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Get Certified! Fisheries

A practical guide to the Marine Stewardship
Council's fishery certification process



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Cover photography:

Pescafría-Pesquera Rodríguez Barents sea cod was awarded MSC certification as a sustainable and well managed fishery in February 2012. It is the first Spanish fishery and the first European Union Barents Sea cod fishery to be awarded this distinction.

Introduction

A practical guide to the Marine Stewardship Council's fishery certification process.



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The Western Australia rock lobster fishery was the first to achieve certification in March 2000.

The challenge

Around the world our oceans are under pressure from human and environmental impacts, and there is a growing need to safeguard our seafood resources. We also need to protect people's livelihoods and conserve the marine environment for the future. While negative reports about poor management and overfishing tend to prevail in the media, there are many fisheries that are fishing sustainably, implementing good management practices and minimising their environmental impact. Some have fished sustainably for decades but need a way to prove this to a market that increasingly requires third-party verification of sustainability claims.

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) helps recognise sustainable fisheries and gives them a competitive edge in the marketplace by assuring buyers that the fish comes from a well-managed and sustainable source.

The MSC

The MSC is an independent, global, non-profit organisation. Our mission is to use our ecolabel and fishery certification program to contribute to the health of the world's oceans by recognising and rewarding sustainable fishing practices, influencing the choices people make when buying seafood, and working with our partners to transform the seafood market to a sustainable basis.

The MSC program is open to all wild-capture fisheries, and we promote equal access for fisheries from the developing world.

Introduction *continued*

The label

The MSC uses a product label – the blue MSC ecolabel – to reward environmentally responsible fisheries. The ecolabel is already displayed on thousands of seafood products around the world. Consumers, who are increasingly concerned about overfishing and its environmental consequences, can choose fully traceable seafood products which have been independently assessed and certified as ecologically sustainable. This assures them that the product has not contributed to the environmental problem of overfishing.

A credible certification program

Under the MSC program, fisheries are certified as sustainable and well managed if they meet the MSC's environmental standard for sustainable fishing. The standard was developed following an international consultation with stakeholders between 1997 and 1999. This consultation included eight regional workshops and two expert drafting sessions, and involved more than 300 organisations and individuals around the world.

To maintain impartiality, the MSC operates a 'third-party' certification program. This means the assessment is conducted by an independent organisation and meets standards established by experts in consultation with stakeholders. This is the highest level of assurance and means the outcome is unbiased.

Underpinned by professional benchmarks to promote robust processes, we offer the world's only seafood certification and ecolabelling program that is consistent with all of the following international norms:

- The Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishing (UN FAO)
- Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries (UN FAO)
- The Code of Good Practice for Setting Social and Environmental Standards (ISEAL)
- World Trade Organization Technical Barriers to Trade Agreement.

The MSC now has more than ten years of progress and experience to draw on to ensure the certification program is robust and valuable to fisheries and the supply chain.

Benefits from MSC certification

MSC certification provides many benefits to fisheries including helping to safeguard livelihoods. The MSC program recognises and rewards good management and sustainable practices and, in many cases, improves market access and price premiums. Many retailers and foodservice companies are now demanding assurance that their product is sustainably sourced – MSC certification demonstrates this higher commitment to sustainability.

About this guide

One of the key lessons we have learnt from fisheries that have been certified is that having a good understanding of what is required and getting prepared before the full assessment will reduce the timescales and cost of the assessment.

MSC fisheries clients, certifiers and the MSC have all gained considerable experience during many independent fishery certification and re-certification processes. This experience has been brought together to provide you with guidance and assistance on how best to manage the MSC fishery assessment process.

This guide will help you ensure your fishery's assessment is efficient and effective – giving it the best possible chance of a positive outcome.

If you have any questions before you get started, please contact your regional MSC office where our staff will be able to advise you. Contact details can be found at www.msc.org/about-us/offices-staff.

“If there is one piece of advice I would give to a fishery entering the MSC process, it's get organised – make sure you have a really good project manager to take you through it.”

David Carter, CEO Austral Fisheries, Australia.
Fishery client for Australian mackerel icefish, certified on 31 March 2006.

What are you assessed against?

Fishery certification is a voluntary assessment to determine whether a fishery meets the MSC Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Fishing (known as the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing or just ‘the standard’).



© MSC / A Battese

The India oil sardine fishery was assessed using the Risk-Based Framework which allows fisheries with limited data available to access the MSC program.

If successful, products from the fishery can display the MSC ecolabel in the marketplace after each link in the supply chain completes a traceability audit against the separate MSC Chain of Custody standard.

Three core principles form the MSC fisheries standard:

Principle 1: Sustainable fish stocks

The fishing activity must be at a level which is sustainable for the fish population. Any certified fishery must operate so that fishing can continue indefinitely and is not overexploiting the resources.

Principle 2: Minimising environmental impact

Fishing operations should be managed to maintain the structure, productivity, function and diversity of the ecosystem on which the fishery depends.

Principle 3: Effective management

The fishery must meet all local, national and international laws and must have a management system in place to respond to changing circumstances and maintain sustainability.

The three principles are supported by 23 more detailed criteria. Under the MSC program every fishery is measured against these principles. The actions that different fisheries take to show they meet the three principles vary in each case, taking into account the unique circumstances of the fishery.

Overview of the assessment process

Certification to the MSC environmental standard is a multi-step process, carried out by an independent organisation known as a certifier (also called a conformity assessment body).

Once the certifier has been appointed, the assessment process can start.

Pre-assessment: A confidential report by the certifier tells the fishery if it is ready for full assessment and may also give guidance about how to get ready for full assessment.

Preparation: We recommend fisheries to prepare for full assessment by communicating with colleagues, agencies and buyers, applying for grants, appointing a project manager or steering group, and making contact with stakeholders to encourage participation in the assessment process.

Full assessment: This is a seven-step process to determine whether the fishery meets the MSC standard. The process is led by the appointed certifier and its expert assessment team. It involves consulting with stakeholders, reviewing performance indicators, scoring the fishery, identifying ways that the fishery can strengthen its performance (if needed), peer review and making a final determination about whether the fishery meets the MSC standard. This is an intensive process that calls for a high level of information to be provided by the fishery and others.

