Sustainable Seafood Coalition (SSC) Members' meeting minutes

Date: 20 November 2019

Location: ClientEarth offices, London E8 3QW

Number of attendees: 24 total (including 3 ClientEarth staff, 1 acting as facilitator/secretariat and 1 as minute taker)

Summary of agreed points

Item 1: Horizon scanning of wider environmental issues

- Priority environmental concerns affecting SSC members should be mapped before any further action can be taken on how to address them as a group.

Item 2: Implementation report planning

- Multiple consultants should be invited to tender for the report and to offer suggestions for some pre-identified variables. A stakeholder consultation on perceptions of the SSC should be conducted by the secretariat.

Item 3: Online discussion platform

- An online discussion platform should be established and a point person identified for each member. A review of activity should be conducted after six months.

Item 4: Advocacy-based improvements

- With minor adjustments, the draft advocacy Guidance can be used as a working document to advise live advocacy initiatives.

Item 5: Business engagement with ratings programmes

- Members can continue individual dialogues with ratings programme managers to explore opportunities for engagement as appropriate to their businesses.

Purpose of the members' meeting

To consider wider environmental issues affecting the seafood industry and the scope for incorporating this into the SSC model; to discuss the format of next implementation report; to choose an appropriate online discussion platform for members; to approve amendments to the SSC Guidance regarding advocacy.

Secretariat update:

The secretariat updated the group on actions and developments since the last meeting and reported against the KPIs agreed by members.

Discussion and comments

- The Secretariat shared apologies from a representative from the Hong Kong Sustainable Seafood Coalition (HKSSC) who had been invited to provide an update. Ongoing political unrest in the area has particularly affected the hospitality sector, and a postponed update would be more informative. The HKSSC are developing a marketplace tool to help improve transparency and traceability, and will be looking to collaborate with the SSC in its development and adoption.

- The SSC Steering Group (SSC SG) has been formed, Terms of Reference signed off and their first call held. Some topics from that call became agenda items for this meeting. Other topics that were discussed are:

    - A disclosures policy. SG Members highlighted the difficulties around having a shared policy due to the diversity of member businesses. The conversation on best practice will continue, possibly on the proposed online platform.

    - A procedure for handling objections by external stakeholders about member code compliance. Developing an external-facing objections form is simple, but defining the internal process, manner and timing of individual involvement and ultimate outcomes is more complex. Further discussions are needed before a full proposal is presented to all members.

    - The risk assessment resource-sharing project. There is now a master sheet, compiling criteria used by members in the risk assessments of their sources. Discussions around the best way to share and use this resource could be included in the conversation about the proposed online platform.

- The Secretariat updated the group on its engagement with other organisations. They still sit on the CLG Steering Group and RFS Technical Advisory Committee. Since the last meeting, the Secretariat has also joined the Seafish Supply Chain and Consumer Panel.

- The Secretariat introduced the ClientEarth seafood team's new project lead, who was in attendance and gave an update on ClientEarth's seafood work in Spain. ClientEarth continues to collaborate with NGOs, retailers and retailer associations to raise the profile of seafood sustainability in Spain. The team organised a large event in Madrid earlier in the year, with attendees from various stakeholder groups, to present the 10 joint NGO recommendations to the seafood industry and gather information about what their priority work areas should be. Stakeholders have highlighted the importance of having the Spanish supply chain actively supporting Fishery Improvement Projects (FIPs) important to the Spanish market, such as tuna, squid and octopus.

- The secretariat shared the finance report for 2019 and forecast for 2020.

- The SSC welcomes three new members since the last meeting: one retailer, one foodservice outlet and one foodservice supplier. There have been five businesses referred by members and the Secretariat has contacted thirty-five new businesses directly. No members have left the SSC. There is a fairly even spread of members across bands, sectors and positions in the supply chain.

Item 1: Horizon scanning of wider environmental issues for the seafood industry

Guest presentation from Seafish.

Discussion and comments

- The secretariat reminded the group of the purpose of this item; following a discussion around plastic pollution in the March meeting, members felt it was important to have an informed awareness of the whole range of environmental challenges affecting the seafood sector to meaningfully address any issues outside the scope of the Codes. 'Horizon scanning' was intended to help members identify the most pressing environmental concerns affecting, and being affected by, their businesses. It can also help the group decide what role, if any, the SSC should play in confronting these wider challenges.

