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Red crab fishery earns MSC certification

NEW BEDFORD, MA – The Atlantic deep-sea red crab fishery earned the distinction on Sept. 3 of becoming the very first Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certified fishery on the US East Coast.

All four active vessels in the fishery were granted MSC status. The fishery's New Bedford-based processing plant, which began operating Aug. 11 under the name Atlantic Red Crab Co., also became "MSC Chain of Custody-certified." That means it meets the council's "strict standard for seafood traceability" and can process red crab leg meat, scored arm and claw meat, salad meat, whole crabs, and customized products, according to the MSC.

Jon Williams, president of the New England Red Crab Harvesters' Association, which worked roughly five years to obtain MSC certification, said the industry was extremely proud to have earned such a distinction.

"We are very excited to have achieved this milestone," he said. "The MSC ecolabel demonstrates the industry's long-term commitment to fishing sustainably and its proactive approach to working with fishery managers."

The MSC, which describes itself as "the world's leading certification and ecolabel program for sustainability in wild-capture fisheries," is an international nonprofit organization with offices in London, Tokyo, Sydney, Berlin, Seattle, and other locations around the world.

Its stated mission, in part, is to conduct "objective, third-party fishery assessments" to identify and label "sustainable and well-managed fisheries," which then can bear the blue MSC ecolabel.

Wave of future?

While MSC-certification – and ecolabeling in general – has its fair share of skeptics and opponents, many in industry observe that independent ecolabeling is becoming increasingly important in the marketplace.

Among them is Angelo Ciocca, chief executive officer of Nova Seafood in Portland, ME, which is a major distributor of red crab. Ciocca said the timing of the red crab fishery's certification "could not be any better."

"Many of our customers are requesting MSC-certified seafood products," he said. "We hope that red crab is just the first of many species to be MSC-certified."

The state of Maine is exploring the possibility of MSC certification for its American lobster fishery. Northern shrimp fishermen have talked about the idea, and the spiny dogfish industry is beginning to pursue certification.

But for now, at least, the red crab fishery remains the only MSC-certified fishery on the East Coast, and it is only the second crab fishery in the world to earn the label, according to Brad Ack, director of MSC's Americas region.

To earn certification, red crabbers went through a years-long pre-assessment process, followed by an extensive 15-month-long "full



assessment” process, which was conducted by an independent certifier named Scientific Certification Systems.

The red crab association received some grant money to help cover the extremely expensive certification costs, but the process was nonetheless labor-intensive and long (see CFN June 2008 for details).

In the end, however, red crabbers are convinced it all paid off.

Williams said, “The ecolabel is an emblem of pride for our fishermen.”

Regulations extended

In other red crab news, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) announced on Aug. 24 that it was extending its April 6 red crab emergency action. The regulations, which were scheduled to expire Sept. 2, now will remain in place until Feb. 28, 2010.

NMFS took emergency action because a new red crab stock assessment completed by the Data Poor Stocks Working Group concluded that the existing estimate of maximum sustainable yield for the fishery was “no longer reliable as a foundation for setting biological reference points or management measures.” The working group’s final report was published in January.

To play it safe until the New England Fishery Management Council had time to address the issue, NMFS reduced the 2009 target total allowable catch (TAC) for the fishery from 5.928 million pounds to 3.56 million pounds by emergency action and reduced the number of fleetwide allocated days-at-sea from 780 to 582.

Days-at-sea in this fishery are divided equally among the five limited-access permit holders. However, as has been the case for several years, one permit holder formally declared out of the directed fishery for 2009, so the 582 days were split among the remaining four active vessels, with each boat being allocated 146 days.

Call for change

When the emergency action first came out in April, the New England Red Crab Harvesters’ Association submitted comments to NMFS asking the agency to instead:

Eliminate days-at-sea and convert the target TAC to a hard TAC and let the fishery operate until the hard TAC is utilized; or

Issue fleetwide days-at-sea without allocating a specific number to each vessel and allow the association to independently decide how to fish the days among its member vessels.

In the Aug. 24 Federal Register notice announcing the extension of the emergency action, NMFS said both requests were beyond the scope of what it could do in an emergency action.

“It would not be appropriate or even possible to significantly change” the management program within an emergency rule, said NMFS.

Such changes “should be done through the council process, not unilaterally by NMFS,” the agency said.

The New England council, which has jurisdiction over the fishery and has a Deep-Sea Red Crab Fishery Management Plan in place, is expected to resume work on red crabs in the near future. /cfn/

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