

# MSC-certified Western Central Pacific tuna could face suspension risk

- Western Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO) tuna makes up half of the global tuna catch and represents 73% of MSC certified tuna.
- If the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) fails to make significant progress this year and next in establishing robust management measures for implementation at its December 2022 meeting, then many MSC-certified tuna fisheries could face difficulty meeting their conditions and certifiers might suspend them in June 2023.

## Western Central Pacific tuna

Skipjack, yellowfin and bigeye stocks in the Western Central Pacific Ocean and the albacore stock in the South Pacific are all managed by the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). To be fished sustainably in the long term, all these stocks must have effective harvest strategies and harvest control rules in place. Strategies set target catch levels, with limits, to guide fisheries management. Robust harvest control rules adjust catch levels according to scientific assessments of stock health.

Currently the WCPFC does not have sufficient measures in place but intends to implement these for skipjack and albacore in December 2022 and one year later for yellowfin and bigeye stocks. Meeting these deadlines, vital for MSC-certified fisheries to resolve existing conditions of certification, requires interim decisions favouring these solutions to be passed by WCPFC in December 2021.

## MSC-certified tuna fisheries

The Marine Stewardship Council provides the most-recognized global standard for sustainable fishing, which is verified through third-party certification. We recognize and reward sustainable fisheries and enable consumers to drive improvements in global fishing by choosing MSC labelled products.

Nearly half of all major commercial tuna caught globally is MSC certified or under assessment. Additionally, another 20% of global catch is in Fishery Improvement Programs<sup>1</sup>. In addition to managing

stocks sustainably, MSC certification also requires fisheries to protect the ecosystems and habitats where they operate.

To stay certified, these fisheries must have robust harvest strategies and control rules as part of their management system. But for tuna fisheries in the Western Central Pacific Ocean, this is only possible if the regional management agency (WCPFC) implements improvements to meet global best practice.



<sup>1</sup> Global Tuna Catch (2019 FAO): 1.67 million tonnes (28.89%) MSC certified, 1.18 million tonnes (20.40%) in assessment and 1.13 million tonnes (19.54%) in a Fisheries Improvement Program, out of Global tuna catch of 5.77 million tonnes (in 2019, most recently released FAO data)

If the WCPFC does not act in time, then all 22 certified tuna fisheries in the region, as well as the additional 5 currently seeking MSC certification, are at high risk of suspension from the program by their independent assessors in June 2023.

This represents over two million tonnes of certified or possibly certified tuna within the supply chain each year.

## Consumer demand for sustainable tuna

Nearly two-thirds of seafood consumers believe that, to save the oceans, all fish should come from sustainable sources. Nearly a third think that overfishing means they will not be able to eat their favourite seafood in 20 years' time<sup>2</sup>.

Suppliers increasingly use the MSC label to assure consumers that their tuna is genuinely sustainable. And growing consumer demand continues to put pressure on fisheries to become fully sustainable by achieving certification – and to stay certified.

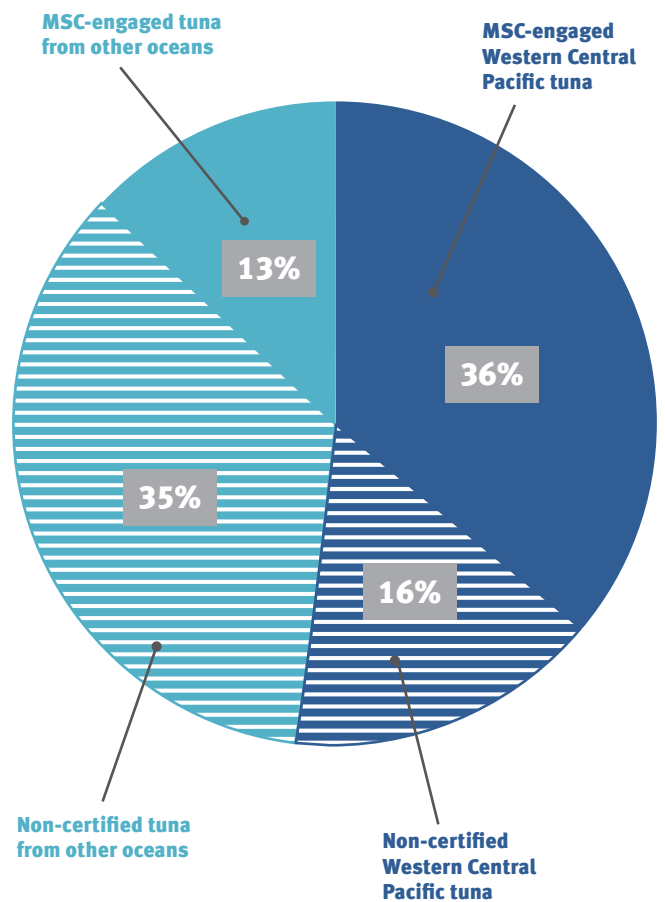
For many consumers there is no credible alternative to MSC certification for sustainable tuna. MSC is the only global wild-capture fisheries certification program that simultaneously meets best practice requirements set by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation, the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI) and ISEAL, the international code for sustainability systems.

## International agreement needed

Highly migratory stocks like tuna are complex to manage. They require many countries to work together to share data and agree on strict rules that their fisheries must abide by. Without international agreement on how shared stocks are managed, no individual fishery can continue to operate sustainably.

