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MEL Council

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Dear MEL Partners:

While overwhelmed with the challenges of responding to unforeseen events, the end of the fiscal year has already arrived. The year of uncertainty continues to cast its shadow as the Kinoto-Mi (Wood Snake) year progresses, and three months have already passed. It has been reported that the number of births in Japan last year fell below 700,000 for Japanese nationals alone. This figure indicates that the declining birthrate is advancing 15 years faster than the government had anticipated. It had long been an accepted belief that predictions related to population dynamics would not deviate significantly. However, we must now acknowledge that substantial societal changes beyond expectations are occurring. Both in business and personally, the pressure of preparing for what tomorrow may bring is growing heavier.

1. International standardization related

From March 16-18, SENA (Seafood Expo North America, formerly known as the Boston Seafood Show) took place, bringing forth various developments. From MEL, Secretary-General Kato participated in discussions related to GSSI as well as finalized the mutual recognition of CoC certifications with CSC.

With GSSI, in addition to matters concerning MOCA, MEL, as a scheme owner, strongly advocated for the revision of the prohibition on the use of protein sources derived from the same species and genus in aquaculture feed. Regarding

CSC, MEL presented a draft document for mutual CoC recognition to be reviewed by both decision-making bodies, and it was agreed to finalize the draft soon (in MEL's case, requiring approval from the Board of Directors and the General Assembly). The issue of "same species and genus" remains challenging, but we aim to create momentum by expanding support among allies.

Secretary-General Kato's report on the Expo has been featured in Section 9 of this letter.

On March 14, a web meeting concerning MOCA (Monitoring of Continued Alignment) was held with the GSSI Secretariat. The submitted documentation from MEL has been under review by IEs, and after minor

adjustments to the identified items, the review process is expected to advance to the GSSI Benchmark Committee around March 31. Following this process, GSSI approval is anticipated to be finalized by the end of April.

2. Status of MEL Certification

This month, three aquaculture certifications and five CoC certifications were issued, bringing the cumulative totals at the end of the fiscal period to 25 for fisheries, 71 for aquaculture, and 179 for CoC, for a total of 275 certifications. This marks an increase of 31 compared to the end of March last year.

However, the growth in the number of certifications has stagnated due to factors such as the suspension, integration, and merger of businesses by certified operators, as well as the approval of cross-prefecture certification integration under the Guidelines for Auditors of the Aquaculture Certification (Ver. 2.1).

3. Voice from Certified Entities

Hicho Co., Ltd., a MEL-certified intermediary at the Toyosu Market, received a request from an international hotel group client for the supply of seafood eco-label certified products. In response, they supplied MEL-certified bluefin tuna (a product caught in the Atlantic Ocean by the Shofuku Maru, a vessel from Usufuku Honten Co., Ltd. in Kesenuma). We received a report on the situation from Mr. Masahiro Iida of Hicho Co., Ltd.

"Connecting the Passion of Fishermen"

Our company, a tuna intermediary business, has been in operation since the Edo period (founded in the first year of Bunkyo) and has long been active in Nihonbashi, Tsukiji, and now Toyosu. We specialize in fresh and frozen tuna, conducting daily procurement and sales at Toyosu Market to meet the needs of

**Masahiro Iida,
Hicho Co., Ltd.**

customers from various business types.

In recent years, from the perspective of SDGs, there have been a case where the foreign-capital hotel stopped handling bluefin tuna. However, they expressed a strong intention to actively handle seafood that is certified as

environmentally friendly and considerate of marine resources—products bearing seafood eco-label certifications.



Mr. Masahiro Iida of Hicho Co., Ltd.

Learning about the Shofuku Maru (a longline distant water tuna vessel registered for bluefin tuna) of Usufuku Honten, a MEL-certified producer, inspired us. As a distribution and processing stage certification holder, we decided to aim for MEL certification, believing that handling tuna from the Shofuku Maru would allow us to meet the needs of these hotels.

