

## MSC Policy Summary: Low trophic level species

Please note that this document is an MSC internal guidance document only. Actual requirements remain those formally implemented as MSC scheme requirements. The content of this policy summary do not replace those requirements.

## Policy Summary: Low trophic level fisheries

### Executive Summary

New certification requirements and guidance on the use of the default assessment tree for fisheries targeting Low Trophic Level (LTL) fish species, like sardines and anchovies, have been developed.

The key elements are higher default target and limit reference point requirements for fisheries on species deemed 'key LTL,' as defined in the new requirements.

### Background

The MSC hadn't explicitly explained how to take LTL species into account in the FAM so funded research to determine how precautionary fisheries needed to be for these species.

The research confirmed the importance of managing LTL species at higher target levels than non-LTL species, particularly when they are highly connected to other species in the ecosystem.

In summary the project has shown that:

- Fishing on LTL species varies widely in its impacts on other parts of the ecosystem – some ecosystems showing little impact even when LTL species are heavily depleted and others showing high impacts even at low levels of exploitation.
- Depleting LTL species that make up over 5% of ecosystem biomass always results in large impacts.
- Depletion of some less abundant species can sometimes also result in large impacts.
- Depleting LTL species that are highly connected to other species in the food web always results in large impacts.
- Decreasing the amount of LTL species being fished reduces the impact on other species within the ecosystem but still provides the fishery with 80% of its original catch.

On the basis of these results, together with the consultation, the MSC Technical Advisory Board has recommended that new guidance be provided relating to the specific assessment requirements of LTL fisheries.

The main focus of this new direction is on the stock biomass levels that should be maintained in the management of LTL species in order to allow for their critical roles in the wider ecosystem.

For a detailed background see the [TAB Directive](#).

### Who's affected?

All fishery assessments where the stock is considered a low trophic level species as of the 15<sup>th</sup> August, 2011 (and all other assessments to the extent that they must show they are not 'key LTL').

**\*\* This requirement came into effect in August prior to the other policy developments and is relevant for fisheries that have not yet entered assessment, or are in assessment but have not yet held their site visit, by 15 August 2011.\*\***

## Core requirements<sup>1</sup>

With the new requirements certifiers will need to use reference points appropriate for low trophic level, short lifespan fish like sardines rather than those appropriate for high trophic level, long lived species like cod.

The new requirements provide more security when fishing low trophic level fish. Reference points are set that minimize the effect on other species and the ecosystem.

In order to score a conditional pass (60-79), for the reference point performance indicator (PI 1.1.2), the fishery must have adopted reference points that maintain the stock level higher than the common Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) level and at least 40% of the level where no fishing occurs.

To score an unconditional pass (80+), for the reference point performance indicator, low trophic level fish stocks must be maintained at a default 75% of the level where no fishing occurs, or at other levels that are shown not to have a significant impact on other species.

The allowable impacts are limited in two ways: firstly, at the ecosystem level, no more than 15% of the other fish species or groups may be impacted by more than 40%; secondly, no other individual species may be reduced by more than 70% from the level where no fishing occurs.

For a detailed requirement see the [TAB Directive](#).

## Definitions

**Key low trophic level species** - A species that, as an adult, holds a key role in the ecosystem. This is either due to size and number of connections with other species or where there are few other species occupying its place in the food web. They usually feed on plankton, have a small body size (less than 30cm), are mature by 2yrs old and live for a maximum of 10 years, are highly fertile and form dense schools e.g. anchovies and sardines.

**Conditional pass** – Fishery gains this if any performance indicators score between 60 and 79 during assessment. It results in the fishery having a condition for that performance indicator.

**Unconditional pass** – If the fishery scores over 80 for all the performance indicators then it doesn't have any conditions.

**Maximum Sustainable Yield** – The most fish you can take during average environmental conditions on a continuous basis without depleting the stock.

**Target reference point** - Fisheries managers try to keep the amount of fish from a stock left in the ocean at or above this level – this is the management target.

**Limit reference point** - The point where the state of the fishery and/or stock is undesirable – this is avoided by management.

## Consultation

The project was carried out in consultation with key NGO stakeholders and technical experts with a full public consultation period occurring in May 2011.

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<sup>1</sup> This information is presented as a summary of the core requirements of the policy discussed. Actual requirements remain those formally implemented as MSC scheme requirements. The content of this policy summary do not replace those requirements.

## Frequently asked Questions

- **Why do key low trophic level species need special consideration?**

These species play an important part in the ecosystem by providing food for species at higher levels and by ensuring the diversity and stability of the ecosystem.

- **Is this going to make assessments for these fisheries harder?**

In some cases. If the fishery just accepts that the stock in assessment is a 'key LTL' stock, and also accepts that fishing levels are maintained at a default 75% of the level where no fishing occurs, then there is little additional burden of proof.

More assessment effort will be required (for both clients and certifiers) in other cases, such as where proof is needed to confirm that a stock is not key LTL species, or to justify that the fishery can fish more than the default level (reducing the stock to 75% of the unexploited level,  $B_0$ ).

- **Are these new requirements raising the bar?**

MSC has not intended that these requirements are raising the bar, having always required that fisheries give special consideration to LTL fisheries at both 60 and 80.

However, since the levels of additional precaution required have not been explicitly defined until now any users who had previously been interpreting the requirements as a lower level may consider this as raising the bar.

- **Is this going to deter some fisheries from entering the programme?**

Possibly, yes, until they can confirm that they meet the now-defined requirements. It should be noted that fisheries may initially pass with only a 60 score for PI 1.1.2, and then gradually increase the reference points and stock levels to the 80 requirements, through conditions.

- **Is the MSC working on further tools to aid the assessment of LTL fisheries?**

The RBF is being extended to cover key LTL species and is currently under development. The date of publication is still to be decided.

- **Do the LTL requirements need to be applied at surveillance audits?**

No, only at the time of the next re-assessment. Once a fishery has become subject to the LTL requirements, however, it must then review its situation at each surveillance.

- **What does a certifier do if they cannot demonstrate that the target stock is not a key LTL species after referring to the criteria in boxes CB 2 and CB 3?**

The burden of proof is with the certifier and the fishery to show that the target stock should not be treated as a key LTL species against the criteria given. If they can't then the stock will have to be treated as a key LTL species.



- **Can fisheries apply the requirements in a series of steps?**

Some fisheries are doing this by focusing on the definition of reference points as a first step and then implementing appropriate measures to build the stocks up to these levels over time.

- **Is it optional for certified fisheries to adopt the new requirements before reassessment?**

Yes, they can choose to do this but it is not a requirement.

### **Key MSC contact**

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