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Recreational fishing groups formally object to menhaden's MSC nod

Chris Chase published in [Environment & Sustainability](#)

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Three different recreational fishing groups filed a formal objection against the Marine Stewardship Council certifying Omega Protein and the Atlantic menhaden fishery.

The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, American Sportfishing Association, and the Coastal Conservation Association all signed onto the objection filed with the MSC. SAI Global, one of the leading certification bodies for the MSC, [recently recommended that the fishery be certified](#) after an extensive review of the fishery.

"This certification would put a blue ribbon on the practice of robbing sportfish of their forage base, even as striped bass numbers decline in the Atlantic," Whit Fosburgh, president and CEO of the TRCP, said in a release. "We felt it was important to put pressure on MSC, in every venue possible, not to do this. It is irresponsible to call Omega's operation sustainable when it affects striped bass numbers and the recreational fishing economy."

The recreational and conservation groups object to the certification, asserting that the menhaden fishery reduces menhaden stocks and "suppresses the striped bass stocks on the East Coast by about 30 percent."

"The MSC certification undermines 10 years of work by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission to establish ecosystem reference points for Atlantic menhaden, a process expected to be concluded in the next year," Mike Leonard, vice president of government affairs for the American Sportfishing Association, said. "For sportfishing businesses on the East Coast, the stakes are very high going into the striped bass season. Menhaden are an important food source for striped bass, and the latest striped bass stock assessment shows a continued decline in spawning stock biomass. This is the worst possible time for MSC to make a misstep like this."

Omega Protein anticipated the opposition by the organizations, and what the argument would be. Currently, the impact of the menhaden stock on other stocks is not considered, using single-species reference points rather than ecological reference points (ERPs), something that the environmental groups object to.

However, Omega Protein pointed out in a release that the ASMFC has said that current interim ERPs "do not represent the best available science."



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“Omega Protein has long supported the development of ERPs by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) to help fisheries managers better account for the role of Atlantic menhaden in the ecosystem,” wrote the company. “In the meantime, it makes no sense to deny the fishery MSC certification when the best available science says it is being managed successfully and sustainably.”

Current science, according to the SAI Global review of the fishery, indicates that it is being fished at sustainable levels. According to the ASMFC, Atlantic menhaden hasn’t been overfished since the 1960s, and even raised the quota for the fish in 2015, 2016, and 2017.

“NOAA attorney Chip Lynch had previously stated at the ASMFC’s August 2018 meeting that finding a healthy fishery out of compliance would have been unprecedented,” wrote Omega Protein. “As SAI Global wrote in its final report recommending the fishery for certification, ‘it is a fact that the latest estimates for menhaden biomass and fishing mortality are well above and well below single species threshold levels, respectively.’”

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