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Marine Fish Conservation Network makes false and unsubstantiated claims in press release

Executive Director calls Omega Protein “Public Enemy Number One”

Last week, the Marine Fish Conservation Network (MFCN) demanded an apology from the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) for allegedly “teaming up with” Omega Protein, Inc. on the recent Keep Fishermen Fishing Rally in Washington, DC. RFA was a leading sponsor of the rally.

Accusation and Demand Based on a False Assumption

MFCN issued this demand in an inaccurate and defamatory press release in which MFCN Executive Director Matt Tinning made numerous statements based on erroneous assumptions, regurgitating a litany of oft-repeated claims not backed by scientific evidence.

In the error-laden release, Mr. Tinning went so far as to call Omega Protein “public enemy number one”.

Upon seeing a photograph taken by a *National Journal* reporter, which showed fishermen employed by Omega Protein in attendance at the rally, Mr. Tinning jumped to the conclusion that Omega Protein was “a central participant” in the event. Omega Protein was not a rally sponsor, nor did the company play a role in its organization. No one associated with Omega Protein spoke at the event.

Major MFCN Funders and Rally Sponsors Fundamentally Disagree

The Keep Fishermen Fishing rally was a public event, held on public property at the United States Capitol. The goal of the rally was to advocate for the reform of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. All fishermen who support Magnuson-Stevens reform were welcomed. A number of menhaden bait and reduction fishermen chose to attend the rally, including some employed by Omega Protein.

MFCN opposes the reforms of the Magnuson-Stevens Act advocated by rally participants. In fact, since 2000, MFCN has accepted over \$4.1 million from the Pew Environment Group, with a substantial amount of those funds reserved specifically for efforts focused on implementing the existing Magnuson-Stevens Act, absent the reforms advocated by rally participants.

Omega's Record is Far From That of a Public Enemy

The characterization of Omega Protein as a “public enemy” is biased and inaccurate. Omega Protein abides by all applicable regulations. Areas in which Omega has consistently demonstrated a dedicated commitment to the well-being of the industry and communities in which it operates include:

Economic Impact

- Omega Protein produces \$80 million in economic output annually in Virginia's Northern Neck region
- Omega directly employs 275 people in Virginia's Northern Neck region and indirectly employs hundreds of others through contract maintenance and operations
- If Omega Protein's operation in Reedville closed, the surrounding area would experience an 8% decrease in employment and a 14% decrease in economic output

Philanthropic Efforts

- Omega donated \$50,000 to benefit restoration efforts of Reedville, Virginia's historic smokestack, a local landmark.
- Since 2007, Omega Protein has contributed more than \$150,000 to the YMCA, charity hospitals, college scholarship funds, disabled veterans organizations and other charitable concerns.

Environmental Stewardship

- Omega Protein does not harvest menhaden on weekends or major holidays when recreational anglers and charter boat operators are most active - a voluntary measure instituted in 1972 that accounts for a 30% reduction in fishing by Omega's fleet.
- In cooperation with the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources Artificial Reef Bureau, Omega has donated retired fishing vessels to serve as an artificial reef for recreational uses in the Gulf of Mexico.
- Omega has committed over \$17 million to refurbishments of its Reedville, Virginia facility, with the goal of making it more energy efficient and environmentally friendly. These improvements have substantially reduced emissions from the plant.
- After rebuilding their boilers, Omega has reduced sulfur dioxide emissions by 55%.

- Omega's new airless dryers have greatly reduced steam and gas exhaust from the drying process employed during menhaden reduction. The excess heat from the dryers also powers a newly installed evaporator, which both reduces the plant's water consumption and saves the burning of hundreds of thousands of gallons of fuel and the associated sulfur emissions.
- Omega Protein conserves 200,000 gallons of water per day by treating and recycling evaporative condensate water from its processing operations
- Omega actively participates in environmental improvement projects in the Chesapeake Bay and sponsored/funded environmental clean-ups of local estuaries
- In partnership with the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC), Omega Protein is a vital partner in oyster restoration efforts. VMRC uses oyster shells to create artificial oyster beds and Omega's Reedville plant provides storage acreage, loading docks and deep water access to VMRC for handling and loading shells for planting
- Omega is actively engaged in partnerships with renewable fuels vendors to retool boilers and dryers to convert to renewable diesel oil (RDO); actions could make Omega one of the largest renewable fuel users in the county

Unsubstantiated Claims about the Menhaden Fishery

Mr. Tinning repeats a series of oft-repeated but never-substantiated claims about the Menhaden fishery.