Post-assessment: Fisheries must arrange for audits of the fishery and should plan how they wish to make the most of certification using the MSC Chain of Custody standard for seafood traceability.

Who does the assessment?

Only accredited certifiers can certify fisheries to the MSC environmental standard. All accredited certifiers are listed on the MSC website (www.msc.org/get-certified/find-a-certifier). The website also lists certifiers that are seeking accreditation. These applicant certifiers carry out a first assessment as part of the accreditation process.

Certifiers are accredited by another independent organisation, Accreditation Services International (ASI). ASI continuously monitors accredited certifiers. For more information about the role of ASI please see page 10 of this guide or visit: www.accreditation-services.com.

How are fisheries assessed?

The formal documents that guide the assessment process are called the *MSC Certification Requirements* and *Guidance to the MSC Certification Requirements*. More information about the certification requirements is available at www.msc.org/about-us/standards.

Transparency and consultation are important features of the process and help build support for the assessment.

Among other things, these procedures include:

- Formal stakeholder consultation to allow all interested parties to input at key stages of the assessment
- Making information about the fishery public, including performance measures
- Identification of conditions to strengthen performance in weaker areas
- Peer review of the assessment
- Stakeholder or ‘public’ review of the assessment
- A formal objections procedure.

Full details of each step in the assessment process can be found on pages 17-24 of this guide.

Which fisheries are eligible?

The MSC promotes equal access to its fishery certification program for all fisheries, regardless of their size, scale, ecology, geography and/or technology.

A wide range of fisheries have applied for certification – from the very small to the very large.

The MSC fishery assessment process is used to certify wild capture freshwater and marine species. The MSC program does not assess aquaculture operations although some forms of enhanced fishery may be eligible for assessment.

Enhanced fisheries

The MSC recognises that many fisheries might involve other kinds of human intervention than the harvest process, e.g. where a hatchery operation releases young fish into the wild or where shellfish larvae are captured on ropes and grown out to a marketable size. These are known as enhanced fisheries. Before the assessment begins, the certifier must clarify with the MSC whether the fishery falls within the scope of the MSC program. For more information on the eligibility of enhanced fisheries please see the MSC website at: www.msc.org/get-certified/fisheries/eligible-fisheries.

Fisheries with limited data

Many fisheries do not have access to the detailed scientific research data that is typically evaluated in fishery assessments against the MSC standard. This is particularly true for small scale and developing country fisheries. If data is limited certifiers can use the MSC's Risk-Based Framework (RBF), which is built into the *MSC Certification Requirements*.

The RBF allows certifiers to use a structured risk assessment framework to determine if a data-limited fishery is operating sustainably and ensures the MSC program and its associated benefits are accessible to all fisheries. For more information about the RBF see the MSC website at: www.msc.org/about-us/standards/methodologies/fam/msc-risk-based-framework.

Examples of types of fishery currently in the program

- Single species
- Multi-species
- Trawl
- Long line
- Hand raked
- Pots
- Freshwater
- Marine
- Inshore
- Offshore
- Demersal
- Pelagic
- Enhanced

What is assessed?

Before the assessment can begin, the fishery needs to be carefully defined and the organisation(s) that will be responsible for the assessment needs to be identified.

Unit of certification

The unit of certification describes what is being assessed. This needs to be determined from the very beginning of assessment by the fishery client with advice from your certifier. It means very clearly identifying what part of the fishery will be assessed, and what will not. It could be the entire fishery, a smaller group of vessels within the fishery, or specific gears or fishing methods. Once defined, only fish from that particular unit will later be able to carry the MSC ecolabel in the marketplace.

The key questions to ask yourself are:

- What species and vessels do you want to be assessed?
- If the certification is successful, what and who will be certified?
- What species do you want to be able to carry the MSC ecolabel in the marketplace?

The unit of certification cannot be changed part way through the assessment without substantial delay. This means that you cannot add species, such as bycatch / by-product, to a certificate at the end of a successful assessment – it is vital to get this right at the very beginning of the assessment.

The fishery client

A ‘fishery client’ is an individual, an organisation or a group of organisations that make a formal application for a fishery to be assessed. Previous fishery clients have included government agencies, fishing industry associations, local management authorities and co-clients where fishing industry associations, conservation and community groups worked together to achieve certification.

The relationship the fishery client has with the fishery, and the level of control over its activities, is more important than the type of organisation. It is important to understand that the fishery assessment and certification process is thorough and scientifically robust, and therefore takes time and resources. The fishery client is responsible for the cost of the assessment so should have some legal standing (i.e. an organisation that is able to sign a contract on behalf of its members) and should clearly communicate who is involved, or represented, in the fishery assessment.

In addition to working with the certifier and providing information throughout the assessment process, the fishery client is also ultimately responsible for implementing any conditions placed on the fishery if (or when) the fishery certificate is issued. Failure to implement conditions can lead to suspension or withdrawal of the certificate, so the fishery client should have strong project management skills and be confident that any required actions can be managed and implemented.

How much does it cost?

Negotiating and paying fishery assessment and certification costs are the responsibility of the client. These fees are paid to the certifier.

Communicating progress to fishery workers throughout the assessment will build support and understanding for the certification and any associated conditions.

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On pages 14-15 we provide advice about how to choose a certifier, including the recommendation that you get more than one quote.

The MSC does not receive any payment for assessments or certifications. The MSC only receives payment when organisations choose to use the MSC ecolabel on their products.

Fees charged by certifiers are generally kept confidential between the client and the certifier and are determined on a case by case basis depending upon each stage of the fishery assessment process.

The main stages of the fishery assessment and certification process that carry a cost are:

- Pre-assessment
- Full assessment
- Audits

The cost of fishery assessments varies and depends on the complexity of the fishery, the availability of information and the level of stakeholder involvement. Anecdotal information indicates that the current cost of certification can vary between \$15,000 (USD) and \$120,000 (USD), perhaps more for complex assessments with multiple units of certification. Ensuring you are prepared for the assessment will reduce the cost and time taken to assess a fishery.

As the fishery client you may need Chain of Custody certification (usually post-harvest companies) or an Ecolabel License Agreement (usually businesses wishing to place the MSC ecolabel on certified products). You can find out more about Chain of Custody certification and ecolabel licensing at: www.msc.org/get-certified.

