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IFFO responds to conflict-of-interest claims regarding sustainability initiatives



Mark Godfrey

(/author/mark-godfrey) published in Environment & Sustainability (/news/environment-sustainability)



Fishmeal processing in West Africa | Photo courtesy of Feedback EU

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IFFO has responded to a report accusing the organization as being rife with conflicts of interest.

The report by environment-focused news website DeSmog, [“Revealed: Industry-led West Africa Fishery Protection Measures Marred By ‘Massive Conflicts of Interest’](https://www.desmog.com/2024/07/04/revealed-industry-led-west-africa-fishery-protection-measures-marred-by-massive-conflicts-of-interest/) (<https://www.desmog.com/2024/07/04/revealed-industry-led-west-africa-fishery-protection-measures-marred-by-massive-conflicts-of-interest/>),” accused IFFO’s sustainability initiatives, including the Global Roundtable on Marine Ingredients and the MarinTrust certification program – ostensibly independent but founded by IFFO in 2009 – as protecting industry interests over local communities in West Africa, where MarinTrust and IFFO members have established [a fishery improvement project in Mauritanian waters](https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/supply-trade/marintrust-improver-programme-accepts-the-first-two-sites-from-fips-in-asia-and-africa) (<https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/supply-trade/marintrust-improver-programme-accepts-the-first-two-sites-from-fips-in-asia-and-africa>) that has been [criticized as not achieving significant progress](https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/environment-sustainability/coalition-claims-mauritania-fip-progress-reports-are-misleading) (<https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/environment-sustainability/coalition-claims-mauritania-fip-progress-reports-are-misleading>).

DeSmog claimed MarinTrust’s governing structure is fully controlled by IFFO members and that two organizations share the same headquarters in London, U.K.

University of Arizona Professor Kevin Fitzsimmons, [a fisheries and aquaculture expert](https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/aquaculture/op-ed-iffo-is-wrong-on-alternative-feeds) (<https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/aquaculture/op-ed-iffo-is-wrong-on-alternative-feeds>), likened the situation to “the fox guarding the hen house.”

“Having so many people from an industry trade association basically being the same people who are running a certification organization makes no sense to me at all,” Fitzsimmons told DeSmog. “They’re not going to hold their own trade group’s feet to the fire. If anybody’s going to take these certifications at face value, they need to open up and be more independent.”

DeSmog called out a lack of civil society representation on the standards and technical committee governing the MarinTrust’s certification standard.

Executives from three leading fishmeal processors – BioMar, Cargill, and Skretting – sit on the boards of all three initiatives, explained De Smog, and all three have plans to increase operations in West Africa. Industry representatives count for 83 percent of representatives on its various executive bodies, compared to a 33 percent industry representation on the executive bodies of the Aquaculture Stewardship Council, another certification body, DeSmog noted. Industry representatives count for 11 percent of the representation on the Marine Stewardship Council, according to DeSmog.

IFFO Director-General Petter M. Johannessen said his organization represents companies responsible for 55 percent of the marine ingredients production globally and is “supportive of all legislative efforts aimed at combating IUU fishing, prioritizing fish for direct human consumption, and developing adequate infrastructure to valorize fish byproducts,” Johannessen told SeafoodSource.

“IFFO encourages its members to go well beyond compliance with legal requirements: adhering to voluntary certification standards is critical to demonstrate responsible sourcing and production. Voluntary schemes are not an either-or approach: clearly a market-driven initiative, exerting market pressure, they complement regulatory frameworks and can help hold businesses accountable through safeguarding principles set by the International Organisation for Standardisation,” Johannessen told SeafoodSource. “They need to be credible from both an industry and a civil society perspective. This is ensured through public consultations and well-established governance mechanisms.”

Two NGOs, the World Wildlife Fund (UK) and the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership, are represented on the MarinTrust’s executive committees that set and govern its certification standards.



In a statement, MarinTrust said it is an industry-led initiative “whose credibility comes from its deep knowledge of the marine ingredients sector: the industry, the certification sector, and the NGO landscape are represented in its governance.”

“Furthermore, public consultations are held to ensure stakeholders’ feedback is listened to,” it said. “MarinTrust’s model lies on setting the standard, not granting certificates – this is undertaken by an independent third-party certification body. MarinTrust’s unit of certification is the facility, NOT the company / brand nor the fishery. MarinTrust provides assurances that certified marine ingredients are responsibly sourced and produced, not that they are sustainable. MarinTrust is a member of ISEAL and complies with its codes of good practice. A FIP is a long-term multistakeholder initiative with a structured pathway.”

Árni M. Mathiesen, the independent chair of the Global Roundtable on Marine Ingredients, also took issue with the DeSmog report.

“The Global Roundtable on Marine Ingredients was created as a single point of contact for stakeholders producing, using marine ingredients or setting standards for their responsible sourcing and use, with a willingness to drive positive changes in the sector through market pressure, to guide its action,” he said. “This platform does not set any sustainability criteria, but rather relies on scientific data and third-party audits (such as Partner Africa’s human rights impact assessment, which we commissioned in 2022). It recognizes fishery improvement projects as effective initiatives to raise awareness on existing challenges and bring together local and international stakeholders. We believe that market pressure can create an enabling environment in which regulators feel confident to act. We praise the Mauritanian government for implementing stricter

regulations on fishmeal production back in 2023. The Global Roundtable co-organized a workshop with FAO in Ghana, gathering 50 representatives of sub-Saharan communities, in December 2023. A [joint statement \(https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Gwdcf_mLxZsxHe5ZoMQ-L-ORhbBO4qbr/view\)](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Gwdcf_mLxZsxHe5ZoMQ-L-ORhbBO4qbr/view), insisted on the need for the marine ingredients sector to be regulated, laws to be enforced, and only raw materials with no market for direct human consumption to be processed into fishmeal. The Global Roundtable publishes annual reports and reports on all its activities via its website.”

Dyhia Belhabib, fisheries program manager at the non-profit EcoTrust Canada, called MarinTrust’s structures “highly flawed.”

“It does not include any idea of the social perspective, nor any idea of true sustainability and its broader meaning,” Belhabib told DeSmog. “I support industry involvement in certification and sustainability programs, but you have to ensure an arm’s length approach. tThis is clearly built by the industry for the industry. If you include current industry members served by the scheme, that is a massive conflict of interest – it should not be allowed.”

Global Seafood Alliance Technical and Projects Advisor Daniel Lee, who sits on MarinTrust’s governing body and Improver Program application committees, disputed the assertion MarinTrust could be tainted by conflict of interest.

“MarinTrust is a standard-setting body, not a certification body, and as such MarinTrust doesn’t certify anything. This separation of roles is fundamental in third-party certification schemes – it amounts to ‘separation of church and state,’” he said.

Harouna Ismail Lebaye, the president of the FLPA Nouadhibou artisanal fishers group in Mauritania, called for artisanal fishers to have representation in the IFFO-related organizations overseeing sustainability initiatives in West Africa.

“It is not possible to defend the wolf and the lamb at the same time. That is the case of artisanal and industrial fishing,” Lebaye said.

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