

Omega keeps sustainability certification despite flagrant harvest violation

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Inaction by Marine Stewardship Council casts doubt on entire certification program

Late last week, the Marine Stewardship Council announced its decision that Omega Protein will keep its sustainability certification despite willfully and intentionally violating a menhaden harvest cap regulation in the Chesapeake Bay by 30 percent last year. Omega's flagrant harvest violation sparked widespread protests among anglers and decision-makers, culminating with the Trump Administration's announced intention to issue a moratorium on the company's operations unless it came into compliance with the management plan established by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC).

"There has always been a great deal of suspicion on sustainability certifications from the Marine Stewardship Council due to the fact that in the past the Council has been funded in part from royalties paid by seafood processors using the MSC ecolabel," said Ted Venker, conservation director for Coastal Conservation Association (CCA). "Conservationists have learned to view the entire certification process as the fox guarding the henhouse, and the Council's decision this week to overlook a flagrant and major fishing violation seems to confirm those suspicions."

In 2011, the science journal NATURE published a sharp critique of the MSC process, pointing out that after the signing of a contract between the MSC and Wal-Mart, the number of certified seafood products mysteriously skyrocketed.

"For decades, the industrial harvest of menhaden in the Chesapeake Bay has been a top concern to recreational anglers in the region" said David Sikorski, executive director of CCA Maryland. "While coast-wide stock assessments do not directly analyze the local impact, it's clear to most that intense removals of a primary forage fish from a vital nursery area impacts the health and sustainability of numerous species, most notably the striped bass."

Using spotter planes and a purse seine fleet to encircle and remove entire schools of menhaden, Omega catches millions of pounds every year, and reduces them to fish oil pills and feed for aquaculture operations, among other things. Anglers in the region have long believed the company's relentless pressure on menhaden in the Chesapeake Bay has caused localized depletions of forage, leading to an increase in diseased, stressed and skinny fish in the Bay. Moreover, on-the-water conflicts between this industrialized operation and sport anglers appears to be growing.

A [coalition of angling, tackle and boating organizations](#) opposed Omega's certification process due to a dearth of information on the impacts of the company's intense harvest practices, including localized depletions, bycatch of other species and the overall role of menhaden in the ecosystem. The company was certified as a sustainable fishery by the Marine Stewardship Council in spite of the fact that menhaden stocks are less than half of what they would be without industrial harvest, which likely suppresses the striped bass stocks on the East Coast by about 30 percent. Striped bass are the single most sought after and valuable marine recreational fishery in the country. Just weeks after receiving the certification, Omega announced it was ignoring a harvest cap on menhaden in the Chesapeake Bay that was set by a necessary and legitimate management action of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.

"Certifying a company that removes hundreds of millions of pounds of a critical forage fish

“Certifying a company that removes hundreds of millions of pounds of a critical storage item every year in the first place is in itself mind boggling, but allowing that same company to just disregard a critical management action and keep that certification is absurd,” said Venker.

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