OCT 31th 2024

MEL Council

MEL NEWS VOL. 79 (ENGLISH EDITION)

Dear MEL Partners:

With the arrival of autumn, Japan has suddenly entered the political season. What kind of drama awaits? Regardless, we hope for a society where people can work with peace of mind and look forward to tomorrow. I am concerned about the low trend in autumn salmon fishing. Clearly, the ecosystem in the northern seas is abnormal. Currently, even sardines in eastern Hokkaido are no longer being caught. It is explained as the effect of warm water eddies, which has left me deeply pondering.

1. International standardization related

An online meeting of the GSSI SOAG (Scheme Owner Advisory Group: a collaborative body overseeing the overall operations of GSSI, composed of seven scheme owners, including MEL, approved by GSSI. The number of approved schemes has decreased to seven due to the reduction of BIM) was held on October 9th at 00:00 AM (as there is no convenient time for all three regions: Europe, North America, and Japan). CEO Eyvind Ihle from the headquarters also participated, explaining the procedures for the upcoming MOCA (Maintenance of Certification Assessment) and announcing a 20% increase in assessment fees.

It was also reported that the GSSI benchmark revision planned for 2025 would be minor. However, the MEL Council will continue to advocate for the revision of the prohibition on the use of feed containing the same genus and species, which lacks scientific basis.

From October 1st to 3rd, Secretary-General Kato was invited to give a lecture at the "Regional Training on Traceability and Effective Management Tools for Southeast Asian Fisheries Products" co-hosted by SEAFDEC (Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center: an international organization composed of 10 ASEAN member countries and Japan,

headquartered in Bangkok; Japan covers 20% of the budget and dispatches experts including the Deputy Secretary-General) and JICA, held in Bangkok, Thailand. Below is a report from Secretary-General Kato.

Secretary General Katoh at SEAFDEC

I introduced the seafood eco-label originated in Japan to fisheries administrative officials (such as those in charge of issuing catch certificates) from nine Southeast Asian countries (Singapore, one of the ten member countries, was absent). In the two-hour lecture, I presented the current state of the world's fisheries industry and the MEL certification, which includes fisheries reform in Japan. In the end, he shared the five key points proposed by the MEL Council for the spread of seafood ecolabels in Asia, which was well received by the Southeast Asian participants, recognizing the significance of the participation.

2. Status of MEL Certification

The number of new certified entities this month is one for aquaculture standard.
Fukuoka City Fisheries Cooperative Association has obtained certification in oyster aquaculture, making a total of four certified producers for oyster farming, just in time for the upcoming season.

3. Voice from Certified Entities

Aiming for Sustainable "Glass Shrimp Fishing"

Kazuhiko Noguchi,
Auditor of Shinminato Fisheries Cooperative Association

Shinminato Fisheries Cooperative Association (hereafter JF Shinminato) in Imizu City, near the base of the Noto Peninsula in Toyama Prefecture, is actively engaged in various types of fishing, including set net fishing, basket line fishing, and small-scale trawl net fishing.
Among these, the small-scale trawl net fishing to which I belong is known for catching "Shiroebi" (white shrimp, or Japanese glass shrimp), also called "the jewel of Toyama Bay."

The glass shrimp fishing is only viable in Toyama Bay globally, and even within Toyama Bay, only JF Shinminato and the neighboring Toyama City Fisheries Cooperative Association (Iwase Branch) engage in the fishing.

Currently, there are eight glass shrimp fishing boats under JF Shinminato. Some groups adopted the "pool system" (equal distribution of catch value) as early as the 1960s and 1970s, and by 2010, all boats engaged in glass shrimp fishing adopted the pool system, conducting fishing activities through cooperative coexistence. The introduction of the pool system aimed not only to fish efficiently in the limited glass shrimp fishing grounds but also to "avoid excessive competition and prevent overfishing," with the primary focus on achieving "sustainable glass shrimp fishing." Our predecessors instinctively recognized the importance of resource conservation and left us this fishing system through the pool system.

"Shiroebi", the jewel of Toyama Bay

With the desire to further promote the sustainable glass shrimp fishing of JF Shinminato, we pursued MEL Fisheries Certification and obtained certification in the January of 2024. We extend our heartfelt thanks to the Toyama Prefectural Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Department, Toyama Prefectural Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Research Institute, Fisheries Research Center, Imizu City Industrial and Economic Department, and Toyama Prefectural Federation of Fisheries Cooperative Associations for their support and cooperation in obtaining certification.

Auditor Noguchi, JF Shinminato

As you know, the Noto Peninsula earthquake occurred on New Year's Day of 2024, causing liquefaction damage in the Shinminato fishing port area, and there was also a seabed collapse in Toyama Bay. Possibly due to these impacts, glass shrimp fishing this fiscal year has continued to suffer from historic poor catches. Moving forward, we will continue to work on voluntary resource conservation, such as the pool system evaluated in the MEL Fisheries Certification, to recover glass shrimp resources and pass on the rich Toyama Bay to the next generation.

