Sustainable Seafood Coalition (SSC) Members' meeting minutes

Date:

21st March 2019

Location:

ClientEarth offices, London E8 3QW

Number of attendees:

22 total (including 2 ClientEarth staff as secretariat and minute taker and 1 member as chair)

Summary of agreed points

Item 1: SSC structure & option for a steering committee

- A steering committee will be established. The first step is drafting a Terms of Reference document which reflects the sentiments agreed in the meeting.

Item 2: Agree direction for the proposed SSC consultancy model

- There are multiple benefits to engaging with non-UK organisations interested in replicating the SSC model. The secretariat should do so without charging fees.

Item 3: Discuss option to host member sourcing policies on SSC website

- Member pages on the SSC website should contain links to the sourcing policies on their own website, but do not need to host copies of the document files.

Item 4: Review of Open Seas engagement & direction on how to respond to similar enquiries in future

- Members would like to see direct communication between Open Seas and the MSC, as PUKFI coordinators, to avoid duplicated or confused communications.

- An objection form will be developed to enable stakeholders to make specific objections against specific members, based on the SSC Codes.

Item 5: Update on Risk Assessment Resource Sharing Project

- The document developed by the secretariat is useful, especially for smaller businesses, as it stands. Members can provide feedback on this initial draft of the document for amends or additions.

Item 6: Brexit

- Members are willing to use the collective influence of the SSC to support relevant advocacy positions. The secretariat will share details on ClientEarth positions on the Fisheries Bill for member approval.

Item 7: Plastics - overview of member approaches

- Plastic pollution is one of several wider environmental concerns which currently sit out-of-scope for the SSC, but which directly affect (or are affected by) SSC members.

- The SSC will be an information-sharing platform, allowing members to assess the wider environmental risk landscape and consider collective action.

Purpose of the members' meeting

To decide whether to establish a steering group; to get direction for the proposed SSC consultancy model; to discuss the option to host member sourcing policies on SSC website; to establish process for handling invitations and objections from external stakeholders.

Secretariat update:

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

Discussion and comments

- The secretariat shared the financial report for 2018 and the forecast for 2019.

- The SSC welcomes eight new members since the last meeting: two producers, three foodservice suppliers and three foodservice outlets. This reflects the focus on expansion into foodservice, an agreed priority area.

- Between them, SSC members referred 31 new businesses to the secretariat as part of the membership expansion strategy, using their existing networks. The secretariat has approached 81 businesses in total since the last meeting, meaning a conversion rate of 10%. One member did not renew for 2019, due to internal structural changes to the business; this equates to a loss of 2.7% of membership.

- The secretariat shared a letter to the SSC from the Ocean Disclosure Project (ODP), a transparency tool that invites businesses to fully disclose their source fisheries. The letter notes the SSC's commitments to transparency and invites members to make full disclosures through the ODP or other means. The response to this letter was discussed later in the meeting.

- The SSC is now an 'Affiliate' to FishChoice, a web-based platform that helps suppliers list their products and associated sustainability ratings for buyers. Affiliation will raise the profile of the SSC and its members, should they choose to set up a profile on the platform.

- The secretariat summarised other received communications: an ongoing dialogue with Open Seas (agenda item below), a questionnaire for retailers on the Landing Obligation from the European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA) and a survey from the The Fridtjof Nansen Institute on retailer attitudes to MSC and ASC certification.

- The secretariat gave an update on ClientEarth's sustainable seafood work in Spain. The team in Madrid have been working with other Spanish NGOs to create a list of 'common asks' for industry, which has now been published. They have also established a retailer platform with the intention of realising these asks.

- The secretariat has accepted positions on two new groups: the Common Language Group Steering Group and the Responsible Fishing Scheme Technical Advisory Committee (RFS TAC). Attendance at meetings such as Common Language Group, Aquaculture Common Issues Group and Seafood Ethics Common Language Group continues to be useful for networking, member interaction and staying up to date with relevant developments in the sector and industry priorities. The secretariat also recently presented at the Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions, showcasing the commitments SSC members have made and the success of the precompetitive collaboration model.

- A member asked for clarification regarding crossover with RFS environmental criteria and SSC Codes and Guidance. The group considered whether the SSC would adopt the wider environmental criteria detailed in the RFS (such as ghost gear and litter practices) into its own Guidance and it was suggested that this would be something to review once the RFS v2 has been finalised and established.

