

Information Sheet 3 – the Unit of Certification explained

When preparing for assessment against the *MSC's Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Fishing*, the client and certification body need to establish a clear and agreed definition of the unit of certification before any work begins.

The key question is: assuming the assessment is successful, what and/or who will be certified? The answer to this question may include named species, caught by named methods from named stocks, by named vessels or companies.

Once the assessment process has begun changing the scope of the assessment, that is, species, area of the fishery, gear type or vessels under assessment, could cause significant delay and extra costs. Potential clients and certification bodies should be very clear about the unit of certification before any contracts are signed.

The MSC describes the unit of certification as:

“The fishery or fish stock (biologically distinct unit) combined with the fishing method/gear and practice (vessel(s) pursuing that stock). At its simplest, a single vessel could be the unit of certification, more likely a number of vessels in the same fishery will probably be assessed.”

So one or a group of vessels in the same fishery (a combination of stock(s)/gear/practice) may be the unit of certification. Multi-species/multi-method fisheries can be certified, so long as each species, stock and gear is identified as part of the unit of certification. There may be other fisheries (i.e. combinations of stock(s)/gear/practice) in operation that may catch the stock or impact the same ecosystem as the fishery seeking certification. Stocks in this context could be different species, or different ‘more or less isolated and self sustaining’ groups within a species. There is no implication that if one stock or fishery is certified then that certification also applies to all other stocks of that species or to other fisheries taking that species.

In submitting a fishery for assessment against the MSC standard, you as the client will need to specify the boundaries to the method/gear and practices in the fishery to be assessed, a geographical description location of the fishery and all the species and stock(s) for which certification is being sought.

Fishery assessments for part of the fish stock

Client fisheries may choose to pursue certification for only one part of a stock. The main concern for the certification body will be the health of the whole fish stock or biological population of the species being fished and the whole stock must be assessed against MSC's Principle 1 and to be certified, pass the standard. The consequence of this is that although a fishery may be taking only part of a stock or biological population, the assessment must always consider the effects of all extractions from that stock, including those in fisheries (or sectors) that are not being considered for certification.

Thus, when assessing a fishery, certification bodies will ensure that recreational or illegal catches, or catches by other gears are also taken into account. This might occur for example, where the fishable stock of a species is widely spread across several jurisdictions, or in small-scale fisheries that target only one part of a much larger stock, or those fisheries where the management performance of one group of fishers is enhanced by additional or different measures compared to other management efforts across the whole range of the fished stock.

The further consequence of this is that where the stock of the certified fishery is shared with other (perhaps uncertified) fisheries, these other activities may deplete the stock and hence have a detrimental impact on the certified fishery. In this situation, the certified fishery risks losing certification because of actions of those outside the certified fishery. The exact choice for the boundaries of the unit of certification can have profound consequences for both the success of the assessment, and the maintenance of the certificate. It is for these reasons that clients are advised to carefully consider the unit of certification, and where feasible, include all sources of extraction from the biological stock of the target species within the fishery to be assessed.

Can bycatch from a certified fishery carry the MSC logo?

Only species in a fishery that have been the subject of a full assessment may make the MSC claim and carry the MSC logo. This means that no fisheries product taken as bycatch in a certified fishery is eligible to carry the MSC logo unless the stock(s) have been assessed and found to comply with MSC's Principle 1 as well as the remaining Principles.

Similarly, in multi-species fisheries, all species to which a client wishes to attach the MSC logo and claim must be nominated for assessment. It is therefore essential that it be determined in advance which products (including bycatch or by-product species) you wish to carry the MSC logo and nominate these at the beginning of the full assessment process.

Any other species taken in the fishery under assessment (and not specifically nominated for assessment under Principle 1) must pass an assessment under Principle 2. This means that the bycatch of a particular species in the fishery under assessment must not be of such a type or magnitude that it contributes substantively to overfishing or any other unacceptable stock or ecological issues that may be experienced by that bycatch species.

Environmental interactions

Where some parts of the stock are not within the fishery being assessed, and may be targeted by other fisheries in the region, the effect of these other fisheries on the stock should be included within the assessment of Principle 1 (as discussed above). However, the environmental effects of such other fisheries (fisheries not being assessed for MSC certification) would not normally be considered under Principle 2 or Principle 3, unless these environmental interactions effect the stock. This might occur when, for example, important spawning or nursery grounds of the species being assessed are outside the geographical area of the fishery, and hence open to fishing or degradation by other means that may affect the stock in the fishery being assessed.

Examples from certified fisheries

The Alaska salmon fishery is an example of a fishery where the unit of certification is very broad. In this case, the unit of certification included all five salmon species taken as target and bycatch in different components of the fishery. The salmon are harvested by nets (drift and set gillnets, purse seine) and by trolling. All of these methods were included as the unit of certification. This was possible as the Alaska salmon fishery is managed by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, who was the client for the assessment. The assessment process therefore looked at each of the components (gear type and salmon species) and evaluated these against the MSC Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Fishing.

In contrast, the South West Cornwall mackerel handline fishery had a much more defined unit of certification. The handline fishery for mackerel operates in a defined area off the south west coast of England and targets a small component of a larger fish stock that is exploited by a number of other fishing methods under different jurisdictions. The client group consisted only of the mackerel handline operators. The assessment of this fishery

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considered both the status of the stock as a whole, and the specific effects of the handline fishery on the target species and the marine ecosystem and evaluated these against the MSC Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Fishing. In this case, the unit of certification was therefore defined as the gear type and the fishing area, however the client was aware that their evaluation is dependent on the continued sustainability of the whole fish stock, much of which is outside of their direct control.

Exclusivity of Fishery Certificates

Standard practice in most certification programmes means it is the responsibility of the certification body to determine who should or should not be allowed to use the fishery certificate they have issued. Only those parties or categories of parties (client group, entity or other parties – see Box 1) from the assessed fishery that are identified by reference to or listed on a valid fishery certificate by the certification body are entitled to apply for chain of custody certification and subsequent use of the MSC logo.

Box 1

Categories of parties could mean all fishers when a government agency is the client, as is the case with Alaska salmon where the Alaska Department of Fish & Game is the client and all Alaskan salmon fishers may have access to the fishery certificate, chain of custody and logo use.

As the client, you are entitled to provide the certification body with the names of those operators who are a part of the client group. On the award of a fishery certificate, the certification body is required to clearly identify those parties or categories of parties that are entitled to use the fishery certificate and certificate number.

Certification bodies have been advised by the MSC that it is desirable for assessment contracts to contain reasonable arrangements to allow for others, either pre-existing fishers within the same 'scope of assessment' or new participants in the unit of certification, to have access to the certificate number. Reasonable arrangements may include agreement to payment of a fair proportion of the assessment costs and commitment to addressing conditions and subsequent corrective actions.

MSC Executive
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