4. Column

“Supporting efforts to address environmental changes"

Tadashi Tokai,

Professor Emeritus, Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology

In various fields, not just in the fisheries industry, we often hear statements like, "We've managed fine so far, so there's no need to change anything!" or "What if something goes wrong? (So we shouldn't do anything new!)" These are classic examples of the status quo bias in behavioral economics, a psychological tendency to avoid change and prefer maintaining the current situation. However, it's important to consider the risks of being left behind by the progress, development, and environmental changes around us if we do nothing.

Professor Emeritus Tadashi Tokai

The social and natural environments surrounding the fisheries industry are constantly changing significantly. Besides the globally unstable political and energy supply situations, the yen's depreciation, which greatly impacts the Japanese economy, is also a factor. Particularly, the natural environment of the fisheries industry is experiencing significant changes in the sea due to global warming. Long-term, gradual increases in sea temperatures and recent environmental changes caused by a strong Kuroshio Current are especially evident on the Pacific side of the Tohoku and Hokkaido regions.

Specifically, it is believed that the rising sea temperatures around Japan have significantly changed fish distribution, resulting in the disappearance of catches of Pacific saury, squid, and salmon. In connection with the reconstruction following the Great East Japan Earthquake, we have heard from people in the fisheries and aquaculture industries along the Tohoku coast that they are struggling with changing fish species and are considering switching species due to high sea temperatures affecting aquaculture. Those close to the production sites seem to be actively starting to adapt to these changes, and there is a sense of urgency that leaves no room for the status quo bias mentioned earlier.

Such environmental changes leading to

poor catches of important target species, especially regionally branded fish species, would be a significant blow not only to the fisheries industry but also to the regional economy, including local restaurants and tourism industries. On the other hand, catches of species like hairtail and pufferfish have increased on the Pacific side of Tohoku, while they are no longer caught in western Japan. Similarly, in Tohoku and Hokkaido, catches have shifted from squid to swordtip squid, and large quantities of yellowtail are being caught in fixed nets for salmon. When it's necessary to catch alternative species or change aquaculture target species, the question is whether all stages, including production, processing, and distribution, can adapt to these changes. Transferring fishing techniques might be necessary, and there may be concerns about whether fish markets can handle the catches, requiring some time to formally harvest and land the fish. The distribution sectors, including fish markets that accept these landings, will need considerable effort to build distribution channels for unfamiliar species and find buyers. The culture and climate of consuming fish have not been formed overnight, so it is challenging to establish local food ingredients and achieve local production for local consumption. Furthermore, the evaluation and management of fishery resources takes even more time because the data accumulation is required for evaluation itself, and management will take even longer. Responding to such changes involves considerable awareness, effort, and time at each stage. As a researcher, I hope to support this through technological development and research, such as the digital transformation of the fisheries industry.

Climate change in the global environment (now known to be closely linked with marine environmental changes) has always significantly impacted human life, particularly primary industries. Although an example of cooling in the North Atlantic, the opposite of current global warming, Brian Fagan's "The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History" describes how climate change impacted the fisheries industry. The cooling of the Arctic region after the 11th century shifted the distribution of cod southward, leading to the disappearance of villages in Greenland and the quest for cod fishing grounds extending to North America, including Newfoundland. This illustrates how climate change has led to significant industrial restructuring.

In Japan, along with "mitigation" measures for climate change, the "Study Group on Fisheries in Response to Marine Environmental Changes" has summarized its direction (see the 2023 Fisheries White Paper, Chapter 3: https://www.jfa.maff.go.jp/j/kikaku/wpaper/R5/attach/pdf/240611-7.pdf). For example, in response to fisheries, "promoting the addition and conversion of fishing methods and target species,

switching operations in fixed nets relying on salmon, and promoting dual employment or conversion with aquaculture." For aquaculture, "choosing dual employment or conversion destinations based on needs and costs." In processing and distribution, which can respond to changes and expansions in target species, "promoting seafood ecolabels and strengthening export measures, including new species through building supply chains that meet the needs of export destination countries." Furthermore, for ensuring and fostering management entities and supporting human resources and fisheries cooperatives that engage in activities such as combining fishing methods and target species, "establishing systems and mechanisms to support fishers engaged in such activities." These measures also seem to promote a form of industrial restructuring.

