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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Antarctic Conservationists Troubled by Sustainability Label for Toothfish

WASHINGTON, DC – The Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC) and the majority of its thirty member organizations strongly criticized the decision to award the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) ecolabel to the exploratory Antarctic toothfish fishery in Antarctica's Ross Sea.

The decision follows a ruling by the MSC's Independent Adjudicator on ASOC's objection to the recommendation to certify the fishery by Moody Marine Limited, the certifying body. Despite the Adjudicator's October decision upholding a number of critical points in the ASOC objection, he allowed Moody Marine the ultimate authority to review those points and make the final decision about certification.¹

"This is the culmination of a badly flawed process that exposes why the MSC blue label is completely inappropriate in this case," said Jim Barnes, ASOC Executive Director. Although there is no further appeal process under the MSC's rules, we call on the MSC's governing board to undertake an immediate independent review of the matter and to defer its certification decision while that takes place.

Concerns about the fishery include:

- Little is known about the life history of Antarctic toothfish, including the specific location of spawning sites, intervals between spawning, depth of spawning and the habitat of early life stages.
- The species is long-lived and therefore vulnerable to overfishing, with cold water temperatures making it particularly susceptible to stock collapse. New data, disclosed after the MSC certification process began, led scientists to nearly double the estimated age of reproductive maturity from 8 and 10 years to 13 and 17 years for males and female fish, respectively.
- There has never been a full assessment of the entire fishery, and the tagging program is insufficient to monitor population changes.

¹ (1) Specific measures to evaluate the effectiveness of the harvest strategy have not been identified and thus awarding a theoretically 'perfect' score of 100 can't be supported;

(2) Interactions between the NZ, UK and other CCAMLR-related management systems and how they operate in practice have not been shown. The response by the certification body is inadequate. It consists of little more than a statement of fact, accompanied by a reference to a website, and there is no qualitative evaluation as to how UK and New Zealand measures interact;

(3) The certification body has still failed to address the underlying question of the extent to which the management system operates in a manner that is consistent with national legislation;

(4) The certification body did not apply any objective criteria to its assessment or indeed show that it made an objective assessment of stakeholder participation - it simply reviewed the evidence as to stakeholder participation and then determined that this was "appropriate", without attempting to define what it meant by "appropriate". It is difficult to discern any real differences between the 60, 80 and 100 scoring guideposts and, within these parameters, the scoring is purely arbitrary.

“Labeling this fishery as sustainable in the face of so many uncertainties is not only a travesty for the toothfish and the protection of the wider Ross Sea ecosystem, but will also seriously undermine the credibility of the Marine Stewardship Council,” said Richard Page, Greenpeace International Oceans Campaigner. “The fishery should never have been considered for certification in the first place and now, through a convoluted and deeply flawed process, Moody Marine, a company which was contracted to and paid for by New Zealand and UK toothfish fishers to undertake this assessment, has been allowed to ignore the inputs from dozens of independent scientific experts and its own peer reviewers to give the blue label to the fishery.”

The Ross Sea toothfish fishery is taking place in what an independent analysis of human impacts on the world's oceans published in the journal *Science* in 2008 classified as the least affected large oceanic ecosystem remaining on Earth.² ASOC argues that there is a compelling case to protect the whole of the Ross Sea and shelf, both on the grounds of its outstanding biodiversity and its value to science. So far 463 scientists have signed a Statement in support of the establishment of a fully-protected Ross Sea marine reserve by the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources.³

“Toothfish are a major species in the Ross Sea ecosystem - playing the role of shark in that ocean - and it is unknown what impact their removal is having on the wider ecosystem. Each year that the exploratory fishery is allowed to remove these top predators it is doing untold damage, and MSC certification will only accelerate this process,” added David Ainley, an Antarctic marine researcher with over thirty years’ experience in the Ross Sea.

ASOC urges consumers not to purchase Ross Sea toothfish due to concerns that the fishery is harming a top predator in the world’s most undisturbed marine ecosystem, and to ask chefs and grocery stores not to sell it. Major retailer Wegmans has pledged to avoid selling Ross Sea toothfish due to concerns about the impact on the ecosystem, and ASOC urges other retailers to act similarly.

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² Halpern, Benjamin S. et al. 2008. A Global Map of Human Impact on Marine Ecosystems. *Science* 319: 948 – 952.

³ The statement can be downloaded here: <http://asoc.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=E7mbBl2txiY%3d&tabid=36>