Where can you seek funding?

The MSC is sometimes asked to provide funds to pay for a fishery's assessment. Unfortunately, we cannot do this, as the MSC would no longer be seen as an independent and impartial mark of sustainability.

Instead, there are a variety of sources of funding available to assist fisheries wishing to seek certification.

Some examples of these are:

- The Sustainable Fisheries Fund (USA) provides grants to fisheries anywhere in the world specifically to pay for work related to MSC certification. You can find out more on the Sustainable Fisheries Fund website: www.resourceslegacyfund.org.
- WWF can provide funding to assist small-scale fisheries. You can find out more on the WWF website: www.panda.org/what_we_do/how_we_work/conservation/marine/sustainable_fishing/sustainable_seafood/fisheries_certification/
- In the US, California Department of Food & Agriculture Specialty Crops Grant Program has funded the California Salmon Council.
- Other clients, particularly in developing countries, have sought funding from development agencies.
- Government agencies can also be a useful source of support. Some agencies have specific funding or grant programs for environmental projects or may be willing to sponsor your assessment. For example, the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) (UK) provides grants to fisheries to enable them to seek certification. These funds are only available to UK-based fisheries. Please contact DEFRA for further information. Other national and regional governmental bodies also sometimes provide funding.

- The Sea Change Investment Fund aims to use the power of the market to encourage sustainable fishing practices. It is supported by the Packard Foundation and was launched in March 2005. Sea Change Investment Fund grants are open to companies that increase the availability of sustainable seafood in the marketplace. For more information, please visit: www.seachangefund.com
- Fishery clients may have access to funds from a variety of sources such as fisheries agencies, trade agencies and regional development agencies. In some countries bank loans or loans from institutions specialising in micro finance may be available.
- Some clients have sought funding from commercial organisations that are interested in promoting sustainable seafood.

If you have any questions regarding funding, please contact your regional MSC office where our staff will be able to advise you on the best approach for your situation.

Please visit www.msc.org/about-us/offices-staff for more information.

How long does the assessment take?

Preparation and good project management are the keys to ensuring a smooth, timely and cost-effective assessment.



© Saskia Van Osnabrugge

The certifier and assessment team will make one or more site visits to the fishery as part of the assessment process.

The information in this guide will help you to reduce assessment time and get prepared before you embark on the assessment process.

The time taken for previous assessments has varied greatly. The average is around 17 months, but the length of the process depends to some extent on your preparation, as well as the nature and complexity of the fishery. The degree of commitment and willingness to engage by those who hold important data about the fishery is a crucial factor that influences the length of the process.

The resources available to the certifier as well as the level of other work commitments of their assessment team members can have a significant influence on how long the certification process takes. You should to raise the issue of timeframes directly with prospective certifiers.

Previous clients recommend you ask lots of questions of prospective certifiers, particularly about their experiences with the duration of the full assessment phase, and use your contract to negotiate a short process.

Assessment roles and responsibilities

The Marine Stewardship Council

- In collaboration with stakeholders, the MSC has set the standard that the fishery will be assessed against
- Sets the *MSC Certification Requirements*
- Sets the *Guidance to the MSC Certification Requirements*
- Provides advice to certifiers, clients and stakeholders about the assessment process and requirements.

Accreditation Services International

- Independently accredits third-party certifiers to conduct MSC assessments
- Monitors certifier compliance with the MSC standard and certification requirements
- First point of contact for complaints about certifiers.

Certifier

- Accredited by ASI to conduct fishery and / or Chain of Custody assessments
- Responsible for the fishery assessment team
- Issues the fishery certificate
- Conducts surveillance audits and evaluations during the life of the fishery certificate.

Fishery assessment team

- Assesses fisheries against the MSC standard and in accordance with the *MSC Certification Requirements* and *Guidance to the MSC Certification Requirements*.
- Uses information provided by the client, management agencies and stakeholder groups to reach a judgment about the performance of a fishery.
- Is not obliged to conduct new research in order to reach a judgment. The assessment team will use existing information and reports to make a precautionary determination.

Fishery client

- Must be a legally constituted body able to enter into legal contracts
- Ensures that the assessment team has unrestricted access to data and information about the fishery
- Discloses all favourable and non-favourable information of relevance to the fishery to the assessment team
- Ensures the certifier is aware of stakeholders that should be contacted to be involved in the assessment.

Stakeholders

- Bring to the attention of the assessment team any issues and concerns they have regarding the conduct or performance of the fishery relevant to the MSC standard.
- Provide well-formed and substantive arguments for their positions, including references to objective evidence that can assist the assessment team.
- The stakeholder may act as a representative of his or her constituents, representing their interests and positions.

Preparation

- *Managing the pre-assessment and full-assessment processes*
- *Preparing the information*
- *Facilitating stakeholder involvement*
- *Choosing a certifier*
- *Compliance with MSC requirements*
- *Get quotes and interview certifiers*
- *Value for money*
- *Making the decision – which certifier?*
- *Using the same certifier for all aspects of the assessment and certification process*
- *Defining the contract*

Preparation

It is worth thinking through how you can make the assessment process run smoothly, before entering into formal arrangements or contracts with a certifier, as this will reduce the timescales and cost of the certification.



© S Fischer

We have noticed that certain things have worked well for previous fishery clients. Here are some ideas to consider:

Managing the pre-assessment and full assessment processes

The assessment process and the management of activities after a certificate is awarded require attention to both detail and timeframes. You may find it useful to designate an individual to assist and monitor the assessment process and to be a point of contact for the certifier's assessment team. While the certifier is responsible for assessing the fishery, someone in your organisation should be responsible for ensuring you meet your obligations as the client, such as delivering any required information or actions on time.

A small group of people who ensure that both the assessment process and post-certification requirements are managed in a timely and efficient fashion can also help. This group could include representatives from industry (fishermen and processors), the fishery management and/or research agencies and / or relevant stakeholders. Alternatively, it could simply involve a project management group from within your organisation.

Getting information in place before the assessment will save you time and money. Here the certifier (left) and expert assessment team visit one of the fishing vessels of the EURONOR saithe fishery in Boulogne Sur Mer. On the right the fishery client explains the details of the fishing operation.

