

PACIFIC UNDERWATER HARVESTERS ASSOCIATION (PUHA) TRADE MISSION 2005



Canadian urchin roe is highly regarded in Japan as having an excellent taste, but it is not widely available or well known. PUHA is launching a marketing effort to increase publicity for Canadian sea urchins in Japan.

BY DAVID MCRAE—DIRECTOR, PUHA

For the past three years, the Pacific Urchin Harvesters Association (PUHA) has sent representatives to Japan to promote Canadian sea urchins. The association has focused on building closer relationships with the Japanese importers and promoting the reputation and quality of Canadian sea urchins. The delegation has also investigated the situation regarding the import of Russian green sea urchins to Japan.

With help from the Canadian Embassy, PUHA arranged an informal meeting with companies involved with or interested in Canadian sea urchins, which took place at the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo. After brief introductions, Mike Featherstone of PUHA gives a short overview of the current situation facing the West Coast fleet and outlines initiatives that are underway to help improve our industry.





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Currently the West Coast sea urchin fleet is experiencing many difficulties. Most noticeable is the near complete shut-down of the green sea urchin fishery, caused by the very low price of Russian green sea urchins.

Francis Cheung from Grand Hale Marine was the most outspoken participant at this meeting, who highlighted the increasing value of the Canadian dollar against the Yen and the US dollar, which has a negative effect on the Canadian side. High fuel prices are also reducing the profit margin of all involved in the sea urchin industry. Francis also stressed the need for a minimum price for the Canadian sea urchin. With a minimum price, the industry is likely to survive the current market conditions. Without it, companies and fishermen will likely be forced to operate below the break-even point. Operating at a loss will surely lead to a shut down of the industry.



Author - David McRae

The Japanese focus was on receiving a consistent supply of sea urchins. The current season commenced with infrequent deliveries and low volume, caused by unfavourable weather conditions. Maintaining a constant supply to the market is the most crucial factor for Canadian sea urchins to maintain their market share. Japanese importers also stressed the need for an increase in the number of areas available for fishing at any one time to ensure that poor weather conditions will less severely affect production.

Russian green sea urchins began appearing in Japan seven years ago, with initial landings of around 1,500 tonnes annually. During the last seven years, Russia has become the largest single exporter of live sea urchins to Japan. Over 10,000 tonnes of Russian sea urchins now enter the Japanese market each year.

Russian exports are having an effect on all urchin fisheries around the world. In a single day it is not unusual for the Russian fleet to land upwards of 300 tons of green sea urchins. This large volume floods the market and is resulting in the possible shut-down of fleets around the globe, or at least causing a substantial reduction of operations. The Russian fishing takes place amongst three of the Kuril Islands located on the



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northeast tip of Hokkaido, the most northern island of Japan. The majority of the fishing takes place within 80 miles of the Japanese coast.

There are no accurate measurements of the Russian urchin population. The fishery is mostly unregulated by Russian authorities due to its remote location and perhaps to a lack of political will. There is a current sea urchin quota of 2,000 tons, but this number is grossly exceeded with Russian exports of 11 000 tons expected this season.

The Kuril Islands is a disputed territory between Russia and Japan that dates back to the end of World War II. Russia and Japan have failed to sign an official peace treaty to end the war. Recently Russia has made a gesture to control the over-fishing by sending a coast guard vessel to monitor the fishing grounds; however, after several days the Russian Coast Guard left and the over-fishing resumed. There is talk of Russia and Japan settling the dispute over the islands since the over-fishing in this area has already had a negative impact on some species. Japanese urchin buyers are also concerned about the collapse of the fishery since the resulting loss in imports is not likely to recover for several years, leaving the sea urchin market grossly under-supplied.

Little is known about the green urchin stocks in the area, which leaves potential for the discoveries of new beds outside the current fishing area. A lack of political will on both the Russian and Japanese side to settle the territorial dispute any time soon means that for the foreseeable future Russian exports will remain.



Conference Members

The PUHA delegation traveled to the Port of Hanosaki, located at the northern end of Hokkaido, to witness the Russian sea urchin production first hand. Five Russian packers were unloading the day we visited, delivering a combined load of 75 tonnes. The port is only open to fishing vessels five days a week, since customs officials are not available on weekends. After witnessing the situation, PUHA delegates fully realized the scope of the operation and the thousands of jobs created by Russian green sea urchins. The local economy would be greatly affected by a block in the flow of Russian sea urchins.

PUHA is now launching a marketing effort to get more publicity for Canadian sea urchins in Japan. The Canadian

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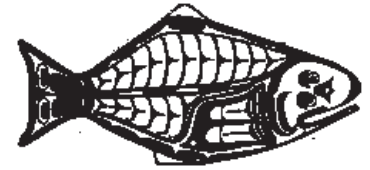
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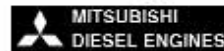
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product is highly regarded in Japan as having an excellent taste, but it is not widely available, nor are consumers typically aware of the source country of their sea urchins. Our annual visits are beginning to generate a greater interest from Japanese importers to focus on advertising and promoting

Canadian sea urchins. One importer suggested we brand our product as Vancouver Sea Urchin, since as the Japanese public is very aware of the upcoming Olympic Games in Vancouver. PUHA plans future visits to continue its promotion of Canadian sea urchins.



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