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MEL Council

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Dear MEL Partners:

The trade battle triggered by Trump's tariff policies is causing global divisions and the collapse of economic order. Japan's seafood and agricultural exports which had now gradually begun to expand are now at serious risk of suffering a heavy blow.

The cherry blossom front has reached Hokkaido just before the holiday season. According to archival studies, the peak bloom date of cherry blossoms has advanced by 20 days over the past 500 years. With modern meteorological observations spanning 150 years, it appears that global warming is significantly impacting not only fisheries but also the timing of cherry blossom blooming.

1. International standardization related

Regarding the GSSI MOCA (Monitoring of Continued Alignment), the IE review was completed without major issues being pointed out and is now awaiting the Benchmark Committee's recommendation to the board.

On April 15, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the U.S. CSC for mutual recognition of CoC certification. Moving forward, we will engage in further

discussions with relevant institutions and revise regulations to enable certified products in both the U.S. and Japanese markets to circulate with logos without additional audits.

The details of the MOU will soon be published on both countries' websites. Once the tariff issues settle, we hope that MEL-certified seafood will penetrate the U.S. market more widely and deeply.

2. Status of MEL Certification

This month, one CoC certification was issued.

3. Voice from Certified Entities

Life Corporation obtained CoC certification in December last year and began selling products with the MEL logo in the Tokyo metropolitan and Kinki regions starting in April. Chief Buyer Inoue from the Metropolitan Area Seafood Department has provided a report on the current situation.

"Background of MEL Certification Acquisition"

Yasuhiro Inoue

**Chief Buyer of the Metropolitan Area Seafood Department
Life Corporation**

Our company operates a supermarket business deeply rooted in local communities, based on our management philosophy: "Contributing to the realization of a sustainable and prosperous society through trustworthy management with high aspirations." In recent years, domestic wild fish catches have been declining, and we aim to increase the utilization of domestically farmed fish. By obtaining and selling MEL-certified products, widely acquired by domestic aquaculture producers, we are supporting producers, securing stable seafood supplies, reducing environmental impact, and ultimately contributing to a sustainable and prosperous society while protecting Japan's natural environment and fishery resources.

We recently obtained the Distribution and Processing Stage Certification, and starting April 1, we began selling MEL-certified products in stores across the Tokyo metropolitan and Kinki regions

(excluding some locations). By choosing MEL-certified products, customers are actively supporting Japan's fisheries and seafood culture. Life Corporation will continue to promote MEL-certified products to contribute to a sustainable and prosperous society.



Chief Buyer Yasuhiro Inoue

One of our MEL-certified offerings, Ise Kuroshio Madai (farmed sea bream), is a Life original product jointly developed by the Mie Prefecture Seawater Aquaculture Association, the Mie Prefecture Federation of Fisheries

Cooperative Associations, and Life Corporation. In April 2021, it became Japan's first fresh seafood product accepted as a health functional food under domestic regulations. With rich, high-quality fat content, it tastes great as sashimi and enhances its umami when cooked, making it ideal for salt-grilling or simmered dishes. By emphasizing freshness, deliciousness, safety, and security, our MEL-certified Ise Kuroshio Madai remains a key

differentiator in our product lineup, and we will continue strengthening its sales.

Moving forward, we will enhance in-store promotions and POP displays to educate customers about MEL certification. As a supermarket operator, we believe it is our mission to ensure our customers understand the meaning of MEL certification and recognize its value.

We would like to express our gratitude to Mr. Inoue. Recently, we visited President Iwasaki, Mr. Nakajima (Head of the Metropolitan Area Product Division), and Mr. Imai (Head of the Metropolitan Area Seafood Department) to share updates and express our appreciation. They emphasized the importance of "raising employee awareness and increasing customer interest in certification."

Soon after, they actively promoted this effort on social media, posting: "Visit Life's seafood section and look for the MEL certification sticker!" We are truly grateful for their support. If the MEL Council can assist in any way, please reach out to the office.

Store Report: Life Corporation obtained CoC certification as a retailer on December 13, 2024, and began selling MEL-certified products in stores on April 1, 2025. On April 8 (Tuesday), with permission, we visited Central Square Oshiage Station Store for photography.



The store was spacious, bright, and exceptionally clean. Among the predominantly blue packaging, the complementary yellow circular MEL logo stood out. Eye-catching POP displays were effectively designed to help consumers unfamiliar with MEL certification easily understand its significance.

