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MEL Council

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The heat continues, but the calendar is the finishing of heat (when the heat subsides), one of the twenty-four solar terms.

MEL News has taken a new step forward. With your support, we aim to make even greater contributions. Thank you very much for your understanding.

One month after the Reiwa Kumamoto Earthquake, in addition to the extreme heat and water outages, the ongoing aftershocks seem to be putting heavy pressure on efforts toward recovery. "Why Kumamoto again?" I am speechless at the unreasonable nature of this unanswered "natural order." We offer our deepest condolences to those who have passed away, and extend our heartfelt sympathies to everyone affected by the disaster.

Not only are there agricultural and fishery products from this fertile land, but I am once again reminded of the significant industrial concentration in Kumamoto. We can only hope that normalization will come as soon as possible, and that this time we will respond appropriately to the reality that we are located on two fault zones, Fudagawa and Hinaku.

1. International Standardization Related

For GSSI's MOCA (Continuing Approval Review), we received the first review comments from an Independent Expert. IE again pointed out that the MEL provision for certified seafood contained in a product containing less than 95% of certified seafood in the Logo Mark Usage Management Regulation is inconsistent with the GSSI benchmark tool. As agreed at the previous MOCA, we returned additional materials and explanations from the MEL Council in mid-August, including the argument that benchmarking tools should be reviewed first.

Additionally, CSI's CoC Technical Committee, which is actively pursuing international expansion, was held on August 10, allowing the MEL Secretariat to participate as observers online. The technical committee is revising the standard-related documents for the new certification scheme (overseas) using CSI's unified CoC certification standard. The common goal is for a single certification body to undergo a single certification audit and to conduct multiple certification programs in a single CoC audit, which aligns with MEL's claims.

2. Certification Implementation

This month, the certification was for one CoC. Since there are three blacked-out stages of the CoC, the number of effective cases is expected to increase a bit. With the acquisition of Toyosu intermediate wholesaler Iwata Co., Ltd., the number of certified companies in the Toyosu market has gradually increased, with six major wholesalers and five intermediate wholesalers holding certifications within Toyosu, and we look forward to further expansion.

3. Reports from MEL Auditors

Since the reports from the certified holders have now been completed, for issue 101, we have decided to share the accumulated "knowledge" with MEL auditors as a new initiative and to bring the audit site closer to the operation of the MEL Council. As you know, auditors are prohibited from providing consulting or guidance during the review process, so the valuable "knowledge" is not of use to the business operator. Therefore, starting this month, we have asked experienced auditors to offer feedback and advice on projects and audits, aiming to resonate not only with businesses but also with those involved in audits and the scheme owner.

The opening act was Mr. Takuo Sakamoto, who kindly agreed after consulting with us. Mr. Sakamoto has served as the director of the Ehime Fisheries Experimental Station and as the head of the Ehime Prefectural Fisheries Division, gaining experience in both research and administration. Currently, he is a leading MEL auditor and plays a broad role.

"My Past as a Local Auditor for MEL Seafood Certification"

**MEL Auditor: Takuo Sakamoto (Resident of Matsuyama-shi,
Ehime Prefecture)**



MEL Auditor Takuo Sakamoto

I conduct audits for aquaculture certification and distribution processing stage certification in Shikoku, mainly in Ehime Prefecture. Currently, Ehime Prefecture has obtained a total of 25 certifications: 1 capture fishery certification, 10 distribution processing stage certifications, and 14 aquaculture certifications. A distinctive feature is the high number of group certifications for aquaculture, with 11 cases being group certifications by fisheries cooperatives and local distribution and processing companies.

When the Marine Eco-Label Japan Council was established, I was serving as an instructor at the 'Domestic Seafood Distribution Promotion Center,' which serves as the secretariat of the Japan Fisheries Resources Protection Association. After a conference held in Tokyo, I underwent several MEL auditor training sessions and was appointed as a MEL auditor in December 2018. The first audit was the aquaculture certification audit in January 2019, the first of its kind nationwide by local auditors. Since it was the first of its kind in the country, two certified auditors from the Japan Conformity Accreditation Board (JAB), the accrediting body, were present. This also assessed my own competence as a MEL auditor, making it a tense review throughout.

