

# New Caledonian Offshore Fishers Federation launches 'Responsible Fisheries' ecolabel

**Jean-François Huglo**

*President of the New Caledonian Offshore Fishers Federation. jefalbacore@lagoon.nc*

## Introduction

Offshore fisheries in New Caledonia experienced a revival in the 2000s, after a halt in issuing fishing licenses to foreign vessels.

A few years later, the creation of the Offshore Fishers Federation gave a new boost to the sector. The Federation allowed the five longline fishing companies in New Caledonia, by then better organised and working together, to speak with a single voice in order to make their skills known and recognised; i.e., selective, environmentally responsible, longline fishing (one hook = one fish).

In 2013, the Federation began to work with the French Agricultural, Agrofood and Fisheries Quality and Origin Certification (AFNOR) Management Agency to

allow its members to benefit from 'Responsible Fisheries' certification. This certification provides a guarantee to customers that goes above and beyond current regulations of proper resource management, environmentally responsible fishing practices, and health and traceability regulations that ensure product quality and good on-board working and safety conditions.

In November 2014, after audits by the AFNOR Pacific inspection and certification agency, three of the five local fishing companies were awarded certification.

After a brief overview of the status of offshore tuna fisheries in New Caledonia, this article will describe the 'Responsible Fisheries' management approach, its principles and objectives, and the requirements that a fishing company must meet in order to be certified.



*Part of the New Caledonia tuna longline fishing fleet in Noumea harbour.*

## Offshore fishers: a major development stakeholder in New Caledonia

New Caledonia's offshore fisheries form a commercial sector that comprises a fleet of similar vessels that belong to five fishing companies. In 2014, New Caledonia issued 17 tuna-species fishing licenses for its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

In 2014, offshore fishers brought in 2781 tonnes – a total of 150,090 fish – (+3 % as compared with 2013). Albacore (*Thunnus alalunga*) is still the predominant species at nearly 60 % of all catches; yellowfin tuna (*Thunnus albacares*) accounts for 26 % of catches.

The most frequently caught species, after albacore and yellowfin tuna, are marlins (Istiophoridae) and mahi-mahi (*Coryphaena hippurus*), which are sold locally. After that is bigeye tuna (*Thunnus obesus*) with the best specimens sold fresh and whole in Japan at auction markets. Then, there are various fish, which are sold locally: opah/moonfish (*Lampris regius*), wahoo (*Acanthocybium solandri*), swordfish (*Xiphias gladius*), sailfish (*Istiophorus platypterus*) and skipjack (*Katsuwonus pelamis*).

### Trade circuits

Every year, about 30 % of production is exported (see Fig. 1).

In 2013, the sector's turnover at initial sale totalled some XPF 1135 million (equivalent to USD 13.5 million – August 2015).

### Sampling and observers

Since 2002, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) has conducted operations to monitor catches at landing and on-board observation campaigns.

The latter consist of identifying and measuring the entire catch, recording the various features of the fishing gear (number of hooks, type of bait used, etc.) and taking samples in order to assess stocks and study tuna biology. In 2014, a total of 22 campaigns were observed on 11 of the 17 active ships, which amounts to 233 days at sea.

### Jobs

The number of jobs that are directly linked to offshore fishing – carried out in fishing companies, processing plants and at wholesalers – was estimated at 230 in 2013.