- The secretariat reminded members of the social responsibility statements in the Codes of Conduct, for which the one-year implementation period ends on 17th July 2019.

- The proposed amends to the Guidance document discussed in the last meeting have been drafted. The secretariat suggested that should members agree on the creation of a steering group during this meeting, the finalisation of these amends should be deferred to that group, otherwise the draft would be shared with all.

- The secretariat has created some informative videos for members to share internally at their respective businesses, to explain what the Codes are and what they mean for the various relevant departments within their organisations.

- Some members have submitted guest blogs for the SSC website, which highlight some of the organisations they are working with in fulfilling their sustainability commitments, but without collectively endorsing them as the SSC.

Actions:

- Secretariat to share RFS environmental criteria that crossover with SSC Guidance.

Item 1: SSC structure & option for a steering committee

In light of the SSC's growing size and profile, the secretariat asked members to consider whether it would be beneficial to establish a steering committee. Its remit could be to

direct the overall SSC strategy, respond more quickly to requests from external organisations and ensure that the coalition continues to provide value to members.

Discussion and comments

- The secretariat highlighted that there are now 37 SSC members and with membership continuing to expand, it may be useful to allocate a smaller, more agile group of members to help with decision-making. It could also address concerns of increasing membership value or reducing membership burden for long-standing members.

- The group discussed the need for and merits of a steering committee. Members felt that the introduction of a steering group would make decision-making easier as recommendations could be narrowed down before being taken to the wider group for discussion. Members also thought that it could inject energy into SSC activities. Clear direction setting by the steering group would also provide a mandate for the secretariat to proactively pursue opportunities of interest for the coalition.

- The group discussed the process for setting up the committee and how it would function. There was consensus that clear, simple Terms of Reference should be drafted as the first step, in order for members to know what they would be signing up for. The group considered the size and composition of the steering group. Members mentioned the ToR for the Seafood Ethics Action Alliance's steering committee as a good example to use for guidance.

- One member asked about the anticipated time commitments for the steering group and the secretariat suggested three calls before the next members meeting.

Agreed:

- A steering committee should be established which is representative across sectors and business size, using the membership banding structure as a starting point for a matrix. Membership of the steering committee should be voluntary, and limited to fee-paying business members. It should have ten to twelve members, with a quorum of six. In the instance of over-subscription, a ballot should take place to select members.

- The Terms of Reference should include information on the process for review or renewal of steering group members. Individuals unable to attend a meeting should be permitted to send a proxy.

Actions:

- Members to: send example Terms of Reference from relevant groups they are part of to the secretariat.

- Secretariat to: draft ToR; send ToR with an invitation for volunteers to join the steering committee.

Item 2: Agree direction for the proposed SSC consultancy model

Organisations outside the UK are interested in learning more about the SSC model with a view to replicating it in their markets. Should the secretariat continue engaging in dialogue with organisations in other jurisdictions, and on what basis should this engagement occur?

Discussion and comments

- The secretariat gave an update on initiatives being implemented or scoped out in other countries. The Hong Kong Sustainable Seafood Coalition (HKSSC) has launched and is expanding membership. Organisations in Japan and Mexico are also considering pre-competitive collaborative models. Specific feedback from a founder of the HKSSC suggests that such organisations are looking to the UK for advice and support because of the precedent set by the SSC; its success in the UK gives confidence to businesses in other markets. It is apparent that such initiatives have a much greater chance of success when they are able to draw on this precedent.

- Members were interested to hear more about the progress of the HKSSC. The group discussed the advantages of providing advice to markets that are trying to organise their own initiatives, acknowledging that there could be direct benefits to SSC members' international supply chains and to the membership of the SSC itself. It was also seen as a promising endorsement of the SSC model. The secretariat explained that the proposal of charging consultancy fees had been escalated internally at ClientEarth and it was established that the organisation were not willing to accept money for a service that was for the public good. There is not a significant burden to the secretariat in providing advice. Members recognised that as ongoing engagement would have benefits for all parties, consultancy fees would be inappropriate.

- Some concerns were raised over reputational risk to the SSC through direct association with other initiatives and the group discussed the extent to which the SSC should be affiliated with and have oversight of models in other countries. The same concerns apply to use of the coalition name and logo.

Agreed:

- The secretariat should engage in dialogue with other organisations who request advice about replicating the SSC. The name and logo of the SSC should not be used by other initiatives.

- The only financial reimbursement to be received by the secretariat should be to cover travel-related expenses.

