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Good neighbors: Group certification approach pins hopes on collaboration

Monday, 16 October 2017

By Lauren Kramer

Streamlined auditing, cost savings among the benefits for aquaculture operations



Shrimp farmers in Ecuador's El Oro province participate in a program implemented by Geaconnection in 2015 and 2016. Funding from The Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH) aimed to help 56 shrimp farmers obtain group certification.

When aquaculture farmers opt for group certification, there's a potential for everyone to benefit from the collaboration. Group certification can streamline the auditing process, saving farmers time and money while improving economic conditions for all participants.

In short, group certification can unite collaborators in a common cause – but it also has the potential to cause rifts among competitors.

Auditing efficiency was the premise of the Best Aquaculture Program Farm & Hatchery Group Program, which the Global Aquaculture Alliance (GAA) launched in Spring 2016.

“Instead of auditing every single farm, a subset of a group of farms within close proximity to each other is audited,” said Steven Hedlund, communications manager at GAA. “There's a methodology to determine the subset so that it's representative of every farm in a group, but the result is a more efficient and thus less costly auditing process.”

Seven groups taking part in the program currently boast BAP certifications, among them Marine Harvest, Cooke Aquaculture, Stapimex and The Fishin' Company. Five more groups have applied for group certification and are going through the process. Hedlund said there are 106 farms participating in total.

BAP's primary competitor, the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC), is also in the throes of launching a group certification program. ASC released its standard for responsible shrimp aquaculture in 2014 and did a trial run in Ecuador's El Oro province in 2015 and 2016. The Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH) provided about €485,000 (\$572,000) to fund a project through which 56 shrimp farmers obtained group certification.

Jessenia Roxana, co-founder and sustainability director of Geaconnection, which implemented the El Oro project, said the pilot program benefited some 300 professionals in charge of up to 30,000 hectares of shrimp production. The program focused on health and safety, improvement of working conditions for workers, farm management and technical protocols related to shrimp health.

It helped that the farmers in the pilot did not compete aggressively with each other, she added.

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“The local demand for shrimp is very high and almost 90 percent of the production is for exports,” she said. “There are 20 important exporters that set the local prices, and the only way farmers can get a voice and set pressure to improve salaries is by working together. So we found that the farmers have good relationships among each other.”

The program and the direct funding it implied piqued the interest of all 92 farmers who initially agreed to participate and Roxana found she had to turn farmers away, even as they were requesting that a second pilot group be funded. Some had attended Seafood Expo Global in Brussels, Belgium, where they learned about the supply chain, adding value to products via processing, customer feedback and market trends.

“They brought home the knowledge that customers are demanding sustainable production, and so were motivated to participate in this trial,” Roxana said.

Still, issues arose, resulting in 36 participants dropping out. Some decided they didn't want to collaborate in the implementation, did not attend any training and showed no progress. Others had political complaints.

“Even though this program had the communication support of the government, we had farmers complaining about that support, or becoming political activists, or asking for faster implementation – even when the standards were not ready. In the end, those farmers left,” Roxana said.

On the whole, however, the pilot program went well, she said: “We want to document everything we’ve learned in the next few months and make all that material public so that other groups of farmers and stakeholders can learn from the experience.”



Salmon net pens off the coast of Newfoundland. Photo courtesy of Cooke Aquaculture.

Marine Harvest agreed to participate in a BAP certification pilot program in Summer 2015, confident that group certification would be a good fit for the company.

“We have strong management systems in place through our policies and standard operating procedures,” said Katherine Dolmage, certification manager for Marine Harvest Canada. “We were confident that even without a formal audit on each site, adherence to these policies and procedures would remain strong, result in less time than bringing in third-party auditors and give us more ownership over the program.”

One concern that generated initial discussion was the risk that if one farm site was unable to achieve certification, it might risk the entire group.

“But since we were confident no major issues would be identified, this wasn’t a serious concern,” she added. “We know our sites are generally operating at levels above standard. The BAP pilot gave us an opportunity to spend less time with third-party auditors and to highlight our systems as the first company offering and achieving certification through this program.”

The program was a definite time and money saver, she said. Marine Harvest saved 30 percent of what it would typically spend on hiring water taxis to transport external auditors and paying them for their work, and the cost of a group audit fee was less than the total of individual audits. It also saved company employees the anxiety of individual site audits.

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“Some site managers find a formal audit very stressful,” she explained. “This reduces the stress, and we’ve added a little competition, too. Sites with zero non-conformances will receive a small prize that will hopefully motivate other sites to review the common non-conformances and ensure they improve from year to year.”

The BAP program has now been built into Marine Harvest’s standard operating procedures and policies, partly as a result of the group certification process. “We’re carefully reviewing the results of our group audits each cycle to ensure that the root causes of any common issues are identified and rectified,” Dolmage said.

Cooke Aquaculture was another company that found the BAP group certification process streamlines auditing and saves time and money.

“The time taken to certify the same number of farms is drastically reduced, and that allows for proactive system improvements, rather than only having time to react to non-conformities,” said Chuck Brown, communications manager.

The costs of certifying the number of sites Cooke Aquaculture operates in North America alone can be quite high, he added. “This program helps reduce costs, which helps improve the economical sustainability of our operations.”

An adjustment for both Cooke Aquaculture and Marine Harvest was the random nature of the farms selected for audit under the BAP program.

“We don’t know which farms will be picked for audit until the day of, and depending on weather conditions that may even change again on the same day. Still, it wasn’t so far out of our comfort zone that we couldn’t move forward with certification,” he said.

The concept has been embraced throughout the company and from production to sales, everyone at Cooke Aquaculture is on board, said Brown.

“Our sales team appreciates having the higher star inventory to pull from, as having all farms certified allows us to market four-star product consistently. Our freshwater and saltwater managers and their crews take it as a challenge to do better than the next hatchery or farm,” he said. “So we’ve seen an improvement in our teams and our overall performance because of that incentive.”

The time savings also allow Cooke to be more proactive with its resources.

“Knowing that we can complete a year’s worth of audits within a few weeks allows us more time and funds to improve our operations,” he continued. “We can refocus resources to complete other tasks, such as performing reviews, doing system upgrades or streamlining processes.”

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