Preparing the information

The fishery assessment is based on expert analysis of information. This information can take many forms, from interviews to detailed scientific reports. Without this information the certifier's assessment team will not be able to make a thorough evaluation of your fishery.

A common cause of delay in previous assessments has been difficulty in obtaining important information. Delays occurred because information was not made available or the information was presented in a form that was time-consuming to interpret for the assessment team. From the outset of the assessment process it is vital that:

- Your certifier makes it clear what information will be required
- Gaps in information are identified and addressed
- All the information is made available to the assessment team in time for the first assessment visits.

Who are stakeholders?

The MSC program depends upon the input and involvement of all individuals or organisations that are interested in, or are affected by, the fishery assessment. These individuals and groups are referred to as stakeholders. They include:

- Government management agencies
- Environmental / conservation organisations
- Other fishers / fishing sectors
- Industry groups
- Community groups
- Commercial / post-harvest sector
- Scientists.

Their support will help ensure the certification process runs smoothly, may help minimise delays and potentially avoid objections to a certification result. A Stakeholder's Guide to the Marine Stewardship Council explains this process in more depth. Copies are available from your local MSC office or www.msc.org.

Facilitating stakeholder involvement

The MSC program depends not only upon written information but upon the input and involvement of all relevant stakeholder groups. The MSC and the independent certifiers devote a significant amount of effort to ensuring that the process is inclusive and transparent. It is vitally important that you, as the client, invest time in gaining the support of stakeholders and agencies (or fishing industry, if the agency is the client). This helps to create support for the fishery assessment and build consensus about a fishery's status.

The MSC provides certifiers with guidance on how to conduct stakeholder consultations in the assessment process and the MSC's expectations of this process. To minimise costs to your organisation and cut down on time, it is important that you provide your certifier with as much information as possible on relevant stakeholder groups.

We suggest that you contact the following stakeholder groups to discuss your assessment:

- **Government management agencies** (if not the client organisation): most fisheries are managed according to laws administered by the government, so the support and co-operation of your relevant government management agency staff and decision-makers is critical to the assessment, especially if changes to improve the management of the fishery require co-operation between government agencies and industry. Government agencies also commonly hold much of the information required by the certifier to undertake the assessment.
- **Environmental / conservation organisations:** conservation groups can be very influential allies that can help you improve the profile and reputation of your fishery, especially regarding public perceptions. Developing trust with conservation groups will help your assessment go smoothly and will benefit your fishery. It is a good idea to involve these groups right from the beginning of your assessment.

Preparation *continued*



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– **Industry groups:** while there are obvious competitive advantages associated with certification, it can be more beneficial to work with other fishers than to try to exclude them. The advantages of having many groups from the fishery join the assessment include sharing the costs, increasing capacity and potentially securing markets with specific quantity or quality specifications. If fisheries wish to join the client group after certification they are expected to make a fair and reasonable retrospective contribution to the costs. These approaches should be welcomed by the clients that initiated the certification.

– **Other community and fishing sectors:** recreational, indigenous and subsistence fishers may harvest the fish stock identified for assessment, or the fishing area may be important for local communities. Ensuring representatives of these groups have a good understanding of the process and are participating in the assessment will help to build support and ensure that the fishery as a whole will benefit from any management changes.

– **Commercial / post-harvest sector:** the use of the MSC ecolabel requires companies in the post-harvest sector to establish a verifiable Chain of Custody from the certified fishery. Chain of Custody certification gives seafood buyers the assurance that an MSC labelled product comes from a fishery that is certified to the MSC environmental standard. You should inform your customers of your intention to become certified so they can look into the options of seeking Chain of Custody certification to be able to use the MSC ecolabel on products from your fishery and show their commitment to sustainability.

Choosing a certifier

Going through the certification process is as much about managing the process as it is about the results of the fishery assessment. To get the most out of your assessment, it is important that you take the time to research certifiers and choose the one that offers you the best service and price for your needs.

Compliance with MSC requirements

Certifiers are accredited by ASI to conduct MSC fishery certifications. This means that ASI has audited their ability to assess and certify fisheries using the MSC's standards and certification requirements. Only those accredited by ASI can certify fisheries. All certifiers are regularly monitored to ensure that they are complying with MSC requirements. A full list of certifiers that can carry out MSC fisheries certifications is available at: www.msc.org/get-certified/find-a-certifier/fisheries-assessments.

This list also includes certifiers that are currently in the process of becoming fully accredited to conduct MSC assessments. These certifiers are able to assess fisheries but are closely monitored and evaluated by ASI throughout the process and only formally accredited once the first assessment is complete before they are allowed to award a certificate.

Please note: The MSC receives no money from the certification process and has no role in overseeing the contract between the client and its chosen certifier.

The assessment team meets to discuss the KDSFF snow crab and flathead flounder fishery. This fishery became the first in Japan to be certified.

Get quotes and interview certifiers

There is no set fee for a fishery assessment. You are therefore encouraged to seek quotes from more than one certifier before making a decision and signing a contract. It is also valuable to contact the certifiers who submit a quote and explore the logic behind each quote.

It is important that the certifier includes each element of the assessment phase in the quote; with an appropriate allocation for the time the certifier says it will take to perform each step of the assessment. As you will have the greatest knowledge about the complexity of your fishery, you need to make sure you are satisfied that these aspects are appropriately addressed in the quote. You might also want to explore with the certifier the factors that might lead to changes in cost during the assessment process.

Pages 17-24 of this guide provides a brief outline of the main steps in the fishery assessment process that should be included in a quote. The *Guidance to the MSC Certification Requirements* provides more detail on the key steps of the assessment.

Another vital source of information is other fishery assessment clients – both certified fisheries and those that are, like you, undergoing assessment. They will be able to provide a candid picture of the assessment process as well as feedback on individual certifiers. The MSC website has contact details of each fishery client and we recommend that you contact them to learn from their experiences.

Value for money

You, as the client, are ultimately responsible for ensuring that your certifier is giving value for money and is capable of delivering the service.

