



From boat to throat

Better tracking could curtail illegal, unregulated, unreported fishing

By Christine Blank

The topic of illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing (IUU) has been a thorn in the side of the global fishing industry for decades. As fisheries and companies all across the supply chain move toward addressing sustainability, they recognize the importance of saving species that were once — and, in some cases, still are — victims of nefarious dealers. Not too long ago, Chilean sea bass was the top focus of conservation efforts and a crackdown on poaching by U.S. authorities. Most buyers and industry groups are doing everything they can to preserve the species. Lately, the poster child for IUU fishing has been bluefin tuna, which has become the focus of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activist groups worldwide.

IUU fishing is equally important to U.S. processors and importers. No one in the industry wants to support illegal trade, which takes business away from legitimate harvesters and suppliers. The U.S. industry has a vested interest in the viability of overseas fisheries, since more than 85 percent of the U.S. seafood supply is now imported.

To that end, U.S. fisheries officials are working on solutions to end IUU fishing, after a contentious report to Congress this year listed six countries that have engaged in the practice. In addition, the

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is drafting regulations — with the industry's input — that will require certification and traceability to address IUU fishing and bycatch of protected marine resources such as turtles.

Representatives from the six countries — China, France, Italy, Libya, Panama and Tunisia — initially were upset and surprised that they were named in the report.

"There were a range of reactions; none were happy with it," says Rebecca Lent, Ph.D., director of NOAA's Office of International Affairs.

NOAA identified fishing vessels from those six countries that had engaged in IUU fishing in 2007 and 2008. The boats were either using illegal fishing gear, were fishing during closed seasons or did not comply with reporting requirements. NOAA gathered the information and presented it to the countries in advance of the report to Congress. Some countries responded with written information and explained how they were finding solutions to the problems, and some countries did not respond at all, says Lent.

IUU bad for business, future supply

"While 'no one likes to be the focus of something that would be undesirable,'" says Mike Della Grotta, an importer and founder of Kendall Seafood in East Greenwich, R.I., the IUU report "puts pressure on them to do things in a bit of a different way."

"NOAA has done a superb job of regulating what is coming in and putting pressure on other areas of the world," adds Della Grotta. "Today, everybody's role is to stop illegal fishing. If you overfish something, you're not going to have a job in three to five years."

Manish Kumar, CEO of the Fishin' Co. in Pittsburgh, which imports seafood from about 10 different countries, agrees with Della Grotta.

"It is even more critical today to know who it is [coming from] and where it is caught, down the chain," says Kumar. Instead of angering officials in China, he adds, NOAA's IUU efforts "should foster better trade relations" between countries.

NOAA is seeking input on proposed certification and traceability regulations.

"[IUU fishing] is theft, and it is the enforcement on both sides that will make this a success," says Kumar.

At the same time, Della Grotta does not believe IUU fishing of Chilean sea bass is that big of a problem anymore.

"For Chilean sea bass, are there rogue boats fishing? Probably not. Everyone is washing boats now," he says. Kendall Seafood imports Chilean sea bass from the South Georgia Islands, certified as sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council. "There is a very healthy population of Chilean sea bass now," adds Della Grotta.

The prized Antarctic whitefish, also known as Patagonian toothfish, had become very popular in U.S. restaurants and other locations because of its moist texture and rich flavor. However, the U.S. government found that more than 10,000 metric tons of Chilean sea bass were illegally landed from 2002 to 2003. As a result, NOAA came down hard on seafood dealers and fishermen it found to be trading in illegally harvested seafood, from Chilean sea bass to spiny lobster tails.

In addition to the government crackdown, U.S. importers in recent years have become increasingly committed to conserving overfished species such as Chilean sea bass. Importers say they want the fish to be around for generations to come.

"From a business standpoint, it would be detrimental if a species was overfished," says Della Grotta.

However, NOAA has found that IUU fishing is prevalent and costs the global fishing industry \$9 billion annually. Bluefin tuna stocks, in particular, are being harmed by IUU vessels, says NOAA.

"Failure to report catch and effort data to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) hampers the ability of that regional fishery management organization to conduct vital stock assessments to manage and rebuild stocks," NOAA officials said in a recent statement.

And, among the IUU problems that Greenpeace USA