On January 5, 2024, the day we obtained MEL certification, frozen bluefin tuna with the MEL certification sticker from the Shofuku Maru was displayed at the Toyosu Market auction. For me, it was a truly shining moment. Captivated by the passion of Usufuku Honten, I purchased it without

hesitation—I had fallen in love with the tuna.

I immediately contacted the hotel and made the delivery. I still vividly remember the words of gratitude from the head chef of the sushi division: "This tuna is perfect. Truly excellent, thank you!"

In the supply chain, traceability is a critical concern. I was truly delighted to connect the heartfelt efforts and passion of the fishermen to the end customers. In the face of increasingly diverse needs, as well as international challenges and goals, I feel the importance of protecting the richness of the sea.



Certified Atlantic Bluefin Tuna caught by No. 1 Shofuku-maru

I am determined to contribute to society while enhancing customer satisfaction and trust with new product lineups. I sincerely hope that the spread and increased awareness of MEL certification will inspire more fishermen to obtain production-stage certifications, expanding the "MEL"

community one by one.

Thank you, Mr. Iida, for your insights. It is evident that the "circle of sustainable seafood" is steadily expanding, driven by everyone's passion. We are also delighted to hear the positive response from customers, including the foreign-capital hotel and its restaurant patrons. Let us continue working together to further grow this circle.

Recently, Hicho Co., Ltd. kindly invited us at the MEL Council to the "Shofuku Maru Unloading and Ship Tour" event, organized by Usufuku Honten at Shimizu Port. Our Secretariat's Yuki Nakashima and Ambassador Akiko Tomita participated. They were both deeply impressed by the overwhelming scale of the event and by the tags on each fish, which conveyed a sense of the earnest efforts at the site. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to President Usui, Captain Koyama, and everyone involved.

4. Column

Recently, we have been receiving numerous inquiries regarding MEL Aquaculture Certification Ver. 2.1. In response, we requested Professor Masashi Maita, Vice President of Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology and a member of the MEL Aquaculture Certification Subcommittee, to provide an explanation about recent developments related to aquaculture feed.

"Issuance of MEL Aquaculture Standard Ver2.1 and Certification Continuation"

Masashi Maita,
Vice President, Professor, Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology

<i>In response to the issuance of the GSSI Global Benchmark Tool Ver. 2.0, MEL Aquaculture Standard underwent partial revisions to ensure compatibility, resulting in the release of Ver2.0. The major change in the standards was to "ensure that raw, unprocessed seafood is not directly used as feed during the growth stage of farmed fish." Consequently, the use of moist</i>	<i>pellets during the growth stage has been restricted.</i> <i>The FAO Technical Guidelines for Responsible Aquaculture Certification regarding feed stipulate that aquaculture feed should minimize environmental impact while promoting economic feasibility. The guidelines recommend</i>
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transitioning from raw fish (wet fish) to formulated feeds. However, these recommendations are determined on a case-by-case basis, considering environmental and socio-economic cost-benefit evaluations. To prevent significant economic losses for aquaculture producers due to the total ban on moist pellets, Ver. 2.0 includes exceptional rules allowing the use of moist pellets under specific conditions, which received GSSI approval.



Prof. Masashi Maita

During explanatory sessions for Ver. 2.0, there were many concerns voiced about difficulties in continuing certification due to restrictions on moist pellet use. However, to maintain international recognition, MEL Aquaculture Standard must secure GSSI approval. We hope for understanding and cooperation to achieve the transition to formulated feeds as recommended by FAO guidelines, furthering responsible aquaculture feed usage and sustainable aquaculture

production. Your efforts toward certification continuation under Ver. 2.1 are greatly appreciated.

Efforts to create value through internationally recognized seafood eco-label certification are being advanced under the collaboration of MEL Japan Council, the scheme owner, and stakeholders. Regarding the expansion of seafood exports to Europe, there is rising demand for exporting farmed yellowtail as fresh chilled products for raw consumption. Currently, chilled exports are limited to products for cooking due to parasite risk management in farmed yellowtail.

