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MEL Council

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*It has been over a year since the Kuroshio Great Meander, which lasted for over seven years, disappeared. With anticipation for the changes occurring in Japan's diverse seas, I pay close attention to the fishing patterns of seasonal salmon, bonito, and whitebait, feeling as if 'spring is coming.' Meanwhile, globally, an El Niño event has been reported, raising concerns about its impact on climate change.*

*Due to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, supply chain disruptions have caused difficult conditions for businesses regarding fuel, fishing gear, and packaging materials, but please keep up the good work. It is also to prepare for the further distortion of the economic climate caused by the realities of war in the world that cause war.*

### **1. International Standardization**

*On April 22, the GSSI Scheme Owners Conference was held in Barcelona in conjunction with Seafood EXPO Global. Secretary General Katoh attended from the MEL Council. Gert le Roux, the new Executive Director from GSSI who was officially announced to take office on June 1, attended and oversaw the event. Regarding the content, Secretary General Katoh's business trip report is separately published, but Mr. le Roux reportedly actively led the meeting by leveraging his experience as a GSSI board member.*

*At the same time, we held meetings with CSI for mutual recognition of CoC certification, but unfortunately, there was no progress as expected, but negotiations will continue.*

### **2. Certification Implementation**

*Unfortunately, there were zero certification activations this month.*

### **3. Report from Certified Holders**

*Silver salmon are now at their peak when landed. In April, the company name was changed from Yumigahama Suisan Co., Ltd. to Nissui Salmon Co., Ltd., and the business office has expanded from Sakaiminato to Sado, Otsuchi, Rikuzentakata, and Ofunato. I asked President Hiroshi Tsuruoka of Nissui Salmon to give an update on the current situation.*

## **"Protecting the rich seas and future of Sanriku."**

**Nissui Salmon Co., Ltd.**

**President and CEO: Hiroshi Tsuruoka**

On April 1, 2026, we changed our company name from 'Yumigahama Suisan' to 'Nissui Salmon.' The Nissui Group's domestic salmon farming business suffered major damage in the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, leaving the familiar waters of Sanriku (Miyagi Prefecture) and restarting in Sakaiminato (Tottori Prefecture). Afterwards, we followed Sado (Niigata Prefecture), expanded into Otsuchi (Iwate Prefecture) in 2020, and since then expanded our bases to Rikuzentakata (Iwate Prefecture) and Ofunato (Iwate), allowing us to return to Sanriku once again.

This company name change clarifies our role as a group under the Nissui brand and expresses our determination to further build a sustainable salmon supply system domestically. The Nissui Group regards aquaculture as one of its key growth areas, and among these, salmon—whose demand is expanding globally—is positioned as a core sector of its aquaculture business and is working to strengthen its business foundation. In the Nissui Group's long-term vision, "GOOD FOODS 2030," sustainability is positioned as a key initiative, and we are actively promoting sustainable aquaculture operations.

Our domestic salmon farming business is one of the representative initiatives within the Nissui Group, and we aim to further accelerate this business expansion and contribute to the sustainable development of the fisheries industry and the stable supply of food.

Amidst these circumstances, following Sakaiminato, we obtained MEL certification for salmon farming at the Kirikiri fishing ground in Otsuchi on April 20, 2026.



**Hiroshi Tsuruoka, President of Nissui Salmon Co., Ltd.**

MEL certification is an internationally recognized seafood eco-label certification system originating in Japan, and obtaining this certification greatly contributes to broadening society's understanding that we farm with consideration for the sustainability of marine resources and the environment.

The Kirikiri fishing ground in Otsuchi, where we operate, is also a breeding base for wakame seaweed, widely supplying seedlings for seaweed farming along the

Sanriku coast. Fisheries for harvesting seaweed and shellfish such as sea urchin and abalone are also actively carried out. We believe we have a responsibility to protect our rich oceans and lead the future of our communities for the future. As part of these efforts, we are also participating in the "UMIGYO (Marine and coastal revitalization business)" initiative at Kirikiri Fishing Port, which was designated as a UMIGYO Promotion Model District in 2024. One of these initiatives, the "Otsuchi-cho Seaweed Bed Restoration Activity," involves our divers and staff planting kelp seeds underwater alongside local fishermen and volunteer divers, aiming to create new seaweed beds. We believe that activities to create seaweed beds will not only help preserve the marine environment and maintain the health of fishery resources, but also contribute to the 'future of local communities.'