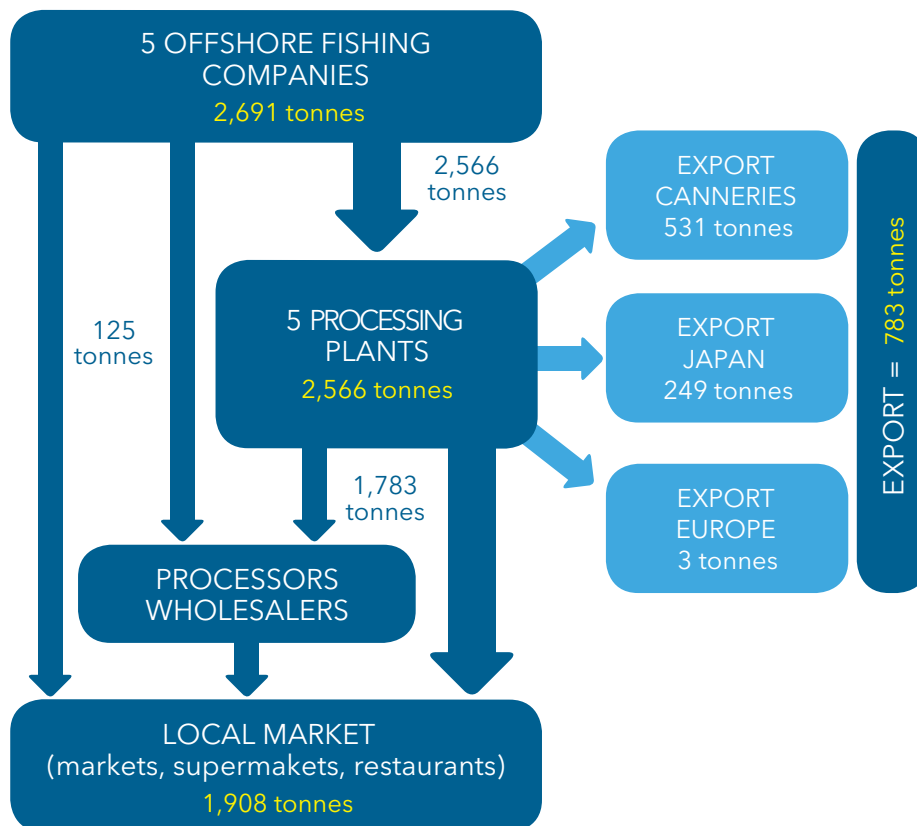


Figure 1. Offshore fisheries trade circuits in 2013 (illustration by Push & Pull).

### Fish stocks

In contrast to certain Pacific Island countries and territories, New Caledonia has underutilised both its exploitable resource and existing logistical infrastructure. According to SPC scientists, catches for species that can be taken with longlines could increase to 10,000 tonnes without overfishing the resource. A limited fishing effort in comparison to the surface area of New Caledonia's EEZ, the longline fishing technique that considered to be more selective and the number of fishing licenses, which are limited to local longliners, make New Caledonia's offshore fishery a sustainable activity that has little impact on tuna stocks. What's more, the sector targets species whose stock statuses are satisfactory at the regional level and only the adult specimens that have already reproduced are harvested.

### Health surveillance

Offshore fisheries products are subject to several levels of inspection by the Animal Health, Food and Plant Health Inspection Unit of the New Caledonia Department of Animal Health, Food and Rural Affairs, including:

- ✓ the annual surveillance and inspection plan, which meets the European Union's regulatory requirements for exported species (44 samples were taken from albacore tuna in 2014, including 16 that were tested for mercury);
- ✓ specific investigations, carried out in 2011 and 2015 (25 samples were taken from various high-risk pelagic species as well as lagoon fish species, crustaceans and molluscs), notably designed to monitor mercury levels; and
- ✓ official testing as part of the monitoring facilities' compliance with health regulations.

Producers and processors also do regular microbiological self-audits to maintain their health certificates.

In regards to the issue of mercury, a joint approach is underway between four Government of New Caledonia departments (Health and Social Affairs; Animal Health, Food and Rural Affairs; Economic Affairs; and Maritime Affairs) to ensure that the community is better informed about this issue.

### Fishing technique and effort

The industry uses a single fishing technique; i.e., longline fishing.

A total of 324 fishing trips took place in 2014. This is a low fishing effort in comparison to the surface area of the fishing zone, since New Caledonia's maritime area covers some 1.3 million km<sup>2</sup>.



