

*Opening address by the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, G. Verburg, at the International Round Table Conference on Eco-Labeling and Certification in the Fisheries Sector, 22 April 2009*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to start by welcoming you all here today. I would particularly like to welcome the members of the Committee of Fisheries of the OECD and the representatives of the FAO, the OECD, and also representatives of consumer organisations, trade and processing, retail, NGOs, the fishing industry, research institutes and government and other experts.

The diversity and international nature of the representatives here today make this conference particularly significant. I am therefore delighted so many of you have come to this beautiful seaside venue to discuss eco-labelling and certification in the fisheries sector.

This subject is very much in the public eye, which is why the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality has taken the initiative to hold this round table in the Netherlands. I would like to thank both the OECD and the FAO for their efforts in organising this conference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Fish is hot. In the Netherlands, fish and fisheries are high on the political agenda and there is also major public concern about the future of our oceans. And there is good reason for this concern, as according to the FAO not less than three quarters of the world's assessed fish stocks are in jeopardy.

However, the fact is that fish remains an important source of food, and it is also very healthy. Fish is therefore highly valued by the consumer, and fish consumption rises each year by eight to ten percent. We can see that aquaculture plays an increasingly important role as a potential response to rising demand and possible shortages.

And there lies the problem. On one hand we want to encourage people to eat fish to combat obesity and because fish oils are so healthy, but on the other hand, we do not want fish stocks to be put under too much pressure.

Furthermore, in recent years the interest of civil society and government for especially catching methods of the fishing industry - and their impact on the ecosystem - is increasing. This while the fishing industry is making significant progress towards more sustainable fisheries. This in response to the announcement of major supermarkets that they intend to sell only sustainable fish.

As you can see ladies and gentlemen, there is a lot of activity in this field. Action is quickly followed by reaction. The fact we are all pulling in the same direction is very encouraging. Because it is clear to the fishing industry, the consumer, the government and civil society organisations: If we want to continue eating fish we must embrace sustainable fisheries and aquaculture. And we must now act on this momentum. Now is the time to make the switch to sustainability. But that can only be achieved if all parties involved work together. And if all parties continue to challenge each other to produce results.

It is not always easy, but we are making significant progress. The market has responded very well in the Netherlands. A large number of restaurants only serve sustainably caught fish, many cookbooks promote the use of responsible fish and most wholesalers and traders pay attention to the sustainability of their products.

Eco-labelling and certification is of course another good example. Consumers want proof that the fish they buy is of good quality and has been caught in a responsible way. The market has responded by designing labels and slogans such as: 'freshly packed' and 'caught in the wild', which I am sure you are familiar with. But these are of no use to consumers. They say nothing about sustainability.

Furthermore, the number of claims and trademarks is growing so quickly that both consumers and the market players cannot see the forest for the trees. Which labels are reliable and which claims should we believe?

I also think there are too many logos and labels. And that is a shame because the aim of labels is, after all, to provide clarity for the consumer. The presence of so many different labels does not exactly help to achieve this. I am convinced that greater uniformity in this area will make things clearer for the consumer and bring us closer to achieving sustainable fisheries and aquaculture.

That is why I have made a number of agreements here in the Netherlands. Last year I made agreements with the fishing industry and civil society organisations for all Dutch-cutter fisheries to step by step, enter the MSC's certification programme. This is part of a wider agreement to achieve sustainable North Sea fisheries. Specifically, it means Dutch fisheries will in the future be assessed on the basis of the MSC Standard for Sustainable Well-Managed Fisheries.

I have also made one million Euros available for the fishing industry in order to start certification of fish and fish products. This will help to support certification of fish, crustaceans and shellfish that are caught or farmed in an environmentally-friendly way.

Lastly, I will put the subject of certification on the agenda of discussions about the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy. I am convinced that certification should become an important instrument in achieving the aims of the CFP. To date this issue has hardly been discussed within this framework.

And ladies and gentlemen, I really think that is a missed opportunity. Because as I said before, certification and eco-labelling contribute to sustainability. That is not only in the interests of fish stocks, but also the fisheries and aquaculture industry. But then we have to go about this in the right way of course. And the government and the market must work in the same direction.

And - ladies and gentlemen - that's where you come in. Because we all have ideas about the wrong way to do things. But what is the right way? How can we prevent a whole forest, or rather, a whole ocean full of claims, labels, logos and certification methods? How can we restore the consumer's confidence in trademarks? What role does the government and the market parties have to play in this? Here in the Netherlands we believe that certification of fish and fishing techniques is primarily a

responsibility of the market. But is that wise, or should the government take a more prominent lead?

There are more than enough questions ladies and gentlemen. Now we need answers. I trust that over the coming two days you will express your thoughts on these matters. So that at the end of the conference we can arrive at intelligent, but above all practical answers and possible solutions on which we on our turn can base our policy. Policy that contributes to sustainability. To an economically profitable fisheries industry, and to healthy stocks of fish.

I wish you an inspiring, pleasant and successful conference.

Thank you.