It is important to remember that the cheapest quote may not be the best quote. Pay particular attention to evidence that the certifier has a good and detailed understanding of the fishery, and is aware of its complexities. It is also good practice to ask about your certifier's other commitments and staff availability to ensure your fishery will receive timely attention.

Making the decision – which certifier?

There are a number of factors worth considering when evaluating quotes. The following checklist of questions to ask your certifier may be helpful:

- ✓ Do they have a track record of effective project and contract management?
- ✓ Do they demonstrate a good knowledge and understanding of your fishery and its complexities in relation to the MSC standard?
- ✓ Can they provide evidence of effective engagement with stakeholders?
- ✓ Can they offer time bound contracts tied into your timeframes?
- ✓ Is the proposed timescale for completing the assessment realistic and what contingencies have been allowed?
- ✓ Can they provide good testimonials from recent clients?
- ✓ Are any unresolved complaints lodged with the certifier or with ASI?

Using the same certifier for all aspects of the assessment and certification process

As the client, you are under no obligation to use the same certifier for the pre-assessment, full assessment or post certification surveillance and auditing work. There are, however, benefits in using the same certifier in that knowledge of the fishery is important for conducting assessments in an efficient and timely fashion.

It is important to consider how much extra work a new certifier might need to undertake to 'get up to speed' with your assessment. There may also be significant costs attached to changing certifier. As the client, you should ensure that any quotes from new certifiers include all of the costs associated with taking over the outcomes or results of work conducted by another certifier. There may also be contractual issues related to intellectual property that will need to be sorted out between you and your original certifier before a new one can take over.

Defining the contract

Once you have chosen a certifier, you will need to sign a contract with them for the duration of the assessment. The *MSC Certification Requirements* specifies that the certifier-client contract has some specific provisions, including the need to set out rights and responsibilities and an overall timeframe for the assessment. However, the nature and additional content of the contract is not specified by the MSC and is confidential between you and your certifier.

You may want the certifier to include the pre-assessment, full assessment and the post certification surveillance and auditing work under a single agreement. Alternatively, you may want to have each component separated out. This is up to you and depends upon your particular situation.

You should also take into account the roles of related third parties, such as other industry organisations, processors or buyers, and in particular their interests in the timing and progress of an assessment. You should also consider any occupational health and safety issues for the assessment team during site visits.

You may wish the contract to specify when you expect the certifier to produce various documents for your review (such as the Preliminary Draft Report) and timeframes for the various stages of the assessment process, to avoid any misunderstanding or undue delays to the assessment.

Like most other contracts with service providers, you and your certifier may agree to link payments to demonstrated performance through completed project steps. Similarly, your contract should outline any obligations you have to enable the certifier to complete the assessment project.

Even though the certifier is providing you with a service, it is an independent body contracted to assess your fishery against the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing. The role of the certifier is not to serve your interests in seeing a fishery certified, but to provide an independent, objective, scientifically verifiable assessment. You should manage your interaction actively as a business relationship.



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Finding the right certifier for your assessment and ensuring they can meet your specific needs is the foundation of a solid assessment.

The assessment process: step-by-step

- *Pre-assessment*
- *Step one: Announcing full assessment and forming the assessment team*
- *Step two: Defining the assessment tree*
- *Step three: Gathering information, meeting stakeholders and scoring the fishery*
- *Step four: Client and peer review*
- *Step five: Public review*
- *Step six: Final report and determination*
- *Step seven: Public certification report and getting your certificate*

The assessment process: step-by-step

The MSC has established the certification requirements to help ensure that all ASI accredited certifiers (and certifiers undergoing accreditation by ASI) follow consistent assessment procedures.



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The certification requirements detail the required steps and procedures that make up a fishery assessment. The pre-assessment and seven key steps are described in this section. The certification requirements prescribe how the MSC environmental standard should be interpreted when assessing fisheries for MSC certification.

Pre-assessment

This is the initial phase that will inform whether you should progress with a full assessment in the near future. The certifier will provide you with a pre-assessment report which identifies any potential obstacles or problems that could be a barrier to certification and that may need to be addressed before you move to full assessment.

It is important you use this report to draw your own conclusion on how easy or difficult it will be for your fishery to meet the MSC standard.

The NESFC sea bass fishery is a beach-based fishery in the UK. Its certification included the requirement to limit fishing permits during the winter fishing season and to report monthly catches in detail.

What is it?

The certifier will assess the strengths and weaknesses of the fishery and provide guidance, in the form of a report, about changes and / or requirements necessary to bring the fishery up to the requirements of the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing. It is vital that the certifier explains the report and details any obstacles or problems fully and that you carefully consider the options for addressing these before progressing to full assessment. The pre-assessment process and its outcomes are confidential to the certifier and fishery client unless you choose to make them public.

At a minimum, a pre-assessment will consist of:

- A meeting between you and the certifier
- Potential field visits
- A preliminary assessment of the extent to which the fishery meets the MSC standard
- An evaluation of your state of preparedness for assessment of the fishery
- A review of the availability of required fishery data and information
- Identification of stakeholder interests that should be considered in a full assessment
- A determination of the overall scope of the full assessment
- A description or agreement of the unit of certification
- A description of potential obstacles or problems that may be a barrier to certification
- Quotes for the full assessment (if relevant).

Advice to fisheries

If the pre-assessment indicates that your fishery is likely to meet the MSC standard you can start to prepare for full assessment. You should ensure that you fully understand the comments in the pre-assessment before continuing as you may need to make some changes to improve the fishery's performance to increase the likelihood of a positive outcome.

If your pre-assessment report does not recommend full assessment at present, it should be clear what your fishery needs to do to come closer to the MSC standard. It may be worth sharing the report with others involved in the fishery (such as government management agencies) to explore how changes can be made, so that the fishery can return to the MSC process in the near future. Reviewing your practices to ensure they are more sustainable will also benefit the future of your fishery.

Step one: Announcing full assessment and forming the assessment team

Full assessment is the detailed, public, rigorous process that your certifier will follow to see whether or not the fishery meets the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing. It starts when you, as the client, sign a contract with your certifier and the certifier notifies the MSC that the fishery is entering full assessment.

What happens?