*Processors are subject to the annual surveillance and inspection plan, which meets the European Union's regulatory requirements for exported species.*

## New Caledonian Offshore Fishers Federation

### History

The New Caledonian Offshore Fishers Federation is a non-profit association created on 8 October 2007. Jean-François Huglo, Director of the company Albacore, has chaired it since its creation.

### Members

The five fishing companies in New Caledonia have been members of the New Caledonian Offshore Fishers Federation since its creation; i.e., Albacore, Baby Blue, Navimon, Pescana and Sea Horse.

### Goals

The goal of the New Caledonian Fishers Federation is to allow local fishing companies to speak with a single voice, particularly with a view to defining their status



and ensuring better recognition of their industry by public authorities. Since November 2013, the Federation has also been the official advocacy and management body (*organisme de défense et de gestion* – ODG) for the offshore 'Responsible Fisheries' ecolabel.

### 'Responsible Fisheries' approach

The New Caledonian Offshore Fishers Association wanted to begin an approach, in collaboration with the entire profession (five fishing companies), to promote the high quality of its products and its sustainable resource management, and to ensure the continued existence of the industry.

Therefore, with the assistance of the Agricultural Price Control Board (ERPA) and the technical support of Maritime Affairs, the Chamber of Agriculture, and the New Caledonia Animal Health, Food and Rural Affairs Office, the New Caledonian Offshore Fishers Federation gained full recognition as an ODG in November 2013.

This agency advocates the official 'Responsible Fisheries' quality label for offshore fisheries, which is designed to recognise and promote the good practices used by the group over the past few years.

### Definition

'Responsible Fisheries' is an overall management approach designed to promote, in addition to compliance with current regulations, practices that are respectful of resources, the environment, fishing products and proper safety and working conditions.

### Principles

'Responsible Fisheries' is based on the following principles:

- ✓ Conserving and managing bio-aquatic resources (quality, diversity, availability) against a backdrop of food security and sustainable development;
- ✓ Using environmentally responsible gear and vessels;
- ✓ Implementing selective and environmentally responsible fishing practices;
- ✓ Ensuring that product harvest, handling, processing and distribution are done in such a way to preserve the product's nutritional value, quality and safety; reduce wastage and minimise negative effects on the environment and local communities – preserving 'critical' habitats (wetlands, mangroves, reefs, lagoons);
- ✓ Preserving working conditions; and
- ✓ Responsible, sustainable use of resources.

### Products involved

The Offshore Fishers Federation's 'Responsible Fisheries' framework covers the entire catch of New Caledonia's offshore fleet (pelagic fish). Certified products can be whole or cut into portions; raw, fresh or frozen; offered in bulk or packaged. They are destined for the local market via processing plants, wholesalers and large- and medium-sized retailers.



FV Yellow Fin from the company Albacore, one of the three fishing companies that were granted 'Responsible Fisheries' certification in 2014.



In 2014, albacore tuna accounted for 60% of all New Caledonia tuna longline vessel catches.

The field covered by this certification – i.e., 'Responsible Fisheries' – is the responsibility of fishing companies and includes all operations from fishing to unloading catches.

### Framework

Given that 'Responsible Fisheries' is designed to become, over the long term, the standard for all of New Caledonia's offshore fishing vessels, current regulations were integrated into this framework, thereby ensuring consumers that the fleet complies with health, environmental and work safety practices.

Among the framework's 28 requirements:

- ✓ 15 are regulatory (i.e. 54 % of the requirements as compared with 50 % in the metropolitan French framework); and
- ✓ 13 exceed local regulations.

'Responsible Fisheries' products guarantee consumers compliance with requirements that exceed normal regulations, and responsible fishing practices in terms of resources and the environment, quality products and food safety.

### Approach timeline

#### 22 November 2013:

The New Caledonian Offshore Fishers Federation is recognised as an *organisme de défense et de gestion* (advocacy and management agency – ODG) for the 'Responsible Fisheries' ecolabel; the technical framework is certified and the inspection plans are approved.

#### 19 November 2014:

Albacore, Navimon and Pescana fishing companies are granted 'Responsible Fisheries' certification.

