008, this one is a major player. It lands about three-quarters of the entire UK quota for mackerel from the Western component (an £80m market), selling it mainly to Russia, Eastern Europe and Japan. What, then, makes the UK’s largest fishery sustainable?

### Highly selective fishing

First, it uses fishing methods that are highly selective. “Vessels use fish-finding equipment to locate shoals of mackerel, then tow at whatever depth the instruments tell them,” Duthie explains. What skippers don’t necessarily know is whether the shoal is made up of larger mackerel, smaller juveniles or a mixture of both – hence the use of automated jiggers, a novel technology introduced on all SPSG vessels last October to improve selectivity further.

“We know from hand-lining that mackerel bite on hooks,” says Duthie, “so operators programme their machines to suspend lines with hooks at the depth where the shoal is located. When the mackerel bite, the machine automatically winds the line up – and each fish caught is weighed on electronic scales. The skipper will see the weight of individual mackerel, but also the average size. Based on that sample of a couple of baskets – 100 mackerel, say – he will decide whether to tow on that mark (or shoal) or to move on elsewhere. If the factories are looking for a particular size of fish, you can go out and tailor your catch to what the market is asking for. Generally, a better price is paid for bigger mackerel, so you can target those and try to avoid catching juveniles.”

In their report, the MSC certifiers concluded that ‘slippage’ [i.e., opening the net and releasing under size fish before they are

pumped out of the water] “is not a significant issue” here, compared to other pelagic fisheries. That conclusion is based on records kept by Fisheries Research Sciences (FRS) in Aberdeen, which deploys scientific observers on board some SPSG vessels.

For a decade before certification, trawlers from the Scottish pelagic fleet also carried observers from the Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU) at the University of St Andrews – a voluntary initiative. “Observations have shown nil cetacean bycatch in the mackerel fishery,” Duthie confirms. When observers became mandatory under EU law, “The SMRU continued that work on behalf of the government,” Duthie says, “and we co-operate with that programme.” Now, as part of its MSC action plan, the SPSG is required to work further with the SMRU to see how any future interactions can be “meaningfully recorded”.

### Third-party endorsement

In 2007, when the SPSG was formed out of the former Pelagic Strategy Group (a government-industry joint venture), one of its stated goals was to obtain MSC certification. It had already developed a sustainability policy but it lacked the credibility of third-party endorsement. “We wanted to prove to people, independently, that our fisheries were in good shape and that we were fishing responsibly,” Duthie says.

Initiatives such as automated jigging were not directly in response to a condition of certification, he stresses. However, when entering MSC assessment, “knowing the kinds of things the certifiers would be looking for” was a catalyst. “We were aware we had to minimise discards,” Duthie says, “and the MSC process focused our minds and helped us push through on that. It made us think about the overall state of the stock and the responsibilities that we have.”

### Protecting existing markets

The other big reason for seeking certification, Duthie says, was to protect existing markets. “It provided an opportunity to ensure that our competitive position is not eroded in any way,” he explains. “There are a number of mackerel fisheries under assessment now, so it’s a way of guaranteeing our future. We didn’t want to be the last of the pack to have these credentials.”

“The achievement of MSC certification – the gold standard of sustainability – for Scotland’s mackerel fishery is a welcome boost for our fishing industry and communities. It also benefits consumers as they now have evidence that when they are choosing Scottish mackerel, they are buying a top-quality product from a sustainable source”

Richard Lochhead, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment



“We were confident from day one that what we were doing was sustainable – but there are always things that can be improved on. The MSC process focused our minds on certain aspects of the fishery and made us think about the overall state of the stock and the responsibilities that we have”

Derek Duthie, Company Secretary, Scottish Pelagic Sustainability Group