

## Eco-labelled seafood doesn't pass the smell test, report's authors suggest

BY MARGARET MUNRO, POSTMEDIA NEWS SEPTEMBER 2, 2010



Fishermen sell salmon from their boat in Steveston, B.C., on Wednesday. This year's salmon run up the Fraser River is expected to be one of the largest in 100 years, according to fishery officials.

Photograph by: Andy Clark, Reuters, Postmedia News

An international program that purports to certify only sustainably harvested fish is failing to protect the environment and needs radical reform, says a highly critical report released Wednesday.

The certification program is run by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), created in 1997 by the World Wildlife Fund and Unilever, one of the world's largest seafood retailers. It has certified 94 fisheries that account for seven per cent of the global catch, including several in Canadian waters.

But many of the MSC's claims are nothing but "eco-babble" and very misleading, says Jennifer Jacquet, a University of B.C. researcher and co-author of a report in the journal *Nature* this week.

The non-profit council is based in London, England.

Its blue "eco-labels" can be found on seafood sold at Whole Foods Markets, Walmart and many stores in Europe.

Controversy has been brewing over the certification program for years, but the MSC's recent decision to slap its eco-label on an Antarctic krill fishery prompted the researchers to spell out their concerns, said Jacquet, a resource management specialist who authored the report with noted UBC fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly and colleagues in the U.S. and Italy.

The council certified the krill fishery last May, despite scientific evidence that suggests the shrimp-like creatures at the base of the Antarctic food chain are in decline.

Worse, much of the krill catch is used to feed farmed fish, pigs and chicken and "any fishery undertaken for fish meal should not be viewed as responsible or sustainable, and should not qualify for MSC certification," the researchers say.

Co-author Paul Dayton, at the University of California's Scripps Institution of Oceanography, said the krill certification "is an embarrassment as it flies in the face of existing data and denies any sense of precautionary management."

The MSC argues that less than one per cent of krill is under fishing pressure.

The report also takes issue with the way the council's eco-labels adorn fish in serious declines.

The U.S. trawl fishery for pollock in the eastern Bering Sea is the largest MSC certified fishery, with an annual catch of one million tonnes.

"It was certified in 2005, and recommended for recertification this summer, despite the fact that the spawning biomass of those pollock fell by 64 per cent between 2004 and 2009," the report says.

Similar declines have occurred in Pacific hake, the report says, noting hake "was certified in 2009, despite a population decline of 89 per cent since a peak in the late 1980s."

The council acknowledges the hake and pollock have seen "declines" but insists the fisheries deserve certification.

"The stock is rebuilding and continued improvements in Alaska pollock biomass is expected as favourable conditions prevail," said Mike DeCesare, MSC spokesman in North America.

Jacquet, Pauly and their colleagues accuse the council of using an "arguably loose interpretation" of sustainability and are urging it to adopt more stringent standards, as well as alter its certifying process "to avoid a potential financial incentive to certify large fisheries."