- A representative from Seafish presented their model for capturing and presenting intelligence from a wide pool of seafood industry stakeholders about environmental changes and how they are affecting businesses. Seafish has mapped this information, identified the most pressing challenges and used this to create 'strategic outlooks', making recommendations based on detailed reviews of these priority areas.

- The discussion turned to the SSC's role and how best to use this knowledge to incorporate wider environmental issues into the SSC's remit. Members were generally in agreement that the broad representation and pre-competitive nature of the SSC makes it a good platform to tackle some wider environmental concerns. The group acknowledged that the SSC currently uses a narrow definition of 'sustainability', focussing on the marine impact of fishing / fish farming activity and not necessarily taking into account wider environmental impacts of the supply chain e.g. transport, land-based fish feed production, use of plastics in the supply chain.

- The group discussed how best to incorporate wider environmental issues into the SSC remit and what leverage it might have as a group. However, it was agreed that the first step should be to identify the main priority areas for the SSC and some suggestions were made about how to collect and filter this information from members. There was also some discussion around the pros and cons of tackling immediate concerns versus upcoming issues that are envisaged in the future.

Agreed:

- Priority environmental concerns affecting SSC members should be mapped before any further action can be taken on how to address them as a group.

Actions:

Secretariat to: create a poll for members to highlight their business' most pressing environmental concerns and distil this into a hierarchy of member priorities for dissemination.

Item 2: Implementation report planning

Planning of the upcoming implementation report. In 2017 an independent consultant conducted an implementation review and report to measure the success of the Codes and the pre-competitive collaboration model on which the coalition is based. Members have agreed to commission an implementation report every three years.

Discussion and comments

- The group used a consultant's proposal for the 2020 implementation report as a discussion point. There was some discussion about whether the report should focus on member compliance with the codes and demonstrating credibility of the SSC commitments, or also incorporate trends and comparisons with the broader UK market (i.e. non-SSC members). It was emphasised that the report is meant to be an evaluation of overall progress towards the goals of the SSC. It was noted that any non-member participants in the review would have to be willing to disclose the necessary information and that this could be harder to gather, but that their performance is an important measurement of SSC success.

- The group discussed a number of variables which would need to be clarified in the final commissioning of the report. These variables included; the intended audience for the report and what influence this would have on the scope and format; sampling methodologies (i.e. which species to include and whether this should vary by member); the sampling pool (i.e. which members to involve and to what extent this should be based on outcomes of previous reports). The group also considered whether an assessment of sourcing and labelling processes, rather than a focus on specific products, would be more insightful and efficient.

- To manage budget, members considered whether the report should be focussed based on the perceived risk of members, sectors or products. Members were clear that only useful data points should be gathered. The group felt that the timely and proactive provision of relevant information by members should save on consultant time and cost. The group discussed the inclusion of a consultation on stakeholder perspectives of the SSC in the report. They concluded that this was a separate piece of work that could be conducted in-house.

Agreed:

- Multiple consultants should be invited to tender for the report and to offer suggestions for the variables described above.

- A stakeholder consultation on perceptions of the SSC should be conducted separately by the secretariat.

Actions:

Secretariat to: Communicate budget and clear set of asks in an invitation to tender; Share draft with members for comment before dissemination; Send invitation to tender to consultancies identified by members.

Item 3: Online discussion platform

Demonstration of available online platforms by the Secretariat.

Discussion and comments

- The Secretariat explained that the SSC SG had identified this opportunity to develop new ways of working within the coalition. As the SSC grows, an online discussion channel could facilitate ongoing collaboration between members in addition to the biannual meetings. Having such a platform would add value to SSC membership and enable all members to more accessibly benefit from the collective knowledge and experience within the coalition.

- The Secretariat demonstrated some examples of available software platforms which fulfil the desirable functions and gave recommendations. Members agreed that having searchable threads for specific topics, space for sharing documents and the ability to conduct polls were particularly useful. Members identified a preference based on page structure and minimal cost.

- There was then a discussion about the logistics of the platform. The SG had already discussed and highlighted the issue of competition law and it was agreed that a guidance document on protocols and best practice should be constructed, which would need to include details on member representation. The Secretariat agreed to take on general oversight of activity on the platform and to ensure that there is a regular feed of relevant content.

