There has recently been an increase in media profile around NGO requests that retailers apply sustainability criteria to the branded seafood products that they stock (i.e. not “own brand”/private label). This has specifically arisen because of a Greenpeace campaign in the UK aimed at canned tuna brands in British supermarkets, but it is likely to spread as an issue.

Typically, retailers have only applied sustainability criteria to own brand/private label seafood products and have not attempted to set criteria for independent brands (although this has happened in some non-seafood products). The request by Greenpeace appears to mark a new departure in campaign strategy and has met with early success – both Tesco and Waitrose in the UK are now setting sustainability criteria for independent brands of canned tuna. There is no reason to suppose that future NGO requests will be confined to tuna and it is likely that all seafood products will eventually be affected.

SFP supports the idea that retailers should adopt sustainability criteria for all seafood products on their shelves (both private label and independent) because:

- It provides intellectual and ethical consistency – it is hard to argue why there should be criteria for one form of product and not for another.
- Consumers would expect such an arrangement.
- It provides practical benefits in that significant improvement of fisheries will require very high levels of engagement by all parts of the seafood industry, and mobilizing independent brands will be an important contribution to the overall pressure for positive change. This in turn will create benefits for retailers in terms of assured future supply.
- Applying sustainability criteria to independent brands also ensures that similar products compete on a level playing field and that branded products with lower environmental performance do not unfairly compete against own brand products produced according to high sustainability criteria.

SFP notes that the current Greenpeace objective – to ensure all branded, canned tuna sold by UK retailers is from pole and line fisheries – is likely to prove difficult. Tesco has committed to require branded, canned tuna to be sourced from more sustainable methods but applying these criteria across the entire UK marketplace would encounter significant practical problems. Waitrose has recently committed, under pressure from Greenpeace, to require branded canned tuna be from either pole and line fisheries or those certified by the MSC (which in practice means the PNA certified purse seine fishery for skipjack which sets on free schools without FADs).

There is clearly value in all leading retailers of canned tuna in the UK – whether private label or independent brand – aligning their sustainability criteria such that the highest environmental
performance is achieved but within the limitations of market availability, acceptable price to consumers, etc.

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