



Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition

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Scientists and Environmental Groups Condemn Proposed MSC "Green Label" for Ross Sea Toothfish FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Washington, DC - November 27, 2009. Scientists and environmental groups this week criticized the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) for its proposed certification of Ross Sea Antarctic toothfish.

The certification is being recommended by UK-based Moody Marine,¹ the organization chosen by the Ross Sea fishers and accepted by the MSC. Its report ignores the written arguments of 40 marine scientists from seven nations who have worked in the Ross Sea for decades,² as well as several ASOC member organizations.³

"The Ross Sea Toothfish fishery is 'exploratory' under CCAMLR⁴ rules due to the lack of scientific data and a reliable stock assessment," said David Ainley, a marine scientist who has been studying the Ross Sea for 35 years for the US Antarctic program.

"There is great uncertainty about the toothfish population and its biology. It is completely inappropriate for the MSC to consider certifying this fishery," said Dr. Sidney Holt, an independent expert on fish population dynamics.

Last year, an independent analysis of human impacts on the world's oceans published in the journal *Science* classified the Ross Sea as the least affected oceanic ecosystem remaining on Earth.⁵ "Awarding Antarctic toothfish the MSC seal of approval will stimulate demand and dupe the public. The Ross Sea is a world treasure that must be protected," said Karli Thomas, Greenpeace oceans campaigner.

"Certification of the Ross Sea toothfish fishery ignores the very inexact science surrounding the fishery, including the age at which fish are fully mature and how often they breed. It flies in the face of public opinion and the wish to see one of the very few intact ocean ecosystems on Earth - the Ross Sea - fully protected as a marine reserve," said Jim Barnes, ASOC Executive Director. "Moody Marine's analysis is shocking."⁶

¹ The certification would apply to only seven of the 16 vessels currently allowed to fish for toothfish in the Ross Sea. The certification assessment report is available online at: <http://www.msc.org/track-a-fishery/in-assessment/southern-ocean/ross-sea-toothfish-longline/assessment-downloads-1/2009.11.18-ross-sea-toothfish-final-report.pdf/view>

² <http://www.asoc.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=YBvvPgFQ-yM%3d&tabid=183>

³ See comments from ASOC: <http://www.asoc.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=4KoMWbAXxYs%3d&tabid=36>;

Greenpeace: <http://www.asoc.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=M4ongtsVc5k%3d&tabid=183>;

Center for Biological Diversity:

http://www.asoc.org/Portals/0/CBD%20comments%20on%20MSC%20toothfish%20cert%20report_8%2027%2009.pdf

⁴ Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, www.ccamlr.org.

⁵ Halpern, B.S. et al. 2008A Global Map of Human Impact on Marine Ecosystems. *Science* 15 February 2008: Vol. 319. no. 5865, pp. 948 – 952 <http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/abstract/319/5865/948>

⁶ The ASOC proposal for protection of the Ross Sea is available online at:

<http://www.asoc.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=x66o4ILDNoQ%3d&tabid=185>

Mr. Barnes said the groups are considering appealing the certification to Moody Marine. It must be filed by December 11 under MSC rules. Appeals require an organization to pay a substantial fee based on the size of its budget.

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Notes to Editors

Concerns about the Ross Sea Antarctic toothfish fishery include:

- Little is known about the life history of Antarctic toothfish, including when they spawn, the specific location of spawning sites, intervals between spawning, depth of spawning, and the habitat of early life stages.
- Toothfish are long-lived (about 50 years or more) and grow up to 2.5 m long. The species has low natural mortality, and breeding doesn't start until around 16 years of age. Therefore toothfish are particularly vulnerable to overfishing.
- Stock assessments are based on tagging fish. Only two of seven vessels included in Moody Marine's assessment meet the size tagging standard. In general, the present tagging system is not working well, with a very low return rate.
- CCAMLR has not so far adopted any indicators to monitor broader ecosystem changes from the projected removal of an estimated 50% of the spawning toothfish population in the Ross Sea under the 'exploratory fishery' plan, although that is supposed to be a CCAMLR requirement.
- During the past ten years the reported catch was 16,219 tonnes of toothfish in Area 88.1 and 2037 tonnes in Area 88.2. The current catch limit is 2850 tonnes in Area 88.1 and 575 tonnes in Area 88.2. In addition, there is a reported catch of rays, rattails and other fish - last year this was 194 tonnes in Area 88.1 and 58 tonnes in Area 88.2. This fishery also catches the complete range of benthic species that make up Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VME), including stony corals, black corals, gorgonians, sponges and bryozoans, most of which are thousands of years old. About half of the nearly 1500 sets last year reported catching VME taxa.