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Responsibility

# GSSI furthers its mission of clarity out of confusion

12 February 2016

By James Wright

## At the SeaWeb Seafood Summit, the sustainable seafood certification benchmarking initiative addresses questions



Because the sheer variety of wild-capture and farmed seafood sustainability certification schemes can be difficult for professional seafood buyers to navigate, an international task force formed in 2012 is aiming to determine which of the standards are the most credible. The Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI) is tasked with, essentially, certifying the certifiers.

Several GSSI board members reinforced their challenging mission at the **SeaWeb Seafood Summit** (<http://www.seafoodsummit.org>) in St. Julian's, Malta, in early February, during a panel discussion titled "Building Confidence in Certified Seafood – The Next Steps." The reason

Photo by Devin Harvey, courtesy of SeaWeb.

for such a gathering? There remains a healthy amount of confusion about GSSI and whether it will fulfill its mission of finding clarity in the alphabet soup of third-party certification programs.

“I know of no other exercise of this nature that’s delivered this kind of robustness in the multi-stakeholder process,” remarked Peter Hajipieris, director of sustainability and external affairs at Birds Eye Iglo (acquired by Nomad Foods in 2015) in the U.K. “Many people challenged that this wouldn’t happen,” he added, referencing “clear disagreement” among stakeholders at the 2012 Summit when GSSI was first launched.

Certainly, the ultimate mission of GSSI came under question by some of the certification programs when the initiative was unveiled. According to a statement on its website, “GSSI is a global platform and partnership of seafood companies, NGOs, experts, governmental and intergovernmental organizations working towards more sustainable seafood for everyone.”

The panelists presenting at the event in Malta said GSSI will not promote the various certification schemes — including the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC), the Global Aquaculture Alliance’s Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) program, GlobalGAP and Friend of the Sea, to name a handful — that eventually pass muster, nor will it rank them. The marketing or promotion of schemes GSSI deems worthy must be done by the individual schemes themselves.

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Tom Pickerell, technical director at Seafish, the U.K. seafood industry authority, said GSSI approval would provide the needed recognition for the certification schemes that surmount the “pass-fail” threshold, while stressing that its role will not be to say “buy or don’t buy.”

“We will be upfront about what the schemes have achieved. When GSSI started, it was what we (Seafish) wanted to be involved with, to add value to what we do for the industry,” he added. “Informed decision making — we can add value to that.”

While Pickerell noted that confusion regarding certification schemes is not rampant among UK consumers, Hajjipieris affirmed that the greatest value will be for commercial seafood buyers, particularly in retail. "GSSI is a foundation, not a commercial entity," he added.

Tania Taranovski, director of the sustainable seafood program at the New England Aquarium in Boston, echoed those sentiments, saying that GSSI increases the value of seafood certification schemes that meet the benchmark. GSSI's **Global Benchmark Tool** (<http://ourgssi.org/benchmark-tool-2/tool-in-action/>) was launched last fall during the Conxemar exhibition in Vigo, Spain.

"GSSI will be a tool to help create more confidence in certification and make it a more effective tool," she said. "The benchmark itself lends credibility and confidence to back up claims. In addition, it achieves another goal, which is to encourage improvements."

Herman Wisse, GSSI program manager, made it clear during the panel discussion that it's not the job of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to inform each and every certification scheme whether it meets its guidelines. Hence the formation of GSSI.

"FAO has been clear that they cannot and will not do that," Wisse said.

"To meet all the FAO guidelines is a rigorous thing to try and achieve," added Pickerell.

It's not known how many certification schemes are undergoing GSSI review. The Global Aquaculture Alliance publicly announced its intention to submit an application to GSSI after the Global Benchmarking Tool was launched. Executive Director Wally Stevens encouraged all certification schemes to apply to GSSI to assure the marketplace that their schemes are grounded in the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF) and **FAO Guidelines for Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine/Inland Capture Fisheries** (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i1948e/i1948e08.pdf>) and **FAO Technical Guidelines for Aquaculture Certification** (<http://www.fao.org/docrep/015/i2296t/i2296t00.htm>).

Summit panelist George Clement, CEO of the Deepwater Group in New Zealand, said that as there is clearly a need for standard global systems for food safety, so too exists the need for a global standard for sustainability.

"I see this (GSSI) as an opportunity," he said. "It's a roadmap to get to sustainability."

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