

PAPER No. 7: Seafood Labelling

Executive Summary

The NTSC actively seeks mandatory labelling of seafood to ensure the consumer is able to make informed choices about their seafood. This includes supporting the mandatory labelling of seafood by country of origin and the differentiation between wild caught and farmed produce to the end user.

NTSC Policy Position:

- The primary reason for the accurate labelling of seafood is to allow the consumer to make an informed choice about the seafood they purchase.
- The omission of comprehensive labelling, for example country of origin for seafood to the consumer is misleading.
- Consumers are willing to pay more for quality Australian seafood.
- The general perception in the Australian community is that the seafood they buy is local.
- The NTSC believes cheap imports are damaging the high quality reputation of Australian seafood.
- Australian seafood is an important asset to the tourism industry.
- Accurate country of origin labelling is required to help the consumer identify seafood from;
 - Sustainably managed and regulated wild harvest fisheries and/or aquaculture operations; and
 - Fisheries and aquaculture operations with well regulated fish handling and hygiene procedures.
- Mandatory labelling is required because;
 - The majority of consumers expects and believes the seafood they buy is produced locally;
 - Currently there is no financial incentives for retail outlets to inform the public who already pay for what they perceive is local seafood; and
 - Cost savings from the use of cheaper imported products may not be passed on to the consumer.
- The Australian Seafood industry cannot price compete against cheap imports from fisheries overseas that operate without essential environmental and food safety regulations.
- The NTSC supports informing consumers as to whether seafood is wild caught or farmed.

Issues

Since June 2006 it has been a legal requirement that seafood sold to the Australian public must be clearly labelled with its Country of Origin. These regulations were introduced by the Federal Government to ensure the Australian consumer be accurately informed about the origin of their seafood.

Unfortunately this requirement is only binding on retailers of fresh seafood. Venues selling fish for immediate consumption including restaurants, clubs, bars, and even fish and chip shops are exempt from this labelling requirement.

There has been considerable community interest in the management of fisheries for a period of over fifteen years. This focus has expanded from concerns about specific fish species to broader issues regarding the use and quality of the marine environment. This has seen considerable changes to the way Australia manages its commercial fisheries. Whilst this has undoubtedly improved our commercial fisheries sustainability the industry has not seen any benefits in the market place from this investment. The management of Australian fisheries is well recognised as world leading. Many countries which are a major source of imported seafood are still failing to implement basic fisheries regulations in relation to sustainability.

The importance of food safety has become well understood. Australian wild catch operations and aquaculture ventures are heavily regulated and independently audited to ensure the safety of Australian Seafood.

Consumers are well aware of the health benefits from consuming seafood and understand that the oceans surrounding Australia are some of the cleanest in the world. The quality of our seafood is well accepted by the consumer and demand for seafood is known to be rising. Consumers can also be assured that Australian seafood either farmed or wild caught is sustainable.

Seafood is a much loved product in Australia and part of the Northern Territory seafood experience is undoubtedly our iconic seafood species such as barramundi and mud crab. Popular tourist destinations such as Darwin and Cairns have restaurants relying heavily on the lure of seafood. In our major cities seafood restaurants are still coveted by those seeking a fine dining experience.

What is common amongst all the consumers at these venues is that they perceive their seafood to be local or at least produced in Australia. The omission of country of origin labelling on menus has led to consumers being misled believing the seafood they purchase to be locally produced. Eating local product is a key aspect of the whole seafood experience and tourism industry.

We see demand for seafood rising yet the Australian industry is in decline. The NTSC believes consumers want Australian Seafood, they want seafood from sustainable and well managed fisheries and farms, and they want seafood from Australia where they know food safety is well regulated. Most of all consumers deserve to be informed about the origin of their seafood so they can make informed decision about what they eat.

Rationale

The Australian seafood consumer demands seafood from sustainable fisheries and farms. There is a strong community perception that seafood sold in Australian venues for immediate consumption is sourced locally. There is an urgent need for mandatory comprehensive labelling to ensure the consumer is not misled.