The current MEL certification system requires, for fisheries, the resource amount of the targeted stocks; for aquaculture, the appropriate management of the targeted aquaculture species; and for processing and distribution, ensuring the traceability of certified seafood products. Practically, fisheries and aquaculture receive certification by specifying biological species. As already noted by Mr. Ozaki in MEL News No. 75 (June 2024), concerns about "climate change and seafood product certification" include the possibility of certification suspension if the target species can no longer be caught. In fisheries certification, if the resource state worsens to the limit management reference point (Blimit), certification suspension is stipulated. However, changes in distribution due to environmental changes may accompany significant reductions in catch volume, not necessarily indicating overfishing. While not easy, it seems necessary to consider review methods corresponding to this. Certification does not end with obtaining it; continuous efforts to meet certification standards are necessary, confirmed through annual reviews and renewal evaluations. This encourages continuous business improvement and management efforts by those who received certification. The matters listed in the certification certificate include fishing methods and target species as the scope of certification. If there are efforts to change target species with the same fishing methods, updating the scope during renewal evaluations might allow the certification to continue.

Ultimately, as one of the systems and mechanisms mentioned in the conclusion of the Fisheries Agency's study group summary, the seafood ecolabel certification should encourage improvements, efforts, and transformations in response to environmental changes at all stages of fisheries, aquaculture, and processing and distribution.

5. MEL Auditor Training Program

This month's auditor training program was a new auditor training program and nine people participated. It was held in person, not online, and the participants were professionals, so we felt that it was a very good training session for us, the MEL Council, which is working to improve its auditing capabilities as an international standardized scheme. Currently, there are 82 people nationwide who are qualified as MEL auditor assistants or higher, and they will be responsible for daily certification audit work. Some people are in multiple certifications, but the breakdown is 63 people in fishery certification (5 designated instructors, 8 auditors, 50 assistant auditors), 75 people in aquaculture certification (16 designated instructors, 2 auditors, 57 assistant auditors), and 78 people in CoC certification (25 designated instructors, 19 auditors, 34 assistant auditors). I am concerned about the large number of assistant auditors.

6. MEL School Outreach Program

We were able to hold a class for elementary school students in conjunction with the seafood promotion activities implemented by the Japan Fisheries Association.

On October 11th, we visited Kamakura City First Elementary School in Kanagawa Prefecture and gave a talk to four of the 5th grade classes, each with the title "Let's think about Japan's seafood industry and marine environmental issues."

The homeroom teachers of each class prepared very diligently in advance, and the class was very fulfilling. Perhaps it was a reflection of the homeroom teachers' guidance, but it was a new discovery to see that each class had its own personality.

In response to a request from the school to let the students touch real fish, we brought along MEL-certified fish, including bonito, a representative of wild catch from the sea, red seabream, a representative of farmed fish, and ayu, or sweetfish, a representative of inland freshwater fishery. We were surprised by the high level of reaction from the students, both boys and girls. This shows that they love fish, but have little experience of seeing and touching real fish. We will continue to conduct these programs when the opportunity arises.

7. Events

TSSS2024 Session: "The Path Forward of Japan's Seafood Industry"

The Tokyo Sustainable Seafood Summit (TSSS2024) was held at the Tokyo International Forum from the 8th to the 10th of November. Since the first summit was held in November 2015, this year was the 10th milestone summit, and 1,400 people from Japan and abroad participated in the event.

This year's theme, "Mainstreaming Sustainable seafood by 2030," was clearly felt in the excitement. As for MEL, we participated in the highlight session of the summit, "Where is Japan's seafood industry headed?", in which Chairman Edamoto of the Japan Fisheries Association, Chairman Sakamoto of the National Federation of Fisheries Cooperative Associations, Professor Yagi of the University of Tokyo, and President Usui of Usufuku Honten, exchanged opinions from their respective positions under the moderation of the organizer, President Hanaoka of Seafood Legacy. It was clear that Japan's seafood industry is taking on new growth by taking advantage of Japan's strengths and appeal.

On the 21st, I was invited to the "Food Sustainability Co-Creation and Collaboration Forum" hosted by Kuradashi Co., Ltd., and gave a speech on the theme of "How seafood ecolabels can be of use to society." Ms. Yoshikawa, Deputy Director of the Processing and Distribution Division of the Fisheries Agency, also spoke on the stage with the title "Towards the sustainable use of fishery resources," providing a good opportunity for people in the food industry to understand the issues and

efforts being made by Japan's fisheries industry.

(Left) Kuradashi Forum (Right) MEL Ambassadors participating the Forum

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EDITOR'S POSTSCRIPT

The number of foreign visitors to Japan and their spending from January to September has already surpassed the total for the whole of last year, and it is reported that it is expected to reach a record high for the year. One of the attractions for foreigners, commonly referred to as 'inbound', is the 'food experience' in Japan, with seafood being the star of this experience. As the number of visitors to Japan is expected to reach the levels of major European tourism countries like Spain and Italy, we hope to be a fisheries industry that can surely seize this opportunity.

It is said that 'autumn fatigue', similar to 'summer fatigue', is spreading nowadays. The Japanese archipelago has been experiencing extreme temperature fluctuations, from the first snow in the north to summer-like days in the west. Please take care of your health and continue your success.

MEL Certified Products of the month: Charcoal-Seared Bonito
Certified entities: Taishin Suisan Co., Ltd.

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