4. Column

This month, we have invited Ichiro Nakayama, President of the Fisheries Research and Education Agency, which is responsible for stock assessments of Japan's fisheries resources, to share his perspectives on seafood ecolabels from the standpoint of a research institution leader.

"Seafood Certifications and Assurance "

Ichiro Nakayama

The President, Japan Fisheries Research and Education Agency



Ichiro Nakayama, The President

A seafood ecolabel is a scheme that allows consumers to selectively purchase seafood products that have been caught or produced in ways that consider the

sustainability of ecosystems and resources," as stated on the Fisheries Agency website. Furthermore, "Seafood ecolabel certification consists of two types: (1) production-stage certification (for both fisheries and aquaculture) and (2) distribution and processing-stage certification."

Production-stage certification ensures that the seafood has been produced through sustainable and environmentally responsible fisheries and aquaculture. Distribution and processing-stage certification guarantees that certified seafood reaches consumers without being mixed with non-certified products during processing and retail. Since verifying these factors independently is difficult for consumers, certification by a credible and responsible institution allows individuals

to use these labels as purchasing criteria. This is the fundamental value of certification.

In reality, in Western countries—especially in Europe—certified seafood is often displayed in separate supermarket sections, similar to how organic or bio-certified agricultural products are marketed. As someone who enjoys visiting local supermarkets when traveling abroad, I have observed that even in Western countries, consumers generally fall into two main categories (my personal opinion, of course): those who consistently shop in the certified seafood section and those who quickly select products from regular aisles. This suggests that, much like in Japan, consumer behavior is becoming polarized.

Although awareness of certified products in Japan is increasing, it has yet to become a decisive factor in purchasing decisions. Price remains the primary determinant for consumers. Historically, the Japanese diet was heavily seafood-based, but in 2011, consumption of livestock products overtook seafood. The perception that seafood is expensive persists. On the other hand, fishermen frequently cite declining fish prices as a major concern. Despite this disparity, certification provides proof that seafood is healthy, environmentally responsible, sustainable, and part of fair trade practices, making it an essential factor in consumer choices.

Ideally, all seafood production should inherently meet these standards, meaning that, in the distant future, the concept of certification may no longer be necessary—because sustainable production would be the norm. However, in today's world, certification remains an indispensable mechanism to reassure consumers and encourage informed purchasing decisions.

Given ongoing marine environmental changes, pollution, and social shifts, certification should prioritize sustainability, low environmental impact, fair trade, and animal welfare. These are key concerns for conscious consumers when selecting food, ensuring assurance alongside basic safety. Scientific evidence can safeguard safety, but reassurance is much harder to establish—it often depends on perception, as seen in the lingering reputational damage from radiation concerns following the Great East Japan Earthquake.

If certification can also provide such reassurance, it will significantly enhance its value. Additionally, as marine ecosystems evolve, habitats, breeding sites, and seasonal variations are affecting seafood populations. Hybridization among species like pufferfish and yellowtail is becoming more common in natural environments. Ensuring accurate species identification within certified seafood may become a future consideration.

Regarding animal welfare, Japan's cultural philosophy on consuming seafood differs significantly from Western perspectives. For instance, the U.S. has proposed bans on octopus farming based on ethical concerns. However, Japan's traditional phrase "Itadakimasu" expresses gratitude for the life taken to provide sustenance, reflecting a deep appreciation for nature. In contrast, France's "Bon app  tit" simply translates to "Enjoy your meal." These fundamental differences highlight the need for culturally sensitive approaches to seafood certification.

Furthermore, Japan's seafood consumption is heavily based on freshness,

particularly for sashimi. Establishing quality standards that define optimal freshness for sashimi-grade fish may be necessary for certification in the future.

I strongly hope that MEL Japan will refine its unique philosophy rooted in Japan's seafood traditions—recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO—and establish itself as a globally respected certification system among international ecolabels. Expanding MEL to Southeast Asia, a region with diverse seafood consumption, could position Japan as a leader in seafood certification, shifting the narrative from a Western-dominated landscape to a Japan-originated, globally recognized MEL standard.

We sincerely appreciate President Nakayama's insights, which provide a broad and forward-looking perspective. Currently, MEL's certification standards are undergoing revisions, incorporating viewpoints like his, and public comments are being solicited.

We will strive to establish MEL as Japan's globally recognized seafood certification and look forward to continued guidance and support.

5. Board Meeting Held

The 39th Board Meeting was held on March 24. This meeting focused on financial settlements and preparations for the upcoming General Assembly. Reports on activities, projected financial results, the business plan for the fiscal year 2025, and the financial plan were discussed and approved.