Meeting the "Parasite Management Standards for Fresh Cultured Bluefin Tuna for Raw Consumption Exported to the UK and EU" would make it possible to export fresh, raw cultured bluefin tuna to Europe. However, as of now, raw materials meeting these standards are not being supplied. If these standards were applied to yellowtail, fresh, raw exports could become a reality. Key requirements at the farming stage include the use of artificially produced seedlings and feed consisting of frozen bait (treated at -20 °C for at least 24 hours or at -35 °C for at least 15 hours) or formulated feeds. Several farms certified under MEL Aquaculture Standards Ver. 2.X already use artificial seedlings. Progress toward MEL Aquaculture Standard Ver. 2.1 certification could serve as a

breakthrough for fresh, raw cultured yellowtail exports to Europe.

certification continuation under Ver. 2.1 will contribute to creating new value and advancing the future of aquaculture.

We anticipate that efforts toward

Thank you, Professor Maita, for your insightful perspective. The discussion indeed highlights how MEL certification can benefit businesses. We will continue to work earnestly on challenges such as the prohibition of same-species and same-genus feeding practices.

5. Public Comments Opened regarding Fisheries Certification Ver.3.0

In accordance with the MEL Management and Operational Rules, which stipulate a review of certification standards every five years, the MEL Fisheries Management Standard Ver. 3.0 and the associated Guideline document, discussed by the Standard Committee, have been finalized. As of March 10, we have started a 60-day public comment period.

social requirements demanded of seafood eco-labels while making the overall standards clearer by addressing overlapping sections and ensuring comprehensibility.

The opinions submitted by everyone will be reviewed by the Standard Committee, and discussions will take place at the regular general meeting scheduled for June, with the aim of gaining approval.

This revision focuses on responding to the

6. Outreach Classes

On February 27, we conducted an outreach class at Mabashi Elementary School in Matsudo City, Chiba Prefecture. A total of 100 fourth-grade students from four classes gathered in the auditorium for a 90-minute session, under the theme "Let's think together about the ocean and fish." With breaks in between, the lesson covered a wide range of topics including Matsudo's history, the ocean, climate change, fish, and seafood consumption, making for an enjoyable and engaging

class.

The moment that drew the strongest reactions was when we introduced JAMSTEC's photograph of a mannequin's head at the seabed, captured by the "Shinkai 6500" submersible at a depth of 6,271 meters in the Japan Trench in July 1991. The question, "Why is garbage—a mannequin's head—sinking in a place like this?" seemed to spark their imagination beyond expectations.

When asked, "Would anyone like to become a fisherman in the future?" three boys raised their hands—an unprecedented experience during our outreach classes.

Not only were the students actively engaged, but the teachers also showed great interest in the content of the class, listening intently. We hope that the

lessons will be reflected in future educational content and anticipate the "fountain effect," where children's statements influence their parents at home, especially regarding issues like sustainable seafood.

We will continue our steady efforts to actively engage in outreach classes, fostering awareness and understanding.



Mannequin's head at the seabed of Japan Trench (left) and gathering students (right)

7. Advisory Board Regular Meeting held

On March 10, the regular meeting of the MEL Advisory Board (the 7th meeting since its establishment in June 2018) was held. For approximately two hours, intense discussions were conducted on the various challenges MEL is currently facing, particularly:

- (1) Analysis and response to the "Survey on the Status of MEL Certification Holders" conducted in October-November last year.*
- (2) Strategies for internationalization,*

including the completion of mutual recognition of CoC certifications with the U.S. CSC, addressing their preparation for establishing a new alternative organization, and expansion into ASEAN countries.

- (3) Reflecting Japan's opinions on FAO and GSSI standards.*
- (4) Promoting new resource assessments, addressing changes in fish distribution due to global warming, and advancing certification acquisition.*

After rigorous discussions, Professor Hiroyuki Matsuda, the chairperson, reminded participants of the significance of MEL as a "place for learning and collaboration among stakeholders." He emphasized the importance of overcoming the notions of inherent good or bad within certification systems and focusing on integrity (honesty, sincerity, and authenticity).