Actions:

- Secretariat to: Invite the chairman of the HKSSC to talk at the next members meeting.

- Secretariat to keep in view for the future: opportunities for benchmarking different initiatives to monitor implementation and compliance.

Item 3: Discuss option to host member sourcing policies on SSC website

At an earlier meeting, members floated the idea of using the SSC website as a centralised space to host sourcing policies. Does this have value, and would it be useful for the SSC to take a recording and monitoring role for specific targets? What are members' initial thoughts on the invitation from the Ocean Disclosure Project?

Discussion and comments

- Members recognised the value in ensuring that publicly-facing sourcing policies are readily available through the SSC website. They identified the administrative burden of updating file copies hosted in multiple locations and considered ways to overcome this.

- This topic prompted discussion on the invitation from the Ocean Disclosure Project (ODP) and member disclosure practices. Some members are already signed up to ODP and find it useful, some use different mechanisms to make full disclosure and others make disclosures on a case-by-case basis where relevant for the stakeholder requesting information. There were concerns about the implications for customer reputation, on the methodologies used by some public-facing ratings systems and on the burden for certain business structures (e.g. procurement businesses with regularly-changing product ranges). Members recognised that it would be difficult to take a collective position on the ODP due to variances in business size and operation.

- The group discussed available ratings systems and limiting factors for fully engaging with them. It was suggested that the SSC would be a good platform for facilitating dialogue with these organisations to discuss ways in which to overcome disengagement and give steer on barriers to adoption within disclosure and sourcing decisions.

Agreed:

- Hosting sourcing policy documents on the SSC website is not necessary, but member pages should contain links to each member's own website. Members should also host links to the SSC website when referencing the SSC in their sourcing policies.

- The SSC does not take a uniform position on the Ocean Disclosure Project. Members are confident that they are meeting transparency requirements and are happy to take direct enquiries about their individual disclosure policies.

Actions:

- Secretariat to: invite a representative from MCS to next members meeting; develop a response to ODP invitation in line with sentiments above for member approval.

- Steering Group to develop an internal policy of best practice with regard to disclosure of sources.

Item 4: Review of Open Seas engagement & direction on how to respond to similar enquiries in future

The SSC has received letters from Open Seas citing concerns over compliance with the Codes by members sourcing from some Scottish scallop and Nephrops fisheries. Are members satisfied with how enquiries have been managed so far and are there suggestions for how enquiries or objections should be acted-upon in future?

Discussion and comments

- A member provided an update on the progress made by Project UK Fisheries Improvements (PUFKI) Stage 2, the prospective FIPs for the fisheries in question. The group reflected on the ongoing dialogue with Open Seas and their grievances concerning a lack of transparency in the PUKFI FIP development process and on the perceived barriers to participation. Some members agreed that more information should be shared earlier in the process. Some suggested that the MSC should do more to help stakeholders understand their standard, the FIP development process and the appropriate objections procedure. It was pointed out that the Open Seas objections are well-researched, reasonable and made in good faith. Some members were confident in the pace of PUKFI work and cited the need for certain documents to remain internal until signed off, and that the planned timeframe for FIP establishment was being met. They also pointed to the limited capacity for FisheryProgress.org to host detailed documents whilst still at 'prospective FIP' status. Open Seas have expressed a desire for constructive engagement and members felt that their inclusion was preferable to exclusion, particularly with regard to PUKFI Stage 2. Members recognised that their inclusion is not a decision for SSC.

- The group examined the process for dealing with this particular grievance, recognising the time-intensity of gathering information from various members and sources. Members agreed that in scenarios where members hold differing opinions, it is an unreasonable burden on the secretariat to work towards a common position. It was also noted that such challenges are expected to increase in regularity, with a recent campaign on fishmeal cited as an example. To manage this, members proposed the development of a more standardised strategy for dealing with similar enquiries in future that will give the secretariat a process to follow.

Agreed:

- Direct communication between Open Seas and the MSC, as PUKFI coordinators, is preferable to piecemeal approach with the SSC secretariat and its members.

- An objection form should be developed to enable stakeholders to make specific objections, based on the SSC Codes, against a specific member. Submission of this form will prompt an investigation into that specific member.

Actions:

- Steering group to: develop objection process.

Item 5: Update on Risk Assessment Resource Sharing Project

Five SSC members have shared their risk assessment information gathering templates, and the secretariat has compiled the data points collected by members into an advisory document for member use. Is this useful in its current form and what should the next steps be?