In Otsuchi Town, the recent forest fire caused significant damage, with 1,633 hectares lost. Our local office became an evacuation target area, forcing us to suspend to work at the office, but thanks to the cooperation of local residents, we were able to continue managing the breeding without any disruption to operations. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of many fire brigades and Self-Defense Force members gathered from across the country, a declaration of suppression was safely issued on May 2, and daily life was restored.

On June 14th, the 6th Iwate Otsuchi Salmon Festival is scheduled to be held without any troubles. We also plan to exhibit at a booth for a "Salmon Tasting Comparison from Sakaiminato, Sado, and Iwate." If anyone nearby is visiting us, we hope you'll stop by.



Left: Algae Field Regeneration Event on January 29, 2026 (at: Kirikiri Fishing Port)

Right: Poster for the 6th Iwate Otsuchi Salmon Festival

Together with all MEL members who share our aspirations, we hope to create the 'future' of Japan's fisheries industry together.

We look forward to your continued support.

*President Tsuruoka, thank you very much for taking the time out of your busy schedule during the peak season of landings. I have a feeling that the trend of Japanese industry, including fisheries, which was previously directed outward, is about to change.*

*Recently, I proposed a town revitalization plan to everyone in Sakaiminato that utilizes MEL certification. We hope that Sanriku will work together with certified holders and local communities to create a model that revitalizes Japan's fisheries industry.*

#### **4. Columns by Stakeholders**

*For the CoC certification series we have asked Professor Naotomo Nakahara of Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology, Mr. Kazuhiko Kotani, representative of Kotani Food Business (formerly working at Ito-Yokado), was responsible for the retail division.*

#### **"MEL Certification from the Perspective of Fish Consumption"**

**Kazuhiko Kotani, Representative of Kotani Food Business**

There are a wide variety of retail stores where consumers can buy fresh or processed fish, as well as restaurants where they can eat fish. General supermarkets, food supermarkets, fresh fish specialty chain stores, local fresh fish merchants, roadside stations, e-commerce malls, online shopping, mobile sales, convenience stores, drugstores, discount stores, and more. Consumers can see fresh fish, processed seafood, and fully prepared products at various stores, with varying selections. In the food service industry, there are many places where you can easily enjoy fish at your own pace, such as conveyor belt sushi chains.



**Mr. Kazuhiko Kotani**

#### **< Environment where retail is located >**

For example, in food supermarkets, which handle many fresh fish, supermarkets are places where consumers can always purchase fresh food, prepared foods, daily deliveries, and grocery products. Stores are refining their selection, convenience, and service to meet these expectations.

Competition across business formats continues to increase, and from a management perspective, recent price increases have led to increased costs due to rising raw material costs, labor, utilities, and logistics expenses, making it difficult to pass on these costs. Driven by consumers' preference for saving money, there has been a decrease in purchase numbers, a sharp contrast in spending, and price polarization becoming more pronounced. Consumers do not come to supermarkets just to buy fish.

To consider the sustainability of fish-eating culture, it is necessary not only to respond to market changes but also to consider the entire food category—not just fish, but meat, vegetables, and prepared foods—and to create and promote appeal so that consumers will continue to choose fish.

#### **< MEL > from consumer psychology**

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Marine Ecolabel Japan Council (MEL Council), established in December 2016. Through the efforts of MEL stakeholders, recognition among fisheries industry and retailers handling seafood is high.

On the other hand, when it comes to consumer penetration, only a limited number of consumers are aware of MEL. As this decade marks a milestone, the next stage may be to raise awareness of MEL among consumers.

In 2021, 'Yokohamaya Honpo Shokudo' inside the southern market in Yokohama became the first restaurant in Japan to obtain CoC certification as a restaurant. At this restaurant, they serve seafood rice bowls and sashimi set meals made with certified seafood.



**Yokohamaya Honpo Shokudo inside Yokohama-shi Nanbu Market**

Also, employees have been trained to answer a question when customers see the word 'MEL' on the menu and ask "what is MEL?"

MEL's seafood bowl is the store's best-seller. However, it's not necessarily the case that customers choose a seafood rice bowl simply because it uses certified ingredients.

However, when you later learn that the seafood rice bowl is made with fish from sustainable fisheries and aquaculture farms, many diners will surely relate to it. The premise for that is, after all, that it must be delicious. You need to value something delicious. For Japanese consumers, who have a fish-eating culture, it would be good to have a value appeal that allows them to imagine deliciousness. Furthermore, the indicator of freshness management also contributes to the appeal of eco-label certification originating from Japan. Katsushime and single-line fishing provide consumers with a sense of freshness.