The certifier announces to general and targeted stakeholders that the fishery is undergoing full assessment. This announcement is provided to the MSC, which emails stakeholders, updates the MSC website and usually issues a press release in collaboration with you, the client. The certifier then plans the assessment process in consultation with you and selects the assessment team. Certifiers usually also consult with stakeholders about the membership of the assessment team.

Advice to fisheries

We suggest that you and the certifier ensure that data requirements and the project plan are in place before you make an announcement so that you can maintain the momentum of the assessment once you have made it public.

Media interest

It is also worth preparing for media interest in your announcement beforehand. The certifier, the MSC and the client should agree an announcement date and prepare a joint press statement in advance, identify spokespeople, media targets and appropriate languages for the statement. This is usually undertaken by email or phone call and should occur when the certifier formally notifies the MSC that the fishery is entering full assessment. Most of the information about the fishery needed for the announcement will be included in the Notification Report supplied to the MSC by your certifier. You might also want to consider including some digital photographs of the fishery, the fish and fishing operations. You could also choose this moment to make direct contact with stakeholders that have an interest in your fishery. Establishing good relationships will help you build a network of stakeholders who want the fishery to succeed, and will be well placed to contribute ideas, resources and capacity at later stages.

The assessment process: step-by-step *continued*



Scores and conditions – how does it all work?

The assessment process involves scoring 31 different performance indicators. In order to obtain MSC certification, the fishery needs to obtain a score of 60 or more for each Performance Indicator. If a fishery achieves a score of less than 60 on any Performance Indicator, certification will not be awarded.

Additionally, the fishery must have an aggregate score of 80 or more for each of the three Principles in order to be certified.

Where a fishery achieves a score for any Performance Indicator of less than 80, but at least 60, the certifier will set one or more

conditions for continuing certification. In the absence of exceptional circumstances, the condition(s) shall improve performance of the fishery to at least the 80 level within a period set by the certifier but not longer than the term of the certification.

The certifier will specify an appropriate timescale for addressing each condition and should specify the outcome or targets for which you should aim. The certifier's role is to offer guidance and make clear to you the required outcome rather than prescribe actions that should be taken. The decision is therefore yours to make on how to achieve the desired outcomes.

A Dutch fishery experimented with a range of new nets during the pre-assessment phase to help reduce impacts on the seabed.

Step two: Defining the assessment tree

What happens?

The certifier's assessment team defines the 'assessment tree' that will be used to assess the fishery. The assessment tree specifies 'performance indicators', which define the specific areas of the fishery that will be assessed, and 'scoring guideposts', which show the performance levels that the fishery will be scored against. Most assessment teams utilise the 'default' assessment tree and its default performance indicators and scoring guideposts. This was designed to be suitable for the majority of fisheries and to make the scoring process more consistent, transparent and faster. Given the great variation between fisheries around the world, the assessment team has to review the default assessment tree to ensure that it will fully provide for the assessment of your fishery. If your fishery has certain special characteristics that cannot be scored using the assessment tree, the team must propose some revisions to allow for these characteristics.

Whether the certifier uses the assessment tree in its default form or with some revisions, the assessment tree goes through a 30-day consultation period allowing full public comment from fishery clients, other stakeholders and the MSC.

Advice to fisheries

The fishery assessment tree is a critical element of the fishery assessment process – it defines how an individual fishery's performance will be uniquely assessed, scored and any conditions set. It is important that you carefully review the default assessment tree within the *MSC Certification Requirements*, or any changes that the assessment team proposes, and provide your comments to the certifier.

If your fishery is complex, you may wish to consult your own experts to assist your review or you could pre-arrange with the relevant management agency to play a role.

Later on, when the certifier reports on the performance of the fishery, it will be difficult to disagree with the basis for scoring if you haven't actively engaged in reviewing the draft assessment tree at this time.

Step three: Gathering information, meeting stakeholders and scoring the fishery

What happens?

The certifier's assessment team analyses all relevant information (including technical papers, reports and other sources) and interviews you, the fishery managers and the stakeholders to ensure the team is aware of all potential information and issues. The assessment team uses this evidence to score the fishery's performance against the assessment tree.

Advice to fisheries

During the data collection and analysis phase, you can help by organising your information and data submissions to the certifier according to the structure of the assessment tree. You might also make a case to the certifier about why you believe certain information translates into a specific score for each performance indicator in the assessment tree.

Please note that while the certifier must take your comments into consideration, they are not required to accept them.



A fishery client explains a technical innovation with net design to stakeholders.

The assessment process: step-by-step *continued*



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Step four: Client and peer review

What happens?

The certifier writes a draft report that includes a summary of the fishery, the environment it operates in and the management system. The report also contains the scores, rationale and proposed certification outcome as well as any conditions aimed at improving the fishery's performance over the period of certification. Your certifier will give you time to comment on this draft, after which, further independent experts (usually two) review the 'revised client draft'.

Advice to fisheries

This is your chance to see the first full draft of the report before it is published and circulated to stakeholders. It will present the fishery's scores against the assessment tree and provide you with an indication of the possible outcome. Where the fishery has scored less than 80 under a Performance Indicator you will need to reach agreement with the certifier on how to address the conditions that are set in a detailed 'client action plan'. It is important to clarify that the MSC does not prescribe how to manage the fishery. The action plan is aimed at meeting the conditions on the fishery certification. The fishery chooses how to meet these – usually working with the certifier.

The certifier collects stakeholder information during the assessment of the Ecuador and Peru mahi mahi fishery.

It is critical that you ensure that you are confident that this report is a true and robust audit of your fishery and have a good understanding of the reasons for any conditions.

Step five: Public review of the draft assessment report

What happens?

Following the client and peer reviews the certifier provides the 'Public Comment Draft Report' to the MSC, which sends out stakeholder notification by email and publishes the report on the MSC website. The public consultation period allows at least 30 days for public comment on the assessment process and conclusions.

Advice to fisheries

This is a chance for all stakeholders to input into the findings of the certifier's assessment team.

You may wish to work with your certifier to send email updates or organise meetings with interested stakeholders. This is also a good moment to think ahead to how you want to mark the occasion of your certificate being issued, assuming the assessment is successful. After the draft assessment report is published, you will be contacted by the MSC communications team to discuss your publicity aims for the end of the assessment. This is big news and a great opportunity for media coverage and promotion.

