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MEL Council

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Dear MEL Partners:

The new fiscal year has begun. Due to recent regular rainfall, the water storage level of the water jars, which was a concern, has gradually improved and is now reflected in the retail prices of leafy vegetables. There is an old Chinese proverb, "Spring rain is precious like oil," and while spring rain was naturally important in supporting the harvest of that year's crops, it also reflects the values of society in the era when oil was used for lighting. Since ancient times, oil has been an indispensable and precious part of food and daily life for humanity.

Now, the world is facing an "oil" crisis. The simulation novel "Carelessness," published by Taichi Sakaiya in 1975, shortly after the First Oil Crisis, became a bestseller. In the novel, although the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz is lifted in 198 days, many readers may recall the realistic depiction of the scars left on social life, such as food shortages caused by energy shortages and the collapse of industrial structures. Even today, we are once again keenly aware that human life cannot exist without oil.

Amid the already frequent conflicts causing global turmoil, and with the mutual distrust between the U.S. and Iran and the circumstances of both sides tossing and turning into a compromise, it has been nearly two months without a clear resolution. In the end, is the only way to restore both sides of the line to create an ambiguous curtain wrapped in the bombshell of uncertainty?

For the food industry, which is a peace industry, especially the fisheries sector, even after the fighting ends, it remains difficult to predict when complacency might recur. It's a shame that the only clever way here is to grit your teeth and give it your all.

1. **International Standardization Related**

Last month, we reported that the new Secretary General of GSSI was Mr. Gert Le Roux (scheduled to take office on June 1), but now a key staff member has been resigning, indicating that organizational instability continues to persist.

On April 10, we held a web conference on mutual recognition of CoCs with CSI, and went a step further by creating a common standard for CSI+MEL and discussing whether we could realize the principle behind CSI's founding principle of eliminating duplication. Since the direction was agreed to be "worth considering," we accepted that and will proceed

with discussions at Seafood Expo Global 2026 in Barcelona starting on the 21st April. Progress will be announced in next month's MEL News issue after receiving a report from Secretary-General Kato. I want to persistently work on even if it takes time, taking reference from PEFC in the forest certification as an example.

2. Certification Implementation

This month, there were four certifications in total: one for fisheries, one for aquaculture, and two for CoC. For the first time in two years, the Fukuichi Group's certification for deep-sea tuna longline fisheries (North Pacific albacore, South Pacific albacore, central-western Pacific yellowfin tuna, and central-western Pacific bigeye tuna) has come into effect.

3. Report from Certified Holders

The second mozuku aquaculture certification in Okinawa has come into effect. Councilor of Kumejima Fisheries Cooperative Mr. Nagatoku Fukuzato, reported on his initiatives.

"Passing Abundant Blessings to Future Generations" — Kume Island Takes on the Challenge for the Future of Sustainable Mozuku Seaweed Aquaculture

Naganori Fukuri, Councilor, Kumejima Fisheries Cooperative

About 100 km west of Okinawa Island, Kume Island has long been praised as the beautiful island of Ryukyu, known as the 'Island of Kumi,' and is home to the Kume Island Fisheries Cooperative. Surrounded by pristine deep ocean water and rich coral reefs, this island is one of the leading mozuku-producing regions in Japan, with approximately 36 producers farming approximately 1,000 tons of seaweed annually. To pass on the blessings of this beautiful ocean to the next generation, we value not just harvesting, but above all, "carefully protecting, nurturing, and passing it on." As proof of that determination, we decided to pursue MEL certification.

We acquired MEL first to "listen to the voice of the sea." The growth of mozuku depends on its untouched nature. That is why we must rigorously examine whether our methods are burdening the ocean, re-examine this strictly according to the MEL standard, and always do our best to continue production. We have made that 'sincere attitude' into our system. Another reason is to cultivate the "pride of being chosen." As global awareness of environmental protection grows, international-standard certification is proof of our love for the ocean, and I feel that Kumejima will infuse new value so that people can confidently choose this Mozuku with confidence.

Since 2014, we have also been engaged in activities involving distribution partners and consumers. That is the Kumejima Chura Marine Environment Fund. This partnership involves our association, Osaka Izumi Citizens' Co-op, Wakayama Citizens' Co-op, Kimuraya Seafood Co., Ltd., and Kumejima Town, allocating 3 yen to the fund for every

Mozuku product purchased, which is used to support environmental conservation activities on Kumejima.

Beyond simple product sales, co-op members visit Kume Island in person to clean up the coast and plant "vetiver" (deep-rooted plants) to prevent red soil runoff from land, continuing activities to protect the muddy sea. These visible relationships are a major asset in creating a "network of empathy" that supports sustainable fisheries.

