

Greenpeace scolds Sobeys over seafood sales

By BRUCE ERSKINE Business Reporter



Greenpeace members demonstrated at the Sobeys on Queen Street in Halifax in 2010 to protest the chain selling species of fish the group says are threatened. (CHRISTIAN LAFORCE / Staff)

Sobeys sells more red-listed, or harmfully fished or farmed, seafood species than any other major Canadian food retailer, says Greenpeace Canada.

Sobeys' focus on fisheries engagement rather than removing species of concern from sale can help encourage change on the water, but the "company needs to act faster to discontinue products that do not have existing, credible, measurable improvement projects in place," the Toronto-based environmental group said Thursday in a news release.

Species are red-listed by Greenpeace if the fishery or production methods negatively affect the fish or other marine species, lead to ecosystem alterations, have social implications or are poorly managed or corrupt.

Red-listed species Sobeys sells include: farmed Atlantic salmon, Atlantic sea scallops, Atlantic cod, Atlantic halibut, haddock, yellowfin tuna and Chilean sea bass, Greenpeace said.

David Smith, Sobeys' vice-president of sustainability, said the company disagrees with Greenpeace.

"It's their list," he said in an interview.

Smith said many of the species on the Greenpeace list are considered to be in good shape by authorities, including Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

“Rather than delist and stop selling things as Greenpeace wants, our approach is to seek to improve production processes,” he said. “We don’t only listen to them.”

Smith said Sobeys has no plans to remove open-pen farmed salmon from its shelves, as has been done by Overwaitea Food Group of British Columbia, the first Canadian grocer to achieve the environmental group’s green rating for seafood sustainability, with a score of 72 this year.

“We don’t follow the herd,” Smith said.

The jury is still out on the impact of open-pen salmon farming, he said.

“There’s lots of science on both sides.”

Overwaitea attained the green ranking in part for its decision to remove open-pen farmed salmon from its stores, Greenpeace said.

“We commend this latest step by OFG to source seafood products that are more compatible with healthy oceans,” Sarah King, Greenpeace’s ocean campaign co-ordinator, said in a news release.

“It’s time the federal government and the salmon farming industry start getting the message that this product doesn’t fit in with the Canadian retail market’s growing sustainable seafood movement.”

Greenpeace has red-listed open-pen farmed salmon because of its negative impact on coastal ecosystems.

Overwaitea is the first large Canadian food retailer, and the third in North America, to stop selling open-pen farmed salmon, which has come under fire in Nova Scotia.

New Brunswick-based Cooke Aquaculture, which recently had to kill several hundred thousand farmed salmon near Shelburne Harbour infected with infectious salmon anemia, has expansion plans in Nova Scotia.

But opponents of that expansion, which is being supported by \$25 million in government loans, say large-scale, open-pen aquaculture pollutes the marine environment and threatens traditional fisheries, including Nova Scotia’s lucrative lobster fishery.

Overwaitea introduced land-based closed-containment farmed salmon, which the Nova Scotia government says isn’t commercially viable, as a more sustainable alternative to open-pen farmed salmon in 2010.

With a score of 68, Loblaw finished second in this year’s Greenpeace ranking of supermarket seafood sustainability. Safeway, which has stopped buying open-pen farmed salmon from Chile, where Cooke has operations that have been hit by infectious salmon anemia, are considering closed-system alternatives to open-pen aquaculture.

Loblaw dropped from last year's first place ranking, while Safeway maintained its third place spot with a score of 63.

Metro finished fourth with a score of 56, Walmart was fifth with a score of 55, Sobeys and Federated Co-operative Ltd. tied for sixth with scores of 54 and Costco was last with a failing grade of 43.

Sobeys' failure to remove or replace red-listed seafood was a key factor in the grocery chain's drop from last year's fourth place ranking, said Susanna Fuller of the Ecology Action Centre.

Consumers continue to see Greenpeace red-listed species in Sobeys' stores and the grocer hasn't "committed to good in-store labelling," she said Thursday. "That makes it difficult, as a consumer, to make informed choices."

However, Fuller commended Sobeys' This Fish program, which allows consumers to trace seafood directly back to the vessel on which it was caught.

Greenpeace said most grocery chains continue to identify species of concern and look for better options, but high volume sales of farmed salmon remains an issue.