Agreed:

- An online discussion platform would provide a number of useful functions and should be established

- A 'point person' from each business should be allocated for polling or voting functions, but access made available to other relevant colleagues

- A review of activity should be conducted after around six months to assess the extent to which the platform is being utilised.

Actions:

Secretariat to: Set up the relevant components of the platform; Create guidance document on use of platform; Invite members to join; Monitor activity to evaluate added value to members.

Item 4: Advocacy-based improvements

Members reviewed a draft addition to the SSC Guidance to clarify minimum criteria for efforts aiming to improve a source using advocacy as a means of demonstrating alignment with the SSC Codes.

Discussion and comments

- In light of the recent advocacy activity by many SSC members on North East Atlantic mackerel, members agree it is necessary to provide guidance on requirements of credible advocacy.

- Feedback on the document was generally very positive and members agreed with the main principles. A member raised concerns about the use of imperative language in parts of the document and suggested changes to align with phrasing in the rest of the Guidance.

- Some members were uncomfortable with the requirement to establish a timebound 'walk-away point' at which members would be expected to cease sourcing from a particular fishery or supplier following a period of unsuccessful advocacy activities. They emphasised that advocacy strategies should be somewhat dynamic and flexible and include 'critical evaluation' points before taking the decision to walk away.

- The group discussed the nuances around the level of engagement expected in group advocacy activities. The question was raised about the level of engagement expected relative to business size and whether there should be a 'threshold' according to individual businesses' resources.

Agreed:

- SSC members have a responsibility to ensure that their SSC commitments are communicated through their supply chains, to help explain the importance of engagement in and the success of improvement initiatives.

- Members agreed that the draft guidance can be used as a working document to share with external stakeholders, in particular at an upcoming meeting on NE Atlantic mackerel.

Actions:

Secretariat to: make agreed adjustments to the document and share with members; present draft (with these adjustments) at the North East Atlantic mackerel supply chain meeting.

Item 5: Business engagement with ratings programmes

Discussion on business engagement with ratings programmes: guest presentation from Marine Conservation Society (MCS).

Discussion and comments

- Representatives from MCS delivered a presentation on their Good Fish Guide, giving an overview of the ratings, methodologies and some updates within the project, including a new rating to identify 'red' rated fisheries that are engaged in FIPs.

- Many members use the guide as a first point of reference when undertaking assessments of sources, but encounter difficulties when looking into less commercially prevalent species that are not included in the guide. Members had questions about the impact of the guide and how this is measured. MCS survey business and individual users of the guide and monitor app downloads.

- The group discussed the idea of more frequent updates to the Good Fish Guide. Some members would like to have the most up-to-date information available, particularly when significant management decisions are made or scientific advice is given. Others highlighted that reviewing their own internal processes and sourcing decisions biannually is already time-intensive, and would be impractical to do more regularly. A member mentioned that their suppliers quite often send the wrong rating and they have to perform their own internal verification.

- Some members shared concerns that there may be unintended consequences of red ratings, such as dis-incentivising FIPs by removing the market drive. These members explained that being instructed not to buy certain species or from certain fisheries removes their power to influence positive change by engaging with their suppliers promoting the necessary improvements. MCS pointed out that FIP engagement is not possible or prioritised by many businesses so advice to stop sourcing can be more appropriate.

Agreed:

Members are invited to speak individually to MCS about their business engagement with the guide, as appropriate.

Item 6: AOB

Discussion and comments

- The Secretariat reminded members of some recurring examples of non-alignment with Codes. One example relates to overarching and occasionally erroneous claims about whole product ranges being 'sustainable'. This is often a result of miscommunication with other departments within the business. The Secretariat reminded the group to explain the Code commitments to all relevant departments, and that instructional videos have been created and made available to members for this purpose.

- The group was reminded of the SSC commitments to avoid threatened, endangered or protected species. Members discussed some specific examples and noted that the high environmental and reputational risks associated with such species means they should not be present in the supply chains of SSC members.

- The Secretariat was asked about their process for verifying a suspected misleading claim being made by a member. The Secretariat explained that they will always speak directly with the member as a first action and for any species-specific concerns they will consult multiple information sources, ratings and experts.