Additionally, Professor Mitsutaku Makino, a member of the MEL Advisory Board, was appointed as the new director of the Ocean Policy Research Institute of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation in January of this year (concurrently serving as a professor at the University of Tokyo). The first director was Professor Hiroshi Terashima, and we hope that the activities of the MEL Council will continue to expand by leveraging the networks of both Professors Terashima and Makino.

8. MEL Ambassador Completion Ceremony Held

On March 14, we held the completion ceremony for this year's MEL Ambassadors, marking the 4th term. While only five people attended, including online participants, it was a lively event with enthusiastic feedback from all. A special highlight was the video presentation by "Sakahiko," our honorary ambassador, which added to the excitement.

The MVPs for this year's activities were Mayu Tsuchiya and Tomoko Yamamoto. Ms. Tsuchiya actively participated in MEL events and successfully spread awareness

among her followers, fostering a strong sense of connection. Ms. Yamamoto, as a mother of a boy who loves fish, broadened the scope of ambassador activities by participating with her child.

For the upcoming year, we will continue working with our existing ambassadors who wish to remain involved. However, new recruitment will focus on university-aged individuals, aiming to inspire interest in fish and seafood among younger generations. We look forward to active participation in this age of social media!

9. Secretary-General Kato Participated in SENA (Seafood Expo North America)

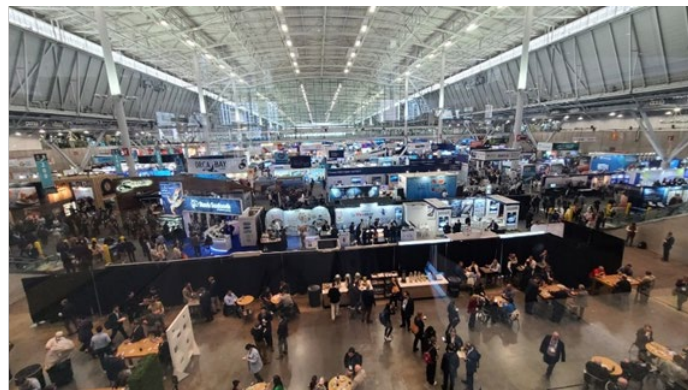
As mentioned under internationalization efforts, Secretary-General Kato attended SENA. The event, held in a spacious venue with wide aisles characteristic of America, brought together seafood industry professionals from over 50 countries.

JETRO's Japan Pavilion featured 18 booths from exhibitors across Japan, including MEL-certified businesses, while more than 10 additional booths were hosted by other Japanese companies and related

organizations, making it a bustling exhibit. One of the highlights was the yellowtail cutting show and tasting hosted by the Japan Aquaculture Fish Export Promotion Association, which attracted a large audience.

With the ripple effects of tariff issues during the Trump administration still

impacting the seafood industry, there is a pressing need for both short-term and long-term strategies in this era of uncertainty. Secretary-General Kato also attended a reception organized by the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute, providing a valuable opportunity to experience the energy of the seafood industry in North America.



Japan Pavilion (left) and the Venue of SENA (right)

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EDITOR'S POSTSCRIPT

Global warming is causing frequent occurrences of heavy rainfall and droughts around the world. Following the large-scale wildfire in California, across the Pacific, Japan experienced its largest wildfire since the Heisei era in Ofunato, Iwate Prefecture. Both incidents seem to have been exacerbated by dryness and strong winds, making firefighting efforts difficult to keep up.

The wildfire in Ofunato spread as far as the coastal areas, directly affecting the wakame harvesting season. Reports already indicated reduced yields due to high water temperatures, and the additional impact of the wildfire is truly heartbreaking. I extend my heartfelt sympathies to all those affected by this disaster.

The surge in rice prices has become a pressuring issue for the daily lives of citizens. In light of this, we wish to consider and act together on how to meet expectations for seafood, from the perspective of contributing to "food security."

MEL Certified Products of the month: Coho Salmon

Certified entities: CO-OP and Kuji City Fisheries Cooperative Association

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