



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

Department of Fish and Game

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Mr. Rupert Howes
Chief Executive
Marine Stewardship Council
Via Email: Rupert.Howes@msc.org

Dear Mr. Howes:

I have written to you previously to share my deep concerns regarding the Marine Stewardship Council's certification of Russian fisheries in general. Today I write to elevate those concerns in relation to a specific fishery – the Western Bering Sea (WBS) pollock fishery and request that you exclude this unsustainable fishery from recertification.

Vessels operating in the WBS pollock fishery routinely fish hard against the U.S.-Russia Maritime Boundary. The contours of the Bering Sea ecosystem do not correspond to this geo-political demarcation – on the contrary, actions on the Russian side of the boundary line have the potential to have profound impacts on Alaska's ecosystem and people. That is precisely what we know to be occurring.

For the last five years, the MSC has provided products originating from the WBS pollock fishery with full access to the most widely recognized sustainability certification in global seafood. During this time, WBS pollock has been sold around the world to unwitting consumers who see the MSC ecolabel and believe that their purchases must be ethical. The vast majority of these consumers never know that they are purchasing seafood harvested in Russia. Even fewer know that they are purchasing seafood from a fishery with no credible harvest strategy, no bycatch avoidance measures, and no benthic habitat protections whatsoever.

The 5-year recertification of the WBS pollock fishery was an opportunity to correct a mistake. This fishery – which should never have been certified in the first place – was admitted to the MSC program subject to numerous "conditions". These "conditions" theoretically should have required the implementation of extensive improvements in the fishery within five years under the threat that the MSC certificate would otherwise be terminated rather than extended. It is sadly predictable that this did not occur.

The Final Draft recertification report posted to the MSC website on June 8 makes clear profound shortcomings not only in relation to re-certification of the WBS pollock fishery but more generally in relation to the operation of "conditions" across the MSC program. This unsustainable fishery's conditions have been magically closed, mainly through the completion of "reports" that aren't even in the public domain. The fishery has undisputably become even less sustainable than was the case five years ago, yet its recertification is almost complete. Unless an objection is upheld or

you intervene, the blatant lie of “sustainable” Russian pollock from the Western Bering Sea will continue to be told in global seafood markets for another five years.

I recently reviewed the formal objection filed on June 30 against the WBS pollock fishery’s recertification. The objection highlights a number of concerns that I share. Foremost among them is the conservation of Alaska salmon. During my time as Commissioner, I have focused relentlessly on the conservation of Alaska salmon populations that are experiencing sharp declines in abundance. These declines are a crisis for Alaska ecosystems as well as for many rural Alaska communities. This includes communities along the Yukon River that have relied on healthy salmon runs for millennia and have lost all subsistence fishing opportunities creating a profound food security crisis. I have sought to conserve these salmon populations through extensive measures, including near shore and in-river closures and tighter regulation of the Eastern Bering Sea pollock fleet. We know that WBS pollock vessels encounter Alaska salmon. It is also crystal clear that no credible salmon bycatch data are being shared by the fishery or Russian authorities, and that no effort whatsoever is being made to mitigate Alaska salmon bycatch. This is outrageous, and inconsistent with any credible sustainability claim.

I also share objector concerns regarding irresponsible management of the target stock and seafloor habitat protections. With respect to the target stock, recent management changes clearly put the fishery at high risk of overfishing and harming the shared pollock biomass. Respectfully, what is the point of a fisheries eco-certification program that allows such practices to be implemented soon after the fishery achieves certification without any consequences whatsoever? These egregious changes are entirely inconsistent with internationally agreed upon responsible management principles. Through its continued certification of WBS pollock for years after the changes were implemented, the program is not “ending overfishing” as your marketing materials repeatedly claim – you are knowingly facilitating it.

My views are similar in relation to the conservation of high-value seafloor habitat. The MSC consistently holds high-performing and high-information fisheries – especially Alaskan fisheries – to the highest standards. This is precisely because of our world class management system’s transparency. The opacity and dishonesty of the Russian system, by contrast, is operating to give the WBS pollock fishery a free pass. This is an especially acute concern regarding the application of habitat requirements under the MSC Fisheries Standard. The WBS pollock fishery has been certified without even the most rudimentary system for identifying and protecting vulnerable seafloor habitat in place. This failure should be an embarrassment for the Marine Stewardship Council.

In summary, the MSC’s apparent determination to turn a blind eye to bycatch management, overfishing, habitat impacts, and data transparency and deploy your program’s eco-label to “blue wash” Russian seafood in global markets is unconscionable at best and flat out deceptive at worst. The MSC’s profound failures in Russia have persisted for far too long. I urge you in the strongest possible terms to belatedly use your authority to act in relation to the WBS pollock certificate, and to exclude this poorly managed, unsustainable fishery from your program.

Sincerely,



Doug Vincent-Lang
Commissioner

CC: Honorable Lisa Murkowski, U.S. Senator for Alaska
Honorable Dan Sullivan, U.S. Senator for Alaska
Honorable Nick Begich, Congressman for Alaska
Tyson Gallagher, Chief of Staff, Governor's Office, State of Alaska
Jerry Moses, Director- Washington DC Office, Governor's Office, State of Alaska