Request for Proposals (RFP)
Research on Embedding Remote Audit in MSC Chain of Custody (CoC)
Assurance and development of guidance

Date 2 February 2022

1. Introduction

The MSC’s vision is for the world’s oceans to be teeming with life, and seafood supplies safeguarded for this and future generations. Through our internationally recognised certification and ecolabeling program, well-managed sustainable fisheries are recognised and rewarded in the marketplace, through the leadership of our partners. Over 400 fisheries around the world, representing more than 17% of the annual global marine catch, are now engaged in the MSC program and MSC certified and labelled seafood products are now available in over 100 countries.

The MSC Chain of Custody (CoC) Standards ensure that product from MSC-certified sustainable fisheries is originated from certified fisheries and separated from non-certified sources. For products to carry the blue MSC label, every company in the supply chain must have a valid Chain of Custody certificate. To be certified, businesses are audited by independent certifiers (also known as Conformity Assessment Bodies – CABs).

2. Background

All Fishery and Chain of Custody (CoC) audits are typically required to be on-site except for trading operations. For CoC certification, clients are eligible to become certified through a remote certification audit, provided they do not carry out any activities with respect to certified products other than trading (buying and/or selling) (CoC Certification Requirements V3.1, Clause 7.1.6). MSC had previously identified the use of remote audits as a means of delivering efficiencies to certificate holders but had not progressed beyond this stage, prior to the pandemic.

Since the beginning of 2020, the global pandemic of Covid-19 made it impossible to conduct on-site audits in many parts of the world. The MSC responded to the impact of the global pandemic by allowing remote audits in place of site visits and certificate extensions. In March 2021, we issued Derogation 3: Covid-19 Fishery and Chain of Custody Remote Auditing¹ allowing for remote auditing where there are documented travel restrictions due to Covid, health risks or certificate holder/CAB company policies not allowing travel. This derogation expires on 28th March 2022. The MSC has decided to extend the derogation by 1 year as the pandemic is still impacting the ability of CABs to complete on-site audits, international and regional travel also will not resume fully in 2022.

In light of this, MSC would like to explore the feasibility of embedding remote audit in MSC CoC assurance beyond the restrictions imposed as a result of Covid-19. We are looking for a consultant to conduct research to identify the potential risks and impacts, as well as developing guidance and

protocol for CABs in carrying out remote audits against the MSC Chain of Custody Standards effectively.

3. Objectives

The main objectives of the research are:

- In order to understand the potential impacts and risks associated with remote audits so that MSC can decide how we should embed remote audit in our assurance approach for CoC certification beyond the current derogation, which is planned to extend by 12 months (until end of March 2023).
- In order to examine other sustainability schemes (fishery and non-fishery) on their approach to enable remote audits on CoC certification, so that MSC can benchmark against peers and align with the latest trends.
- In order to provide prescriptive guidance for CABs on what circumstances remote audits are permissible and how they should be conducted so that the consistency of assessments can be improved.

4. Scope of work

MSC would like the consultant to examine the following areas of work in two stages:

- Stage 1: on a policy/strategic level, how MSC can embed remote audit in our assurance mechanism without compromising the integrity of our CoC programme, while understanding the potential risks and impacts of remote audits
- Stage 2: on a practical level, development of guidance and protocol to help improve the consistency of remote audits.

The research will include a combination of detailed desktop analysis of certification requirements from MSC and other relevant organisations (such as ISEAL, ASI, IAF), as well as interviews with MSC internal and external key stakeholders. MSC will provide all relevant standards, guidance, policies, and the list of potential stakeholders to the successful consultant when the research commences.

Note that remote audit is defined as virtual interaction with the site in question, e.g. remote interviews or site tour, in combination with a review of client documents and other sources of data and information. The consultant should also consider the use of ‘hybrid audit’ in the research.

4.1 Activities in stage 1

1. Identify the potential risks associated with remote audits for MSC, and recommend suggestions on how to manage and mitigate the risks. The consultant should examine the following areas (note MSC will provide a confirmed list at the start of the research):
   a. Credibility of our Chain of Custody standards

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2 Using Technology and Data to Enable and Enhance Remote Audits, January 2021, ISEAL
3 Hybrid audits also known as partial, facilitated or semi-remote audits. An evolution of the remote audit, this involves combining a desk based audit with the use of a local facilitator or audit team members to help virtual lead auditors verify practices on the ground – Source: Using Technology and Data to Enable and Enhance Remote Audits
b. Retention of Certificate Holders (CHs)
c. Accessibility to new clients
d. Compliance with Global Seafood Sustainability Initiative (GSSI)
e. Assurance for CHs with vessels listed at sites or at-sea activity in scope such as harvest\(^4\)
f. Labour requirements

2. Identify the potential impacts and benefits associated with remote audits and provide suggestions to mitigate the impacts on the following key stakeholders:
   a. Conformity Assessment Bodies (CABs)
   b. Certificate Holders (CHs)
   c. Prospective companies wanting to get certified

3. Based on number 1 and 2 above, identify the circumstances where remote audits are feasible and appropriate; the following areas should be considered (not an exhaustive list):
   - types of standard version,
   - types of audits,
   - types of supply chain actors,
   - certification scope,
   - level of risks,
   - labour requirements,
   - at sea vessels etc

4. Compare the following sustainability\(^5\)/ food safety schemes on their approach to remote audits in CoC certification:
   a. Aquacultural Stewardship Council (ASC)\(^6\)
   b. Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) Certification
   c. A Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) recognised scheme such as BRC Food Safety Standard, FSSC 22000 or IFS
   d. Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)
   e. Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)

5. Examine various mechanisms for MSC to effectively manage remote audits, considering in-house and external resources. (Note that for CoC assessments the current derogation requires a risk assessment and variation request approval for initial audits).