As key topics, we reported that the initial loan incurred during MEL's establishment has finally been fully repaid. Additionally, we are progressing towards presenting Fisheries Certification Ver. 3.0 at the General Assembly, which includes new provisions on social responsibility and is

currently open for public comments. The General Assembly is scheduled to take

place on Tuesday, June 24, at 1:30 PM.

6. Management Review Meeting Held

On March 25, a regular management review meeting was convened with three participating entities: the scheme owner, the accreditation body, and the certification body. Activity reports were presented by each organization, and the following key points were highlighted:

- The accreditation continuation review for certification bodies is proceeding smoothly.

- There is growing interest in MEL certification from Southeast Asian countries, requiring appropriate responses.

- The approach to sharing information on certification standard revisions was brought up as a discussion point.

This year marks the scheduled five-year review of standards under MEL's management and operational regulations. Participants reaffirmed the importance of close coordination in advancing these initiatives.

It was determined that the management of the scheme owner (MEL Council) and certification bodies (Japan Fisheries Resource Conservation Association and the Marine Ecology Research Institute) is being carried out appropriately.

7. MEL Certification and Feed Issues Discussed at the Fisheries Science Spring Conference Side Event

On March 26, at Kitasato University's Sagami-hara Campus, the Aquaculture Discussion Group (chaired by Professor Yoshifumi Sawada from Kindai University) held a lecture featuring "MEL Certification and Feed Issues" as its main theme. Reflecting the growing attention on aquaculture, the event was highly successful, with approximately 200 attendees.

The discussion centered on feed-related challenges, with presentations from researchers, industry stakeholders (feed

manufacturers and aquaculture operators), consumers, and government representatives. The exchange of viewpoints revealed key issues and potential solutions. Both the MEL Council and the certification body, Japan Fisheries Resource Conservation Association (JFRCA), actively participated, making the symposium exceptionally informative.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Professor Sawada for organizing and overseeing the event, as well as to Ms. Kitamura from JFRCA. Special thanks also

go to the speakers:

-Professor Shuichi Sato (Fukui Prefectural University)

-Mr. Sutomatsu Tachikawa (Kurose Suisan)

-Mr. Takahiro Okada (Ainan Fisheries Cooperative Association)

-Mr. Tomoki Togawa (Nichimo Co., Ltd.)

-Mr. Mitsutaka Yamakado (Hayashikane Sangyo Co., Ltd.)

-Ms. Yuko Hirano (Housewives Federation)

-Mr. Tadaaki Kakinuma (Fisheries Agency)

A summary of the event, compiled by Ms. Kitamura from JFRCA, will be published in the May edition of Suisan-kai.

8. Aquaculture Certification Expert Committee Meeting Held

At the request of Japan Fisheries Resource Conservation Association JFRCA, the certification body, an expert committee meeting was convened to review the use of moist pellets under the MEL Aquaculture Certification Standards Ver. 2.1, Section 4.2.3.

Following an in-depth evaluation of food quality analysis submitted by the applicants, the committee approved the application of the exceptional regulation. In principle, moist pellet feeding is permitted for one month as part of pre-

shipment quality adjustment and enhancement, but this has now been formally extended to 30 actual feeding days, considering practical feeding conditions.

The MEL Council has communicated this decision to JFRCA and requested continued testing in the effort of shifting toward EPs. Efforts are also being made to ensure that the transition to MEL Aquaculture Certification Standards Ver. 2.1 does not cause disruptions for industry stakeholders.

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EDITOR'S POSTSCRIPT

EXPO 2025 Osaka, Kansai has officially opened under the theme "Designing Future Society for Our Lives." The excitement of the opening ceremony was vividly conveyed through TV broadcasts.

As with any major event, it has sparked a range of opinions, both positive and critical. A newspaper column reflecting on the Osaka Expo 55 years ago brought back memories of Taro Okamoto's "Tower of the Sun" and Kenzo Tange's "Grand Roof," highlighting their historical significance. For those who witnessed Japan's transformation through the 1964

Tokyo Olympics and the 1970 Osaka Expo, this moment carries deep emotions.

Over the next six months, unexpected developments are bound to arise, but hopefully, this Expo will serve as a powerful platform to showcase Japan's charm to the world.

MEL Certified Products of the month: Yellowtail

Certified entities: Life Corporation and Hyoshoku Co., Ltd.

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