Additionally, we have obtained certification for the "Blue Carbon Credit" as a new field. We aim to create a model that values the carbon dioxide absorbed by mozuku, a type of seaweed, during its growth, and balances contributions to a decarbonized society with the stabilization of fishery management.



Beautiful sea of Kume Island and mozuku farm



Freshly harvested mozuku

We hope to promote this 'Kumejima Model' not only within Japan but also around the world. In addition to its appeal as a healthy food, we aim to pioneer overseas markets as "Sustainable Mozuku," which adds value to the environment and society, and present a new form of Japanese aquaculture.

Our wish is simple. **"Delivering good products continuously."**

However, in today's world, where climate change and marine environment are shifting rapidly, continuing the same things as yesterday cannot be expected to "continue." Guided by MEL certification, we continuously update resource management and environmental conservation based on scientific evidence, and contribute to the environment and society. I am convinced that this is the only way to pass on Kume Island's rich blessings to children 100 years from now.



Vetiver to prevent red soil

Thank you, Mr. Fukuzato. You can feel the hearts of everyone who has cherished Okinawa's sea and nature. Also, the activities of the Churaumi Environmental Fund are

excellent. Please continue to deliver great products. We look forward to the further development of Kumejima Fisheries Cooperative.

4. Columns by Stakeholders

For the second installment in the CoC series, continuing from the previous CoC general introduction, we asked Professor Nakahara to write about processing.

"Seafood Processing Industry and MEL CoC—A System Supporting Trust and Value"

Professor Naotomo Nakahara

Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology

Many Japanese seafood processing industries have developed as raw material locations, accumulating in the backland of fishing ports, supporting the regional economy. By connecting the seafood landed locally with the local climate and culture, unique local seafood processing products and fish-eating cultures are being fostered. However, in recent years, the situation has changed due to declining catch volumes, changes in fish species, and diversification and fragmentation of demand. Sourcing raw materials from other regions and expanding business with a view to the national market have become important options, not just for major companies. Therefore, for seafood processors, stable procurement of raw materials and marketing to appeal to consumers' needs have become more essential than ever, with sustainable use of seafood as a prerequisite.

With the above in mind, here I would like to consider the seafood processing industry and MEL CoC. According to the list of MEL certification achievements published on the MEL Council's website, as of March 26, 2026, there are 24 fishery certifications, 68 aquaculture certifications, and 189 CoC certifications. The number of fish species and seafood handled is 22 for fisheries, 19 for aquaculture, and 31 for CoC. In MEL certification, seafood certified during production is incorporated into the chain from MEL CoC to the consumers, and many are processed during this process. Although the entire final products cannot be seen from this list, it is clear that various products have been created from certified seafood.

However, whether distributing fresh fish in round form or distributing advanced processed products, the same applies in terms of ensuring the authenticity of certified seafood and passing the trust that comes with it to consumers. However, in the seafood processing industry, processes such as fillet processing, boiling, soaking, drying, and frying are also added. Such changes in material properties are believed to increase the risk of disrupting the management chain, and based on this, establishing a management system that can ensure authenticity is a key point of MEL CoC in seafood processing. Therefore, in audits, in addition to the appropriateness of sorting mechanisms, it is necessary to quantitatively verify yield to ensure consistency of incoming and outgoing

volumes in processes involving irreversible material changes, manage separation and mixing from non-certified raw materials, and verify the indicated process schedules and product specifications. Compared to cases without form changes, it is characterized by relatively more detailed management and review points.

Furthermore, one of the features of seafood logistics, which is multi-stage, also applies to the distribution of processed seafood products. While there are businesses that cover every stage of processing, it is generally not uncommon for the operators responsible for primary, secondary, and higher-level processing to differ. In such cases, seafood products often pass through multiple small to medium-sized processors to transform their form toward the final product. Furthermore, it moves through wholesalers, retailers, and food service businesses before reaching consumers. As MEL certification becomes more widespread, there will be more situations where more businesses are required to comply with MEL CoC in multi-stage distribution based on division of labors. While this can be a significant burden on the ground, it is also an essential condition to maintain the authenticity of certified seafood while clarifying management responsibilities at each stage.

So, what do MEL certification and MEL CoC mean for the seafood processing industry? What I want to confirm here is that although MEL certification has the potential to add value, at present, it is not directly realized as price or product value. However, the entire MEL certification forms the foundation of trust and value in sustainable seafood, and MEL CoC can position this trust and value as a mechanism that protects and connects these values at every stage of distribution and processing. By supporting the value created by seafood processors' marketing activities and trust derived from sustainability, it is believed that this will help create differentiation elements and secure entry conditions for markets that demand sustainability.