Opportunities for Recreational Anglers

Mr. Tinning argues that the menhaden reduction fishery "vacuums forage fish from the ocean in a way that steals fishing opportunities from anglers", and that this centuries-old fishery takes menhaden "from the mouths of striped bass and countless other species".

Although these claims are made with regularity by some recreational fishing advocates and environmentalists, there is no scientific basis for them.

In fact widely-accepted, peer-reviewed research conducted by Bob Wood and Herb Austin on Chesapeake Bay menhaden indicates that climatic factors such as Atlantic Multi-Decadal Oscillation (AMO) can explain the major shifts in menhaden and striped bass population numbers; not the harvest of the handful of vessels in the menhaden fishery.

NOAA defines Atlantic Multi-Decadal Oscillation (AMO) as an ongoing series of long-duration changes in the sea surface temperature of the North Atlantic Ocean, with cool and warm phases that may last for 20-40 years at a time and a difference of about 1°F between extremes. These changes are natural and have been occurring for at least the last 1,000 years

Spawning Stock Biomass

MFCN writes, “Omega Protein’s practices have reduced menhaden to just 8% of spawning stock biomass.” However, measures of fishing mortality, such as the statistic cited by the MFCN, are not the best way to measure the health of the menhaden stock.

Historically, menhaden fishing mortality (the amount of fish removed from a stock each year) and spawning are not significantly correlated. The number of menhaden born in various years varies greatly, and the number of young of year menhaden has never been shown to be related to the previous year’s fishing levels. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has noted that environmental factors play a much larger role in determining the size of the menhaden stock than commercial fishing (<http://chesapeakebay.noaa.gov/fish-facts/menhaden>).

According to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), the menhaden stock is currently being fished sustainably. The ASMFC’s 2010 stock assessment found that menhaden were not overfished. There has also been no significant pattern of overfishing in the last decade, with overfishing occurring only once in the last ten years.

Sustainable Fishing Practices

Omega Protein’s Reedville, Virginia-based menhaden fishery is regulated by the Commonwealth of Virginia in cooperation with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.

Mr. Tinning argues that in recent ASMFC proceedings, “Omega Protein and its allies” opposed a “critical first step towards sustainability”.

While Omega Protein did not agree with the more radical demands made to the ASMFC by some members of the environmental and recreational fishing communities, the company did not oppose a lower overfishing threshold than in previous years. However, neither the best available science nor practical experience in the fishery indicated that a reduction in the overfishing threshold would impact menhaden abundance, as environmental factors are believed to have a greater impact on spawning than commercial fishing operations. This was noted on page 87 of the ASMFC stock assessment report.

The problem with the menhaden stock is not the lack of an adequate spawning stock. Menhaden are not overfished. Mature egg indices have been at or above target levels throughout the past decade.

Historical evidence also substantiates the position that factors other than fishing are most important in determining stock levels. For example, excessively high levels of fishing that occurred between 1962 and 1981 did not prevent the stock from recovering from very low levels during the 1980s.

It is far from certain that the stock will respond to a reduction in fishing. It is much more likely that the stock will respond when environmental conditions favorable to reproduction occur.

Omega Protein did not oppose establishing a lower overfishing threshold in order to give the ASMFC an opportunity to see if the stock would respond favorably to lower fishing mortality rates. Omega Protein does not believe that the communities dependent on the menhaden fishery should be forced to suffer severe economic hardship without evidence that such hardship will yield substantial benefits.