4.2 Activities in stage 2

The focus of this stage is to develop prescriptive protocol and guidance for CABs to conduct remote audits, the consultant should take into account the results in stage 1 research (risks and impacts etc) in developing protocol and guidance. The consultant should:

6. Develop a protocol for conducting remote audits for CoC certification, which lays out the procedure for CABs to follow, this includes
   a. Description of the circumstances where remote audits are permissible and appropriate (based on 3 in 4.1);
   b. Risk assessments on information availability and ability to verify information remotely by CABs, what records to be requested and/or retained for justification etc

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\(^4\) Note the focus of this research is land-based processing but the consultant is expected to examine the risks of at-sea vessels.

\(^5\) For example in this ISEAL Guidance a number of sustainability schemes are referenced: [https://www.isealalliance.org/get-involved/resources/guidance-remote-auditing-good-practices](https://www.isealalliance.org/get-involved/resources/guidance-remote-auditing-good-practices)

\(^6\) Please note that since early 2012, ASC has used MSC’s CoC certification to cover ASC certified product supply chains.
Decision tree/ flow diagram should be utilised to facilitate understanding of the procedure involved (who do what and when etc). The consultant should include consultation with list of target stakeholders and pilot for developing the protocol.

7. Develop guidance for CABs on conducting remote audits for CoC certification audits considering different business types, including consumer serving businesses. The guidance should include pre-audit planning and preparation, evaluation process (opening meeting, interview, documentation review, closing meeting), audit findings, audit reporting, type of technology

8. Develop a briefing document for Certificate Holders (CHs) to help them understand the process and preparation required for remote audit.

5. Deliverable

Deliverable for the two different stages are outlined below.

5.1 Stage 1:

The consultant will produce a final written report based on the components stated in the scope of work. The report should contain:

- An executive summary of main conclusions and recommendations (3-4 pages)
- Detailed findings from the desktop review and interviews, including:
  - Risk analysis and mitigation measures for MSC on remote CoC audits
  - Impacts and benefits of key stakeholders on remote audits and suggestions on how to mitigate the impacts
  - Circumstances where remote audits are feasible and appropriate
  - Comparison of sustainability schemes on their approach on remote audits in CoC certification
- Recommendations on mechanisms for MSC to effectively manage remote audits, covering in-house and external resources

5.2 Stage 2:

The consultant will develop the following documents:

- A protocol for CABs that clearly defines the circumstances where remote audits are permissible and the required risk assessment.
- A guidance document that provides detailed information on how remote audits should be conducted, covering pre-audit planning and audit process
- A briefing document for Certificate Holders (CHs) to help them prepare for remote audits

The consultant should ensure alignment with ASC for the above documents whenever relevant.

6. Timeline

The research is to be carried out between end of February to October 2022.

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<tr>
<th>Application deadline</th>
<th>16 February 2022</th>
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<tr>
<td>Shortlisting</td>
<td>17 – 21 February 2022</td>
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### Decision & notification

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<tr>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start of consultancy</td>
<td>7 March 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kick-off meeting</td>
<td>Week of 7 March 2022</td>
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### Stage 1 research

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<tr>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>Progress update</td>
<td>By 30 March 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft report</td>
<td>By 6 May 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final report</td>
<td>By 27 May 2022</td>
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### Stage 2 guidance development

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<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>Draft guidance, protocol and briefing</td>
<td>By 29 July 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pilot and consultation</td>
<td>1 August – 16 September 2022</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final guidance, protocol and briefing</td>
<td>14 October 2022</td>
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Regular project coordination meetings to also be considered (regular project check in meetings and final deliverable close out meeting etc).

7. **Competency requirements**

The consultant/team of consultant should possess the following competency requirements:

- Good understanding of MSC certification especially on CoC standards and requirements.
- Proven experience in working with international Voluntary Sustainability Schemes (VSSs), especially those who are ISEAL members
- Excellent knowledge on auditing of international Voluntary Sustainability Schemes (VSSs) or other ISO standards, particularly on fishery/aquaculture will be valuable
- Demonstrated experience in developing policy/guidance and conducting remote audits
- Excellent written and verbal communications skills – including ability to communicate with technical and non-technical peers
- Excellent stakeholder engagement skills and experience working with stakeholders from diverse backgrounds
- Strong analytical skill, and ability to work in cross-functional, multi-disciplined team environment

8. **Next step**

Interested candidates are invited to submit their proposals by email with the subject header ‘Application RFP Remote Audit’ to Joyce Lam, Head of Supply Chain Standards Operations: joyce.lam@msc.org.

Deadline for submission of proposal is Wednesday 16 February 2022, the indicative budget of this work is £25,000 – 28,000. Questions, requests and applications sent after the deadline (16 February 2022) will only be considered in exceptional circumstances. Proposals responding to this Request for Proposals should be a maximum of 10 pages (excluding CVs), and include the following:

- Overview of relevant experience;
- Proposed methodology and timeline;
- Detailed and transparent budget in GBP, including time allocation and day rates.
In addition to skills, competencies and expertise, we will consider value for money and demonstrable commitment to the sustainability field to evaluate applications.

All candidates should declare any conflict of interest in conducting this work.