

Grocers begin battle over sustainable seafood

Sobeys enters partnership with NGO to improve protection of vulnerable fisheries

BY SARAH SCHMIDT, POSTMEDIA NEWS OCTOBER 13, 2010

Let the sustainable seafood war at Canadian supermarkets begin.

Sobeys Inc. plans to raise the bar today with its plan to push seafood suppliers and producers to run sustainable fisheries and farms to sell their fish at 1,300 Sobeys stores across the country under retail banners that include Thrifty Foods and IGA. Sobeys, the second-largest grocer in Canada, is the latest to release a sustainable seafood policy as food retail giants jostle to convince eco-conscious consumers of their commitment to protect vulnerable fish stocks.

In an interview, David Smith, vice-president of sustainability at Sobeys, said it's not enough to sign on to certification programs to phase-out at-risk species from fish counters, so Sobeys has teamed with Sustainable Fisheries Partnership, an international non-governmental group that works with seafood suppliers and producers to create sustainable operations.

"We're certainly committed to the sustainability of seafood and the people and the economies dependent on them. We want to make sure those can be viable for generations to come and we also want our customers now and in the future to be able to buy a broad assortment of seafood. We feel the most impactful way of doing that is actually fixing the worst first. It means actually going beyond certification programs and ecolabels. Those tend to appeal to the fisheries that are often in decent shape already. What's left out is those that are in the most challenging situations," Smith said Tuesday.

The new policy comes just a few months after Sobeys placed near the bottom of Greenpeace Canada's annual supermarket ranking on seafood sustainability, with a score of 14 per cent, ahead of Co-Op (12 per cent) and Costco (seven per cent). The Overwaitea Food Group came out on top with a grade of 51 per cent, followed by Loblaw (43 per cent), Safeway (36 per cent), Wal-Mart (28 per cent) and Metro (21 per cent).

Those at the top of the ranking have already developed and implemented a seafood policy, begun to rid their shelves of harmfully fished and farmed seafood on Greenpeace's Redlist.

Jennifer Jacquet, of the University of B.C.'s Sea Around Us Project, said in an interview that partnering with a group such as the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership is "a very sensible approach if they have at all a long-term perspective," but the situation is so dire, it may not be enough.

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