#### **< What is the value appeal of seafood >**

To prevent mixing with uncertified seafood, supermarkets with CoC-certified seafood sections sell certified fish processed in their in-store workshops with stickers bearing the MEL logo.

Except for the whole fish sold naked in the seafood section of food supermarkets, almost every product has some kind of sticker affixed. The act of sticking stickers requires human hands. At the sales floor, dozens of different stickers are applied daily to each individual product to avoid mistakes. Other stickers are also put on to differentiate and promote the products.

In such circumstances, it is quite difficult for consumers to recognize that a fish is certified just by the MEL logo sticker. Installing it on a store with a media is one option, but unless the design size is clearly visible, it won't catch the consumer's eye. Some supermarkets with CoC certification list MEL certified products on their flyers. Furthermore, for target fish species, we promote them as functional foods and fishing methods, aiming to differentiate ourselves so that they catch consumers' attention. Additionally, QR codes that can store a large amount of information for information dissemination are also being utilized.

#### **< Get to know MEL >**

To get consumers to choose products with the MEL logo with empathy, there are limits to relying solely on retail and food service in-store communication. Starting with sharing on social media, learning at schools, and even for companies outside of fisheries, it is necessary to raise interest in MEL.

For example, the Fisheries Agency of Japan established a campaign to promote fish consumption by informing members supporting Fish Day. I've heard that more than 1,100 companies support this Fish Day. Supporting companies are interested not only in businesses and organizations in the fisheries industry, but also in promoting fish consumption, food education, and expanding seafood consumption. Collaborating with companies from other industries to expand awareness of MEL might be one option. By becoming widely known, people will likely pay attention to the media and products displayed in stores.

The value for seafood is deliciousness, freshness and quality, as well as price and cost-effectiveness. These are the premises that consumers will pick up the fish. Food supermarkets have been strengthening their seafood sections in recent years. The reason is that, compared to fresh meat, the production areas and fishing methods are diverse, and differentiation is made by the way they source and their preferences, as well as the way they assemble their products. I think this approach might be good for raising awareness of certified fish.

Fish is a high-quality source of protein and is known as a food suitable for a wide range of generations, from children to the elderly. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, health consciousness has increased even further. With declining birthrates, aging populations, and dual-income families, the deli section is expanding its selection for time-saving, convenience, and individual dining. Many seafood sales outlets are increasingly installing freezer cases for products that are well preservable. Currently, retailers with CoC certification mainly offer sashimi and fillet products.

To ensure that even uncertified retailers can offer a selection of MEL-certified products, it would be beneficial to encourage certified businesses to promote the commercialization of these products. We aim to design attractive products from the consumer's perspective. By offering certified frozen products that are time-saving, convenient, and have good shelf life, it may become possible to offer not only food supermarkets but also home centers, drugstores, and other retail chains beyond food supermarkets. Additionally, as CoC certification progresses in supermarket deli sections, it will expand to sushi and prepared foods made from certified fish species.

We collaborate with certified businesses in fisheries, aquaculture, and distribution processing, share their strengths, and promote initiatives and products. By having the role of value creation coordinator, I believe that production areas and manufacturing and sales can become integrated, enabling continuous enhancement of MEL's added value.

*Thank you, Mr. Kotani, for your various insights. We ask Japanese retailers to obtain MEL CoC certification. To realize the effectiveness of certification, we kindly ask for continued guidance from Mr. Kotani's on-site Watch.*

## **5. Report on Secretary General Katoh's Barcelona Trip**

*Secretary General Katoh attended the GSSI scheme owner meeting, held concurrently with Seafood EXPO Global in Barcelona. At the meeting, Gert le Roux, Executive Director of GSSI from South Africa, who is set to take office in June, gave an explanation regarding the strategy for the next five years and the review of benchmarking tools. He set three key priorities: credible benchmarking, collective*

leadership, and expanding global influence. GSSI aims to enhance the sustainability of seafood by strengthening the three key areas. Also, since the benchmark tool is scheduled to be reviewed within this year, the MEL Council has conveyed requests such as permission for the use of conspecific and congeneric protein sources in compound feeds and promotion of the use of processing residues.

