

The Fal Oyster PDO: Lessons Learnt



The challenge

The Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) for Fal Oysters was designed to protect and promote the Fal Oyster fishery by developing an added value supply chain. Unfortunately, the PDO failed to meet initial expectations and represents a useful case for learning from experience. We discuss the various components of the case study below looking in turn at economic, environmental, and social factors.

The case study

The PDO for Fal Oysters applies to oysters caught within the Truro Port Fishery area (Cornwall, England) and stipulates that harvesting must occur by sailing and rowing vessels using traditional methods. The initial motivation for the PDO was to generate more income for the oystermen allowing a continuation of the last commercial sailing fleet in the UK. The failure of the PDO to deliver these aspirations is shown to stem from a mismatch between the various interests of those organisations and communities involved in the production, sale, and regulation of the PDO. In part as a result of the Strength2Food case study, a Community Interest Company has now been established to take over the PDO, to be able to attract separate resources to deliver on social objectives, and as a mechanism to bring the PDO nearer to the community as a whole.

Key recommendations

- Support Fal Oyster production as a form of environmentally sustainable production
- Protect fishers from illicit appropriation of the PDO name and related falsifications
- Encourage fishers to register for certification system via multi-stakeholder dialogue
- Foster the access of new actors in the fishery to increase generational turnover

Main findings

• Economic dimension

The economic case for the Fal Oyster is on the face of it very strong. However, only 4% of sales occur through the PDO route. Why is this the case? The 2% sold at the Falmouth Oyster festival heavily skews the market; because of the timing mismatch with the closed season, it also has a negative effect on increasing mortality (as Oyster Festival stock is last season's juveniles laid inter-tidally for the summer). This also has the effect of driving down the average oyster size, reducing the availability of 85gram restaurant grade oysters, thus increasing the capacity at lower prices, but reducing the size of the stock of oysters for higher-margin (PDO) sales. Moreover, the move to PDO status was not embraced by the majority of the boats and a number of governance, regulatory, and environmental issues also create significant barriers to economic success.

• Social dimension

The PDO was initiated with a clear social agenda around restoring boats to the fleet and providing educational and work opportunities within the local community. This has struggled in part because of the lack of economic success of the PDO, in part because of a lack of connection with the wider community. However, for that trade that does occur through the PDO, the local multiplier effects are high, with every £1.00 generating £2.33 within the community.

• Environmental dimension

It is hard to imagine a more sustainable form of production. The fishery is wild, the boats have to be powered by sail, and small wooden dredges ensure minimal damage to the seabed. Only salt water pumped direct from the harbour and then back in again is used in depuration. Some problems, however, occur. Extra moorings in the summer linked to tourism can damage the oyster beds. Passing off oysters not covered in the PDO as Fal oysters has occurred, with no legal penalties incurred for those who have engaged in such falsification. Sewage released into the estuary contaminating the water and then closing the fishery makes continuity of supply very difficult with only a narrow harvesting season in the year. Other actors' behaviour thus mitigates against the success and sustainability of the fishery as a whole.

Recommendations for policy makers

Support Fal Oyster production as a form of environmentally sustainable production, which ensures minimal damage to the seabed.

Protect fishers from the illicit appropriation of the PDO name and related falsifications, through increased control systems and enforcing legal penalties for those who engage in such frauds.

Enable multi-stakeholder dialogue and community-oriented policies to encourage fishers to enter the certification system.

Foster the access of new actors in the fishery to increase generational turnover and enhance social benefits to the local communities.

Conclusions

At the heart of this case study is the question of what a PDO is for. If it is simply a way of protecting a geographical indication then a simple system can work. If the aspiration is wider and the intention is to create an engine that can bring work, income, social benefit, and opportunity to rural areas and communities which have struggled to add value then a more sophisticated approach is required. It requires the various regulatory bodies such as the harbour authority, environmental bodies, and local authorities to work together to create the opportunity for these initiatives, usually coming from individuals or groups who care deeply both about their products and their communities, not only to succeed but to act as a catalyst for change.

More info

This note was written by Adam Wilkinson, Managing Director of Impact Measurement Ltd.

More info can be found here: V. Bellassen, F. Arfini, V. Amilien, et al. (2019), Report on assessment of the social, environmental and economic sustainability of food quality schemes. Strength2Food, Deliverable n. 5.1

<https://www.strength2food.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/D5.1-Assessment-of-social-environmental-and-economic-sustainability-of-FQS-protected.pdf>

- Fal Fishery Cooperative CIC Blog: FalFisheryCoopCIC.co.uk;
- Saving ESTER the OYSTER: SavingESTER.co.uk;
- Local multiplier 3: www.lm3online.com

Recommendations for producers and producers' organisations

Protect juvenile stock and avoid driving down the average oyster size through carefully timing production season and large events (such as the Falmouth Oyster festival).

Enhance connection with the wider community through local events, dialogue, and relationship building, in order to provide educational benefits to consumers and consequent high margins for producers.



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Strength2Food is a five-year, €6.9 million project to improve the effectiveness of EU food quality schemes (FQS), public sector food procurement (PSFP) and to stimulate Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC). Lessons from the research have been applied and verified in 6 pilot initiatives that brought together academic and non-academic partners.



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