It is worth developing a communications plan together with the MSC that outlines what will take place when, where and how. If you can provide high resolution digital photographs and free-to-use video footage of your fishery, these will increase the possibilities for media exposure.

In preparing the publicity around the end of the assessment, there are several options that could be considered, each requiring between a week and eight weeks of planning. Possibilities include:

- A simple announcement on the MSC website and press release
- A small launch event for the media
- A launch event for the media and commercial contacts
- Announcements in different parts of the world
- A substantial event, combined with a group media visit to the fishery.

These are just a few of the options that are available – the right one depends upon your needs, resources and media interest in the fishery, as well as other factors.

An observer on board a vessel in the South Georgia Patagonian toothfish fishery, which was initially certified in 2004, and re-certified for a further five years in 2009.



The assessment process: step-by-step *continued*

Step six: Final report and determination

What happens?

After reviewing, considering and responding to all comments, the certifier revises the Draft Report and makes a determination as to whether the fishery should be certified as a sustainable and well managed fishery in accordance with the MSC's standard.

The certifier provides this report to the MSC and the MSC again emails all interested stakeholders and updates the MSC website with the report, allowing a further period of 15 working days for parties to lodge an 'intent to object' to the decision (see below for more details).

During this period, the MSC communications team will work with you to prepare the press release to announce the end of the assessment and – hopefully – your certification.

Advice to fisheries

Carefully review the report and make sure that you are comfortable with any changes made since the first draft.

If you have built up close relationships with stakeholders, you should have a good idea of whether they are likely to object to the findings. If ongoing problems have not been resolved then this is a last chance to work with your certifier to allay the stakeholders' concerns and avoid them lodging a formal objection.

Even if your fishery has not been recommended for certification the assessment process will have contributed to an enhanced understanding of your fishery and the environment it is operating in. After you have addressed any reasons for your fishery not meeting the standard, you can of course re-apply for assessment at any time.

The Objections Procedure

If an objection is raised during the 15 working day period of 'intent to object' after the final report is published, the fishery proceeds into the MSC's Objections Procedure. This provides a mechanism for any disagreement with the assessment of the fishery to be resolved by an Independent Adjudicator. Following appropriate consultations the Adjudicator will make a decision on whether the objection should be upheld. For more about the Objections Procedure, please visit: www.msc.org/get-certified/fisheries/assessment/objections.



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Step seven: Public certification report and getting your certificate

What happens?

If no objections have been raised during the 15 working day period of 'intent to object', the fishery is certified. Your certifier will issue and publish a Public Certification Report, reflecting surveillance and any action plan commitments. After this, you will receive a fishery certificate from your certifier. Your fishery is now certified for a maximum period of five years, subject to surveillance audits.

Advice to fisheries

This is a time to celebrate and promote your certification! MSC and your certifier will already have worked with you to prepare the press release and materials to announce that you have achieved certification.

Please note that the following things need to be in place before a public announcement can be made:

- The MSC must have received and published the Public Certification Report from your certifier
- The certifier must have issued your fishery certificate
- The MSC must have posted the certification on its website before the announcement can be made.

Don't forget to organise an event to celebrate your certification and let your customers know you can offer MSC certified sustainable seafood.

Post-certification requirements

Your certifier will work with you to develop a program of surveillance audits. The certifier is required to carry out audits over the five-year period of fishery certification.

The certifier does have the right, however, to conduct an unannounced audit at any time or to schedule more frequent audits if circumstances indicate the need. These may have budgetary implications, so you should ensure your budget includes sufficient funds to cover the cost of audits for the duration of the certificate.

Each surveillance audit will examine any significant changes that might have occurred either in the physical environment or in the management of the fishery. Each audit will also examine whether you are addressing any certification conditions as defined in the Certification Report.

Failure to make adequate progress can mean that the certifier has to suspend or withdraw your certificate, so it is important to work on fulfilling any conditions the certifier has set.

Prior to the agreed audit, the certifier provides details of planned dates for the surveillance visits to interested stakeholders and updates the MSC website. Once the audit is complete, the certifier provides a report to the MSC, which once again emails interested stakeholders and makes the report publicly available on the MSC website.

The Lakes and Coorong Fishery, certified as sustainable in June 2008, operates in the lakes and beaches of the Coorong region, at the entrance to the Murray River in South Australia.



Reaping the benefits

The process does not end with the granting of the fishery certificate; indeed fishery certification is really only the beginning!

Retailers and consumers throughout the world want MSC labelled products. As the MSC ecolabel has become more widely recognised the demand for certified products has grown. Gaining certification can open new doors for your product. Contact your regional MSC office for information and advice on how to best launch and promote fish and seafood from the newly certified fishery. For a full list of MSC regional offices and staff please visit: www.msc.org/about-us/offices-staff.

Chain of Custody and ecolabel licensing

Businesses that wish to display the MSC ecolabel on their products need to know that the fish they are buying is traceable through every link in the supply chain, back to a certified fishery.

Each company in the supply chain therefore needs to undergo a Chain of Custody audit. This protects against uncertified products entering the chain and prevents unscrupulous companies from realising benefits they have neither paid for nor deserve.

To help relevant links in the supply chain to meet the requirements of Chain of Custody, MSC has published *Get Certified! Chain of Custody* that sets out in clear, easily understood sections exactly what needs to be done. Please contact the MSC directly for guidance about the Chain of Custody process or visit: www.msc.org/get-certified/supply-chain.

After being certified for Chain of Custody, companies wishing to display the MSC ecolabel on their products must obtain a license from the MSC's trading company, Marine Stewardship Council International (MSCI). You can get further information on the ecolabel licensing requirements by emailing ecolabel@msc.org or from the MSC website: www.msc.org/get-certified/use-the-msc-label.

Both the Chain of Custody and the ecolabel licensing procedure will have additional budgetary implications. Should you have any queries with regard to these issues, you should contact the MSC directly.

Who can give you more help?

MSC staff are always willing to respond to enquiries and, where appropriate, provide assistance and advice.

Please call **+44 (0) 20 7246 8900** or email standards@msc.org to get in touch with MSC staff in your region.

Glossary

The table below contains a glossary of terms used throughout the fishery assessment.

