

Environmental Group Attacks U.S. Food Firm's Whale Trade Link

By Stuart Biggs

April 16 (Bloomberg) -- The Environmental Investigation Agency, a nonprofit conservation group based in Washington and the U.K., called on U.S. fish supplier True World Foods Inc. to pressure its Japanese partner to stop selling whale meat.

Tokyo-based Kyokuyo Co., Japan's fourth-largest seafood company, sells whale meat from the Japan government's annual research whaling expeditions, according to an EIA report published last week. New Jersey-based True World Foods agreed last year to distribute Kyokuyo's Polar Seas brand of frozen sushi to its customers, which include more than 6,000 restaurants in the U.S., according to the company's Web site.

The EIA hopes U.S. consumer pressure will force Japanese seafood companies, which are expanding their global interests, to exit the whale meat trade in their home market. Commercial whaling was banned worldwide in 1986, so whale meat sold in Japan comes from the government's annual "research whaling" expeditions.

"The globalizing of Japanese fish companies' interests has made them accessible to campaigns and subject to consumer interests," EIA President Allan Thornton said in an interview. "Any company that wants to market its products overseas and stay involved in the whaling industry is going to hear about this issue."

Kyokuyo spokesman Yasuaki Nyuya confirmed whale meat sold by the company comes from the government's "scientific research," adding that revenue from whale meat accounts for "a tiny portion" of the company's sales. Nyuya said he couldn't comment on a potential boycott of the company's products by U.S. consumers without further information.

Reminding Suppliers

"True World Foods has never, does not and never will sell, deal in or purchase whale meat," True World Foods chief executive Takeshi Yashiro said in a statement posted on the company's Web site on April 11. "We are in the process of reminding all our suppliers that we advocate humane fishing practices and we urge them to support such practices worldwide."

The company declined to comment when contacted by Bloomberg News on April 11 and 12. The company's Web site doesn't give details on annual sales or profit. Kyokuyo in January said it had profit of 1.9 billion yen (\$15.9 million) on sales of 124 billion yen in the nine months to Dec. 31.

The Japanese government began so-called research-whaling after the International Whaling Commission imposed a moratorium on commercial whaling in 1986. Whale meat from the annual research expeditions, which are legal under IWC rules, is sold to wholesale markets in Japan.

Falling Consumption

Japan's whaling fleet aims to kill as many as 935 minke whales, 50 humpbacks and 10 fin whales in the Southern Ocean, and as many as 220 minke, 50 sei, 50 bryde and 10 sperm whales in the Okhotsk-Pacific this year, according to the government's Institute of Cetacean Research.

The fleet aborted its hunt in the Southern Ocean in February after a fire broke out on one of the ships, leaving one crewman dead.

“Americans will be sickened to know that they are buying sushi from a company that sells whale meat,” Patrick Ramage, an official for the International Fund for Animal Welfare, said on a conference call with the EIA on April 10.

Whale meat consumption in Japan fell to about 30 grams (0.07 pounds) per person a year in 2004 from about 5 kilograms during the 1960s, Junko Sakuma, a former Greenpeace official said in a report published by the Tokyo-based Dolphin & Whale Action Network last year.

Japan had 3,904 tons of whale meat in cold storage at the end of December, compared with a stockpile of 3,511 tons a year earlier, according to figures from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

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