



Buyers struggling to find pole-and-line tuna sources

While commitments to source pole-and-line tuna pleased some NGOs, the lack of supply has put increasing pressure on retailers and suppliers.

Dominic Welling

Over the past few years, the resurgence of pole-and-line caught tuna as an international commodity has become an "extremely sensitive" subject between retailers, importers and green campaigners as the sides argue the merits – both commercial and ecological – of the fishing practice.

"There are many arguments, a lot of different spins on it and a lot of science going into it," one UK importer told **IntraFish**.

A few years ago, under pressure from environmental group Greenpeace, most major UK retailers and brands committed to selling only pole-and-line caught tuna in their products by 2020. Many have already implemented the changes, with retailers such as Sainsbury's, Tesco, Marks & Spencer and Waitrose already stocking only tuna caught by pole and line on their shelves.

Princes and Asda, meanwhile, have committed to removing tuna caught using fish aggregating devices (FADs) in combination with purse seine nets from their supply chains by 2014.

The lure of pole-and-line caught tuna from the green groups' perspective is that it is a much more environmentally sound method of tuna fishing than the alternatives of purse seine fishing with fish aggregating devices (FADs), the use of long lines, or trawling, simply because it significantly reduces the amount of bycatch.

While the steady retail commitments to pole-and-line tuna in the UK pleases Greenpeace and other environmental groups, there is a now huge burden on the retailers and importers on where to source the tuna to meet these commitments.

"It's a very political discussion, a lot of it is driven by the environmental groups and the pressure they bring to bear on retailers," the importer said.

Current figures show pole-and-line tuna only accounts for around 10 percent of the entire global catch of tuna, which itself is around 4 million metric tons per year.

"There is not a grand swell of consumer lust and demand for pole-and-line, but there is a grand swell of demand to meet Greenpeace commitments," another importer told **IntraFish**.

Commercially, this relatively new development inevitably results in a squeeze on prices, the importer said.

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"All of a sudden the demand has gone through the roof but the supply is static on pole-and-line," he said. "There are not that many pole-and-line fisheries around the place."

Although pole-and-line tuna commands a premium as a raw material, this does not necessarily translate through to the consumer.

In fact, it is the retailer who sees a squeeze on its margins ultimately losing out, the importer said.

Pole-and-line markets

While pole-and-line caught tuna is now prevalent in the UK markets – as well as in other countries in northern Europe such as Holland, Scandinavia and Germany – in countries such as the United States, Spain, France and Italy, it is practically "non-existent."

Mainly because the US is a much more price sensitive market, and there has not been "quite the same sensationalism that there is over in the UK," the importer said.

However, this might not be such a bad thing, while the pole-and-line production can only supply a minimum level of global demand, "it is enough certainly to supply all of the UK, all Holland and Scandinavia for example, easily."

This supply is becoming harder to find for some UK retailers who were slightly slower at signing up to Greenpeace commitments, and they have pledged to offer FAD-free tuna products as an alternative.

"The first round of retailers to sign up in the UK were able to meet that commitment," said Mike Crispino, vice president of communications and outreach for the International Seafood Sustainability Foundation (ISSF).

"But when more retailers wanted to make the commitment and started to look into it, and found they weren't able to find all of that pole-and-line caught tuna, or at least a consistent, steady supply of it to meet their demands, they started to have to look to other things such as FAD-free tuna, because they could not use just pole-and-line alone," he said.

World Wildlife Fund

Going forward, the size of the catch from pole-and-line will never likely to be much bigger than its current 10 percent of the catch, said Bill Fox, vice president of fisheries at the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

However, from the WWF's perspective the issue is not about one type of fishing gaining preference over another, but more the ecological issues at play.

"WWF doesn't favor one gear or another gear," Fox said. "No fishing is completely clean, but the important thing is to manage fisheries sustainably and reduce bycatch and the collateral ecological effects as much as possible, rather than say pick this or that [type of fishing]," he said.

As a result the WWF only supports fisheries that are certified by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), which offers "the only credible sustainable fish," Fox said.

There are currently only two pole and line fisheries that are MSC certified. There is one in the Maldives, which accounts for around 25 percent of the whole global pole-and-line production and then there is a very small fishery off the tip of California, which is a mere "drop in the bucket," Fox said.

However the WWF is concerned because it believes the pole-and-line issue has not been properly explained to the public from an ecological perspective, because it has to use live bait in order to work.

These bait fish populations, smaller fish such as sardines, are crucially important to ecosystems, Fox said.

"Birds, mammals, other fish, people in those regions rely on these populations for direct consumption," he said. "But it is being fished without any proper data collection or management, and we feel that in itself counts as a bycatch issue of the fishery."

As a result, Fox wants to see more active management of the bait fish part of the fishery, and expected there to be more pressure than there is "due to the marketing issues principally in the UK and Europe."

The ISSF is also of the view that while pole-and-line fisheries are "part of the sustainability story" for tuna, they are not "the silver bullet."

"We focus on the overall issues of sustainability and the gear of catch is really only one of these," said Crispino. "For example, there need to be bait fish management systems in place to ensure that populations of sardines for example are not being over fished just to fish for tuna, and leaving local fishermen without that population to fish."

Outlook

Most parties agree however that pole-and-line fishing is unlikely to grow any bigger than it is already in terms of a wider international commodity.

"It is certainly viable in the numbers that are caught now, but you can't really expect a large increase, certainly not anytime in the near future," said Crispino.

For one thing, these fisheries are a lot more labor intensive, he said, and it is a lot more difficult to catch a lot of fish with a smaller pole-and-line vessel than with a purse seine vessel.

"So to compensate for that kind of demand and volume, it would be a lot harder to expand pole-and-line fisheries," he said.

Furthermore, as a result of the expense associated with pole-and-line fishing and the labor issues that go with it,

one UK importer sees the future of the industry focusing on FAD-free purse seine fishing instead.

"Originally the Greenpeace issue was all about bycatch on FADs, when you fish on these you catch turtle and sharks, etc., but by redesigning FADs you can reduce that by catch get them more focused on tuna.

"I think the industry will look to reduce the bycatch by use of better designed FADs and better nets, better escapes in nets, and reduce the bycatch that way," he said.

Even so, the tuna fishery is not known for being a big bycatch industry anyway relatively, the importer said.

"But we can talk about the science all day," he said. "The fact is the Greenpeace band wagon is rolling and the science has been left behind now so we need to meet the commitments we've given."