To achieve this, new MEL CoC certifications and ongoing maintenance are required, but as mentioned earlier, auditing and managing these are by no means easy. While the MEL CoC review is strict while aligned with the actual conditions of Japan's seafood distribution industry, each operator has its own unique characteristics, and the seafood processing industry also includes diversity in processing methods and technologies. With the ongoing update of certification standard, there is consideration to divide the "Guidelines for Auditors; Indicators of Conformity" into wholesale, processing plant, and retail, reflecting the movement to operate in line with these realities. This is expected to build a more rational and effective management system tailored to the characteristics of each business operator.

Seafood processing products, which are part of Japan's fish-eating culture, and the seafood processing industry that supports them, are advancing internationalization in almost every aspect, including raw material markets, labor markets, and product markets. Amidst this, seafood processors are committed to their mission of delivering attractive products to consumers while keeping a wide range of needs in mind, under strict constraints. At that time, MEL CoC will play an even more important role as a

mechanism to maintain trust derived from sustainability through to the final product. Naturally encountering such processed seafood products in stores demonstrates that our commitment to sustainability contributes to the creation of product value, and that value is materialized as the final product through a chain of responsibility and trust, becoming an established everyday choice. As MEL certification spreads, such movements will steadily spread, contributing to the sustainability of Japan's fisheries industry.

Thank you, Dr. Nakahara. The perspective of the seafood processing industry through your eyes was very fresh. We hope that MEL certification will help Japan's seafood processing industry, which faces the internationalization of raw materials, labor, and markets, for further strides. We look forward to your continued guidance.

5. We held a three-party management review meeting.

The Management Review Meeting is a meeting that summarizes the activities of the past year as required of the scheme owner (SO), accreditation bodies (AB), and certification bodies (CBs) based on ISO and GSSI regulations. On April 3, regarding the activities for the fiscal year 2025, Ms. Yoshikawa, head of the Certification Promotion Team at Fisheries Processing Industries and Marketing Division, Fisheries Agency, attended as an observer.

It has been confirmed that the activities of SO, AB, and CBs are being conducted appropriately, and during this period, the certification body JAB also decided to continue accreditation during the surveillance audits conducted at certification bodies (Japan Fisheries Resource Conservation Association and Marine Ecology Research Institute).

We confirmed the swift reconclusion of the MoU in accordance with IAF regulations (MD25 2022) for the scheme owner MEL council. Additionally, regarding the MEL Council's request to the JAB to certify aquaculture feed certification and fishmeal and fish oil certification under development, a formal application will be submitted as soon as the standards and related regulations are finalized, and JAB will consider whether it can undertake the certification from economic perspectives.

6. Held the Feed and Fishmeal & Fish Oil Certification Standards Committee

After the public comment session on March 30 was completed, the Standards Committee meeting was held on April 17. There were 2 comments and 19 items received. Of these, opinions related to standards are 2 items and 5 items posted on the MEL website. This time, the standards committee was held jointly for compound feed and fishmeal & fish oil, and we received extensive feedback from committee members, expert subcommittees, and observers. Six years have passed since we began developing MEL certification for fish feed and fishmeal/fish oil, and finally, we have reached the stage where the certification standards can take effect, receiving board approval and submitting them to the general assembly.

Exports of Japanese seafood are on the rise, and implementation in industry remains a challenge.

As mentioned in the management review report, the next steps await, such as issues of the accreditation body and auditor training, and we kindly ask for the support of all stakeholders.

7. We held a study session for MEL auditors.

We held a study session for auditors on "Workers' Human Rights," which is included in version 3.0 of the fisheries certification standard, which was approved and came into effect at the regular general assembly in June 2025. Workers' human rights for Aquaculture has been introduced since version 1.0, and for CoC is currently being introduced from version 3.0, which is currently in public comments.

From the perspective of legal compliance, we invited Professor Eiji Tanaka to provide a lecture and explain how to address labor-related issues in the review process. Twenty-nine people participated both in person and online, and 29 people wished to watch the recording later, making it a highly anticipated event with nearly 80% of qualified auditors. We hope you will make effective use of the recordings and help improve the quality of the auditing processes.

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The surge in various prices is even more apparent. The Engel coefficient for 2025, announced by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, is 28.6%, the highest level since the second oil crisis in 1981 following the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. In April, in addition to food, there was a surge in prices of petroleum-related products, and the ripple effects are expected to be widespread. Every industry faces the painful reality that even if rising costs are passed on to selling prices, consumption will ultimately shrink.

Pope Leo XIV's Easter message was, "let those who have weapons lay them down; let those who have the power to unleash wars choose peace." There seem to be some who oppose this message, but as someone involved in the peace industry, I can only hope for a permanent ceasefire.

MEL Certified Products of the month: Coho salmon
Certified entities: Ito Yokado & Nichimo Mariculture

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