Furthermore, discussions regarding the mutual recognition of Chain of Custody (CoC) were held with Certified Seafood International (CSI) at the Seafood Expo Global in Barcelona. The MEL Council expressed its goal of establishing an international mutual recognition system for CoC, similar to the PEFC in forest certification. In response, CSI expressed their desire to first realize mutual recognition between MEL and CSI, with the aim of expanding it into a global system thereafter.

#### **6. Technical Section Chief Akimoto attended the ICFA General Assembly and the ICFA-FAO Information Exchange Meeting**

At the ICFA annual meeting held in Rome on April 27, MEL section chief Akimoto attended as an attendant to Japan Fisheries Association President Edamoto, and at the ICFA-FAO information exchange meeting on April 28, MEL's opinions were shared.

When discussions were held to promote the adoption of certification systems, one of the challenges facing seafood eco-labels was that CoC certification must be connected through the supply chain, resulting in disrupted CoC during exports and the burden of duplicate costs of obtaining multiple certifications. To address this issue, we propose the idea that it is desirable to reduce costs for businesses by promoting mutual recognition and standardization of CoCs. There were opinions from countries like Spain that expressed support for deepening cooperation between GSSI and FAO.

Also, when the FAO discussed the importance of effective utilization of fishery by-products, we introduced the widespread circular use in Japan where urban by-products are collected to produce fishmeal. On the other hand, from the perspective of fishery eco-label certification, issues such as traceability of residue raw materials and the FAO Technical Guidelines prohibiting the use of conspecific fish-derived ingredients as feed are bottlenecks, making it impossible to incorporate them into sustainable certification frameworks. We expressed our hope for the FAO's active involvement based on scientific evidences to ensure that the effective use of appropriate resources is accepted in the global market.

#### **7. Secretary General Katoh appeared as a panelist at the webinar on 'Ecolabelling and small-scale fisheries' hosted by the FAO**

On May 6, 7, and 13, the first day of the FAO workshop held online, Secretary General Katoh, Ms. Laura Rodriguez from MSC, and Mr. Gert le Roux at GSSI were invited

together as panelists in the session on 'Ecolabelling and small-scale fisheries.' Secretary-General Katoh explained the current state of MEL, the importance of collaboration among industry, local government, research institutions, and universities to address Japan's diverse fish species, as well as the existence of fishers' cooperatives and their associations that oversee small-scale fisheries.

MSC explained its efforts toward FIPs and SSF, while GSSI explained GSSI's position on SSF. There were numerous questions and opinions from speakers and web participants in other sessions, strongly emphasizing that the world's eye is focused on small-scale fisheries, which account for over 40% of the world's catch, along with social responsibility (such as human rights issues).

At the final day of the opinion exchange, Deputy Director Yoshikawa of Fisheries Processing Industries and Marketing Division of the Fisheries Agency of Japan also took the stage and explained that Japan's coastal resources are being managed through voluntary management through discussions among fishers, such as catch size regulations and fishing ground regulations. She argued that fishers in small-scale fishing countries, including Japan, cannot obtain sufficient certifications, making it impossible to export seafood to Western countries, and that these certification systems have effectively become trade barriers, emphasizing the need to operate systems suited to the realities of small-scale fisheries.

**8. Public Opinion Submission for the MEL CoC Certification Standard (Ver.3.0) Has Ended**

Public comments on the revision of the CoC certification standard ended on May 15. We received a total of 14 comments from two organizations. We are preparing to review the matter at the Standards Committee meeting on May 18, obtain approval from the Board of Directors, and submit it to the regular general assembly scheduled on June 17.

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There was an article about Japanese sand lance (*Ikanago*) in a national newspaper. "I feel the arrival of the season with the opening of local fish fishing restrictions. The dining table becomes a bit livelier than usual. The 'small fish' beloved only in the community has a flavor closely tied to everyday life. On the other hand, it is also facing and affected by the decline in fishery resources. I don't want to give up the unique pleasures of an archipelago surrounded by the sea." For an editor born in Kansai, unfortunately, I missed out on boiled *Ikanago* this year.

*Despite being in May, midsummer days are being reported nationwide, but the MEL Secretariat is usually busy preparing for the General Assembly. This year, there are agenda items such as certification standards approval and board member elections, so we apologize for the inconvenience and appreciate everyone's cooperation.*

MEL Certified Products of the month: Ayu (sweetfish)

Certified entities: Ito Yokado & Mori Yogyo Jo

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