In Ehime Prefecture, from the very start of certification, fisheries cooperatives and local distribution and processing companies quickly started to obtain MEL certifications, and group certification audits for their affiliated fish aquaculture businesses have begun. The certified fish species cover six species (small-scale cage farming): yellowtail, red sea bream, bluefin tuna, striped jack, amberjack, and yellowtail amberjack. That year, 38



A fish farm located in the central Uwa Sea

sites were audited, covering the entire Uwa Sea. In the three years from the start of certification to 2021, the number of aquaculture certifications in the Uwa Sea steadily increased: 3 group-certified yellowtail, 3 red sea bream, 1 each for bluefin tuna, yellowtail amberjack, amberjack, and striped jack, and 1 regular certified red sea bream, totaling 11 cases.

The "MEL Aquaculture Certification Standard Ver.2.0," which came into effect in August 2022, was a major shock to fish farming in the Uwa Sea. The MP (Moist Pellet) fish feeds those had been previously available were now virtually unusable. For three

species: bluefin tuna, amberjack, and striped jack, it was expected that continuing certification would be difficult, and they ended their certifications by April 2024. However, an unexpected situation occurred in the certifications of yellowtail, red sea bream, and striped jack. There has been a significant decrease in the number of certified members for group certifications. For example, in one yellowtail farming company, the number of certified members decreased from 64 to 11, and in red sea bream farming, 36 organizations became 4, causing significant damage to the farming sites.

As the MEL Council, I believe we are forced to navigate the difficult task of realizing a "world-recognized seafood eco-label" and its mission to "reflect the diversity of Japan's nature and fisheries while protecting our food culture." On the other hand, as auditors close to businesses seeking to obtain and maintain certifications, I feel it is important to connect voices from the field to MEL, and I hope to continue contributing to the development of "Japan-originated seafood eco-labels."

Now in my eighth year as a MEL auditor, I have joined the ranks of late-stage seniors, and as our longtime acquaintances are getting older, I am concerned about securing new auditors. Since my former job was a fisheries technical staff member in Ehime Prefecture, I approached retired juniors who possessed the qualities befitting MEL auditors. Fortunately, two juniors became auditors, bringing the total number of auditors living in Ehime Prefecture to three.

We are concerned about maintaining the judges' motivation. [Even after the COVID-19](#) pandemic subsidies, skill development training and various meetings for auditors continue to be held remotely, which has led to the loss of opportunities for connections and interaction among auditors, which is concerned about the decline in auditors' motivation. I hope the Council will restore opportunities for face-to-face dialogue and interaction among auditors.

Thank you, Mr. Sakamoto. As MEL Chairman, I have visited Uwajima many times to seek opportunities for dialogue with business operators. Also, recalling the report from Mr. Takahiro Hamabe (former Planning Section Chief, Fisheries Policy Department, Fisheries Agency of Japan), who was seconded to the Ainan Town Marine Industry Promotion Office, which was published in MEL News No. 69 (December 2023), I am savoring Mr. Sakamoto's point. We will strive to maintain even closer relationships with everyone on the ground going forward, so we appreciate your supports.

4. Columns by Stakeholders

This month's column by stakeholders was directed to Mr. Kazuki Yuyama, General Manager of Ito-Yokado's Fresh Fish Department, who was appointed as the new director at the MEL regular general meeting in June.

"Upon Appointment as a Director of the MEL Council"

General Manager of Fresh Fish Department,

Ito-Yokado

Kazuki Toyama

To everyone involved in fisheries. Nice to meet you, my name is Kazuki Yuyama, General Manager of the Fresh Fish Department at Ito-Yokado Co., Ltd. Since June, I have



**Mr. Kazuki Yuyama, Director of the
MEL Council**

been serving as a director of the MEL Council. By sharing opinions and challenges from the retail field, consumer trends, and customers' feedback, which is my daily work, I want to actively energize the entire council. We look forward to working with you from now on.