Securing adequate management measures in multi-jurisdictional areas overseen by Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) can be difficult. Complex multi-country decision making, and an absence of pre-set allocation arrangements, can be exacerbated by political issues and the disconnect between fisheries and fragmented market demand.

## Global tuna catch



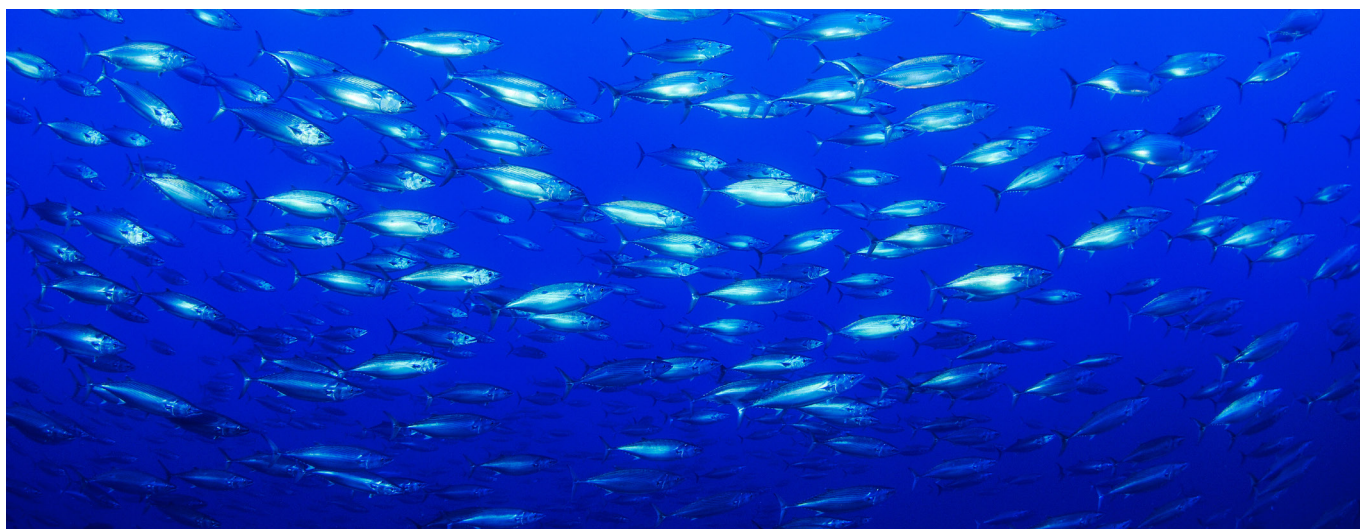
Nearly half the world's major commercial tuna supply is engaged with the MSC (certified or currently in assessment), with the majority of this coming from Western Central Pacific Ocean fisheries, which represent over half of the global tuna catch.

## Why tuna fisheries face having their MSC certificates suspended

The MSC Fisheries Standard sets out requirements for fisheries and is based on the UN FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries<sup>3</sup>. Principle 1 of the standard, governing sustainability of stock, requires fisheries managers to set rules for how catch by each country is controlled, to ensure stocks stay at healthy levels. These rules must be responsive to unforeseen changes and take account of all fishing pressures on that stock.

<sup>2</sup> GMSC (2021) [GlobeScan Survey: What Will the future hold for the conscious seafood consumer?](#)

<sup>3</sup> [UN FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries](#)



MSC certified WCPO tuna fisheries have conditions to adopt enhanced control measures. To meet deadlines, significant progress on existing workplans is needed at the WCPFC December 2021 annual meeting and related Scientific Committee meetings. Then, final agreement at the 2022 meeting is necessary or all Western Central Pacific tuna fisheries could face risk of suspension from use of their MSC certificates in June 2023. Yellowfin and bigeye tuna certificates are particularly at risk, meaning the current workplan for these stocks needs additional fast-tracking by the Commission this year, so it can be completed in 2022 and not a year later as currently scheduled.

## What happens if these tuna fisheries lose their certification?

If all Western Central Pacific tuna fisheries become suspended from the MSC program, over two million tonnes of tuna could no longer be sold as MSC certified into the supply chain and brand owners would no longer be able to use the MSC ecolabel on products made from this catch. While fisheries could regain certification if the WCPFC reaches agreement in later years, there could be a significant delay. Independent assessors will need to determine if the WCPFC action enables the fisheries to meet the MSC Fisheries Standard once again, and for tuna stocks that fall to unhealthy levels during this time, the delays could be significantly longer.

## Conclusion

Responsible management is the key to sustainable fishing. For complex fisheries like tuna, it is global best practice for effective harvest strategies and harvest control rules to be part of this.

**Urgent action is needed by Governments to complete the WCPFC workplans, and we urge all stakeholders to lobby their representatives to ensure robust sustainability measures are reached for all tuna, especially WCPO tuna stocks at this time.**

We believe consumer demand for sustainable seafood, and the industry's need for secure supply chains, can drive change on the water. But it requires Regional Fisheries Management Organizations like the WCPFC to set clear rules, based on scientific advice, that all fishing countries can then implement.

In the case of the Western Central Pacific Ocean, this requires consensus between dozens of WCPFC member nations, participating territories and cooperating non-members.

Setting rules for tuna conservation is complex, but decisions are needed to ensure sustainability of species in the Western Central Pacific. Parties to the WCPFC must work to complete a comprehensive workplan and vote to implement the results in December 2022. We encourage all certified fisheries, market partners, conservation organizations and scientists involved to keep up pressure on representatives to deliver fisheries management measures needed to protect tuna in the region.