Accreditation	The process by which the MSC's contract accreditation body examines and determines the fitness of a conformity assessment body to be an MSC certifier authorised and designated as competent to conduct a fishery assessment according to the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing.
Assessment	The process of implementing the <i>MSC Certification Requirements</i> for assessing and certifying a fishery according to the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing.
Assessment Contract	A contract specifying the terms and obligations for both the certifier and the client according to MSC requirements that is signed by both parties.
Assessment Team Leader	A person qualified to manage and perform assessment activities against the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing.
Assessment Team Member	A person qualified to perform assessment activities against the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing.
Assessment tree	The hierarchy of Principles, Criteria, sub-criteria (or components in the default assessment tree) and performance indicators and scoring guideposts that is used as the basis for assessment of the fishery for compliance with the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing.
Certificate	The formal document that is issued by the conformity assessment body to a client as evidence that a fishery is currently certified and complies with the MSC standard.
Certifier	The certifier (also called a conformity assessment body) authorised and accredited by the MSC's contract accreditation body to conduct fishery assessments.
Certification requirements	The <i>MSC Certification Requirements</i> sets out how accredited certifiers must apply the MSC standard for sustainable fishing when assessing fisheries.
Certification system	A system that has its own rules of procedure and management for carrying out certification of conformity.
Certified fishery	The unit of certification that has been granted a certificate for conforming to the MSC standard.
Chain of Custody	The measures undertaken by a fishery and all subsequent handlers of certified seafood (supply chain, processors, retailers, foodservice, etc.) to ensure that products from a certified fishery are not mixed with products from any other fishery during processing or distribution for sale.
Client	The legal entity applying for the fishery to be assessed. Also known as the 'fishery client'.
Condition	A requirement of certification placed on the fishery client by the certifier that ensures an outcome is consistent with a score of 80 or above for a specific performance indicator.
Criterion (Criteria)	A sub-division of an MSC Principle used to judge whether or not a Principle has been fulfilled.
Determination	Recommended certification outcome.
Final Report	The report of the assessment of the fishery prepared by the assessment team and the certifier, including revisions following the peer review and public comment stages, as made available during the objections period. Includes scores, weightings and special conditions and the overall determination of the certifier on the fishery.
Guidance to the MSC Certification Requirements	The <i>Guidance to the MSC Certification Requirements</i> provides examples, explanations, illustrations, background and other information to help users understand the <i>MSC Certification Requirements</i> .
MSC standard	The MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing is the standard that a fishery must meet to become certified. Made up of three Principles and 23 Criteria, the MSC standard is available on www.msc.org . Only seafood from an MSC certified fishery that meets the standard can carry the blue MSC ecolabel.
Notification Report	Report from the certifier formally notifying the MSC of a fishery client's intent to undergo a full assessment. Includes a summary of the fishery's details such as tonnage, area fished, gear-type and point of contact, as used by the MSC communications team to write the press release announcing entry into full assessment.
Objective evidence	Evidence supported by independent witnesses, resulting from quality peer-reviewed scientific research, or otherwise verifiable and credible.

Glossary *continued*

Objections Procedure	The MSC's formal process for dealing with any objections raised against the fishery determination during the final 15 working day objections period. Objections are considered by an independent adjudicator appointed by the MSC Board of Trustees, who may call on independent experts to provide technical advice on certain matters as required.
Peer Review Draft Report	The draft report of the assessment of the fishery prepared by the assessment team and the certifier submitted to peer reviewers. Follows Preliminary Draft Report, precedes Public Comment Draft Report.
Performance Indicator	A point in the assessment tree against which the performance of the fishery is scored by the assessment team. The default assessment tree contains 31 performance indicators, covering the three Principles.
Pre-Assessment Report	Report to client from the certifier following a pre-assessment.
Preliminary Draft Report	The draft report of the assessment of the fishery prepared by the assessment team and the certifier provided to the client prior to peer review. Precedes Peer Review Draft Report.
Principle	A fundamental element of the MSC's standard, used as the basis for defining a well-managed and sustainable fishery.
Public Certification Report	The last report of the fishery assessment process; includes the Final Report and any written decisions by the certifier and / or independent Objections Panel arising from any objections raised about the fishery assessment outcome or process.
Public Comment Draft Report	The draft report of the assessment of the fishery prepared by the assessment team and the certifier released for public comment. Follows the Peer Review Draft Report. Precedes the Final Report.
Public Surveillance Report	The report of a surveillance accepted by the MSC for publication on the MSC website; this report is the same as the Surveillance Report.
Re-assessment	Assessment of a fishery prior to the expiration of an existing fishery certificate to ensure, if the fishery passes the MSC standard, continued certification.
Risk Based Framework (RBF)	A set of risk-assessment methods used to evaluate certain performance indicators within the assessment tree in situations where quantitative data is too limited to use the default scoring guideposts.
Scoring elements	Defined as the different sub-divisions of the ecosystem affected by the fishery, such as different species, stocks or sub-stocks of fish or habitats, that are scored in an MSC assessment.
Scoring Guidepost	The benchmark level of performance agreed by the assessment team in respect of each numeric score or rating for each performance indicator.
Stakeholder	Any person, group or organisation that has an interest in, or could be affected by, the assessment; this may include fishery managers, fishers, fishing industry organisations, recreational groups, public interest and community groups, indigenous communities, research communities, and government agencies.
Sub-criterion	A criterion below the level of the MSC Criteria; the assessment tree may contain any number of levels of sub-criteria. Used in pre-default assessment trees, but not in the default assessment tree, where performance indicators are grouped instead in 'components' under each principle.
Surveillance audit	The periodic review and assessment of the certified fishery in order to determine ongoing compliance with the MSC standard and progress to meet conditions identified by the certifier.
Surveillance Report	The report of a Surveillance Audit.
Team Leader	A person qualified to manage and perform assessment activities against the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing.
Team Member	A person qualified to perform assessment activities against the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing.
Unit of Certification	The fishery or fish stock(s) (=biologically distinct population unit) combined with the fishing method / gear and practice (=vessel(s) pursuing the fish of that stock).



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Designed by Forster.

Participation in MSC's certification program changes over time; all details within this document are accurate at the time of publication.

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