As Ito-Yokado (hereafter IY), we have previously sold final products processed by manufacturers with seafood certification, similar to other overseas seafood certifications. The three companies—IY, YO, and YB—have obtained store-level Chain of Custody (CoC) certification, making it possible to sell products processed in-store from raw fish materials—such as sashimi blocks and fillets—that account

for the majority of the seafood sales area in each store. Since 2020, the importance of certifications has gradually been communicated to procurement (development) staff, and by encouraging domestic farmed fish producers with whom we have long worked together, we have been promoting "safety and security" step by step by selling and cultivating the products themselves as "MEL products."

Processed products using these raw materials gradually spread, and "high quality" has also been added. We want to refine each of these and spread them to the world, and further share this cycle with the distribution of wild fish and other retail members. First, let's all nurture them together toward domestic recognition and seafood certification that can be recognized globally!! Thank you in advance.

Thank you, Mr. Yuyama. We received powerful words from Ito-Yokado, a retailer responsible for the intersection of production and consumption. We will do our best together.

Thank you very much for your support.

5. Exhibited at the Japan International Seafood & Technology Expo

The 28th Japan International Seafood & Technology Expo was held at Tokyo Big Sight from August 19 to 21. It has become a show with a rich international character befitting its international name, and reflecting the organizer's wishes, it has become one of the highlights of the show featuring families with their children.

From exhibitions focused on tastings to many showcasing concepts and technologies reflecting non-fisheries companies' entry into the seafood sector, there were many exhibits. Behind it was the boom in land-based aquaculture, and the side event seminar was also very successful.

The MEL Council exhibition focused on fostering dialogue between visitors and MEL members, focusing on creating a space to consider sustainable seafood together with MEL, shifting from a style where people could view certified products. Also, MSC and ASC set up booths adjacent to the MEL booth, finally turning the seafood eco-labels into a section, which clearly boosted their appealing.



Seafood show MEL booth. Takahashi Shoten and MSC/ASC booths are adjacent

6. The MEL Certification Award Ceremony

On the first day (Aug. 19th) of the seafood & Technology Expo, the MEL certification awarding ceremony was held.

This time, the recipients were a total of seven companies and organizations: 1 capture fisheries, 3 aquaculture, and 4 CoC. Guests from the Fisheries Agency of Japan, Ms. Kuno, Director of the Processing and Distribution Division and Mr. Yoshikawa, Head of the Certification Promotion Team, attended and concluded the ceremony together with representatives of the awarders.

In the declaration of determination from those who received the awards, there was a statement about positively utilizing MEL certification, and as a scheme owner, I strongly felt that the seafood eco-label system is entering a mature phase. We hope to work together with everyone to further enhance the presence of "eco-labels originating in Japan."



MEL certification awarding ceremony: Together with our guests and representatives of the award recipients

7. Exhibited at Asasho Summer-Navi @ Osaka Science and Technology Museum

We exhibited at 'Asasho Summer-Navi' as part of the MEL Council. On the day, four parent-child classes were held in one day, and every session was fully booked, making it a great success.

We welcomed MEL ambassador Sakahiko as a guest, giving children an opportunity to learn about MEL while having fun.

To raise interest in MEL in the Kansai region, we first spark children's interest and then expand it to their families, so we exhibit every year.



The venue for the bustling 'Asasho Summer-Navi'

After this, the MEL Council plans to hold parent-child classes at Toyosu's 'Yumeichi Rakuza' on an irregular basis. We will continue to aim for fountain effects from children to raise awareness.

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According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the export value of agricultural, forestry, and fishery products in fiscal 2025 will reach a record high of 897.7 billion yen (ca. 5.6 billion USD), an 11% increase compared to the previous year. While it is truly gratifying that yellowtail and matcha were the driving forces, the path to achieving the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries' 2030 target of 3 trillion yen is far from ordinary.

Meanwhile, last year's food self-sufficiency rate hit a record low of 31%. While the impact of soaring rice prices is undeniable, considering that the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries' target of 45% by fiscal 2030 is 53% even for seafood, the gap is huge. I am once again reminded of the weight that supports food security.

MEL Certified Products of the month: Whitebait

Certified entities: Fukushima Sangyo Co., Ltd., Shirasu boat-seine fishery (Ehime Prefecture)

MEL Council Secretariat

Nittochi Uchisaiwaicho Bldg. 3F, 1-2-1 Uchisaiwaicho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 100-0011 Japan

URL: <https://melj.jp/eng/> Email: info@melj.jp