Discussion and comments

- The group reflected that the document provides information on what information members are gathering from their suppliers, but not how they are using it. It was agreed that consolidating the various data points is valuable, particularly for new members. Members suggested that each business has a different appetite for risk and that interpretation of the data should be at the discretion of each business.

- Members felt that social responsibility risk assessments are too complex to be included in the environmental risk assessment. Others felt that that this issue should be dealt with separately and that there are other ethics-focussed resources towards which interested members can be directed.

Agreed:

- Pending some minor tweaks, members are happy with the tool and its intended purpose, which is to give members a basic resource to use in-house to assist with their risk assessment information gathering.

- The interpretation of the results of these assessments will be left for individual businesses to determine.

Action:

- Members to provide feedback on document, including amends or additions. This can include sharing their own template for incorporation by the secretariat.

- One member to draw on SEA Alliance knowledge to share list of resources for social risk assessments with secretariat.

- Secretariat to update and share document, and to split-out social responsibility criteria.

Item 6: Brexit - overview of member approaches

Members were invited to share information on their preparations for EU-Exit, then scheduled for 29th March, to consider the implications of Brexit for seafood supply chains and responsible sourcing commitments, and to explore options for indicating collective coalition support for advocacy positions.

Discussion and comments

- The secretariat explained that some target businesses have identified Brexit as a focus of time and resource, meaning that responsible sourcing is a lower business priority. Members expect that the impact of Brexit on product prices will contribute to this effect. Members used the opportunity to discuss changes in catch certificate management processes for imports and exports.

- The group discussed the Fisheries Bill, and positions which they would be willing to support as the SSC. Members expressed an interest in ensuring that the new fishery management regime would be sufficiently precautionary to reduce fishery risk ratings. The secretariat outlined ClientEarth's advocacy positions, namely the asks for a commitment that fishing limits cannot be set above MSY and for robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

- Members explored other advocacy positions they would be interested in supporting, such as improving fully documented fisheries and securing remote VMS for the UK and neighbouring EU states. It was recognised that the greater the complexity of the position, the more likely that members' opinions would differ. Some members stressed that engagement in such advocacy work should be at the high-level of supporting ClientEarth advocacy, rather than developing positions independently as the SSC.

Agreed:

- Members present at the meeting agreed with the ClientEarth advocacy positions identified above, and would be willing show support for them by using the name of the SSC in relevant output.

Actions:

- Secretariat to present members with a range of advocacy positions to gauge support. Members to respond to indicate willingness to support positions.

Item 7: Plastics - overview of member approaches

Members were invited to reflect on the issues of marine plastic pollution, to share their varying strategies for combating these issues, and to introduce the initiatives and partnerships they have adopted in this space.

Discussion and comments

- A member provided an overview of the intersection between seafood supply chains and plastic risks. This includes the health implications of microplastics entering food chains, operational plastic use in seafood processing and packaging, fishing-for-

litter initiatives and macro-plastic pollution in the form of ghost gear from fisheries and aquaculture.

- Members discussed impactful initiatives that they had come across. These included the Global Ghost Gear Initiative (GGGI) and Fishing For Litter. It was noted that the fishing industry is well positioned for collection of data on plastic pollution and other information through these programs.

- Suggestions were made on how plastic could be incorporated into the previously-discussed risk assessment tool. A member pointed out that if the SSC were to consider plastic in the risk assessment then the same should apply to other environmental issues affecting seafood supply chains, such as climate change and ocean acidification. Members recognised that SSC meetings are an opportunity for information sharing and learning on such issues.

Agreed:

- Through the SSC, members can assess general risk landscape for environmental issues and consider whether and how to act as individual businesses or a coalition.

Action:

- Secretariat to: invite Seafish expert to present on wider environmental concerns for the seafood industry; include updates on plastic in coalition emails, where relevant to members' areas of influence.

AOB

- A member explained that they had been approached by Cargill to scope appetite for a seafood supply chain workshop on aquaculture feed and novel ingredients. The workshop would look for consensus on whether these ingredients are viable at scale. They'd like to gather perspectives from the customer end of the supply chain.

- Members thought that this would be a useful exercise for knowledge exchange between different parts of the supply chain and that keeping up to date with the latest developments in the animal nutrition and feed sector is helpful, particularly for retailers who have to face questions from consumers.

Agreed:

- Positive interest to be fed back to Cargill and members to await information on any further engagement.