## Responsible offshore fisheries – the four main areas involved in certification:

### 1. Resource management

#### Background

Given growing pressures on marine resources throughout the Pacific region, it is important for New Caledonia's offshore fisheries industry to contribute to sustainable management of harvested stocks while engaging in selective fishing that respects both the ecosystem and its diversity. Proper resource management requires the full cooperation of the scientific community, in particular through the provision of reliable and complete data.

#### Objectives

- ▶ Use resources in a sustainable manner.
- ▶ Control impacts on the ecosystem.
- ▶ Help to improve scientific knowledge.

#### Framework requirements

- no. 1: Be a member of the New Caledonian Offshore Fishers Federation;
- no. 2: Comply with resource management, conservation and use measures;
- no. 3: Only fish in New Caledonia's EEZ and offload all catches in New Caledonia;
- no. 4: Only engage in longline fishing and limit bycatch; and
- no. 5: Cooperate with scientists in terms of collecting and sharing information.

## 2. Respecting the environment

### Background

Like all human and economic activities, offshore fisheries generate waste. Implementing effective waste management, including storage and disposal, is part of an environmentally responsible approach that meets the needs of society.

In addition, fuel consumption is a very important expenditure item for fishing vessels.

Controlling such consumption is vital on both the economic and environmental levels.

### Objectives

- ▶ Improve waste management.
- ▶ Limit the impact that the waste produced has on the environment.
- ▶ Optimise energy consumption.

### Framework requirements

- no. 6: Keep household waste on-board and dispose of it at the port;
- no. 7: Keep fisheries-related waste (bait packaging, bits of line, etc.) on-board and dispose of it at the port;
- no. 8: Use specific collection containers;
- no. 9: Prevent fuel-oil pollution;
- no. 10: Recover used oil products and ensure they are treated;
- no. 11: Dry-dock in the designated dry-dock area;
- no. 12: Use biodegradable cleaning projects (deck, refrigerated holds, etc.);
- no. 13: Optimise energy consumption; and
- no. 14: Inform and educate the crew about good environmental practices.

## 3. Hygiene, quality and traceability

### Background

Good hygiene, treatment, storage and preservation practices must be followed from the very start of the supply chain to ensure consumers of the highest quality products.

In addition, priority must be given to product traceability to make it possible to identify, distinguish and enhance the products that are displayed on the shelves.

### Objectives

- ▶ Ensure product quality.
- ▶ Ensure product traceability.
- ▶ Enhance products.

### Framework requirements

- no. 15: Adhere to proper hygiene and cleaning practices in the areas where catches are processed and stored as well as in ice production and refrigeration facilities;
- no. 16: Properly handle and process catch to optimise its quality;
- no. 17: Ensure catches are properly preserved;
- no. 18: Ensure good hygiene practices during on-board processing;
- no. 19: Ensure the health quality of offloaded fish;
- no. 20: Provide advanced information about catch offloading;
- no. 21: At each landing, provide processing plants with clear and systematic fish-traceability information;
- no. 22: Optimise product development and marketing; and
- no. 23: Provide skippers with regular training in good hygiene practices.

## 4. Working conditions and boat safety

### Background

More attention must be paid to the specific features of the working environment on-board an offshore fishing vessel to improve safety, work and living conditions for crew.

### Objectives

- ▶ Ensure satisfactory working and living conditions for those who work on fishing vessels.
- ▶ Ensure the shipboard staff's safety.

### Framework requirements

- no. 24: Ensure proper maintenance of the vessel and its safety systems;
- no. 25: Work to prevent accidents;
- no. 26: Comply with employment contract provisions;
- no. 27: Ensure that living quarters are properly maintained;
- no. 28: Educate the crew about environmental management; and
- no. 29: Provide regular safety training sessions to skippers.

## Quality and origin identification labels

In 2008, following a request from professionals and consumers in New Caledonia, all government partners (French Government, Government of New Caledonia, Provinces), in collaboration with the Chambers of Commerce and Industry and consumers, – and under ERPA's coordination – implemented a process to issue and monitor quality and origin identification labels (SIQO-NC) for agricultural, agrofood and seafood products, and to supervise their use at the territorial level (Fig. 2).

There are three categories of labels:

1. environmental quality labels/ecolabels (including 'Responsible Fisheries');
2. premium quality labels; and
3. authenticity labels.

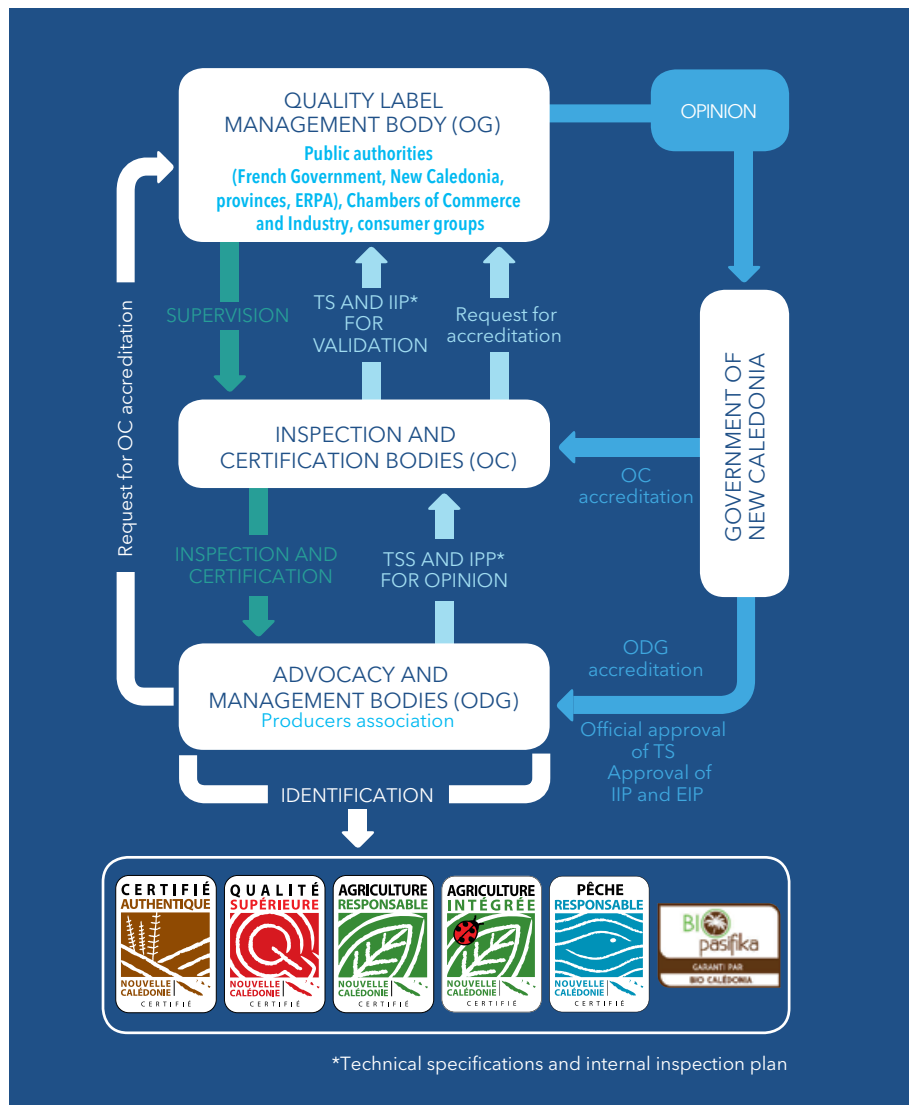


Figure 2. Quality and origin identification label (SIQO-NC) accreditation process (to find out more: [www.siqo.nc](http://www.siqo.nc))(illustration by Push & Pull).

All pictures in this article by Théau Gontard, ERPA.