

Southern Africa checks shellfish

A new safety programme will to open up new markets for South African, Namibian and Angolan shellfish producers. **Claire Attwood** reports

In the mid-1990s, the European Union (EU) placed a ban on the export of molluscs from the Benguela region because there was no EU-approved monitoring system in place.

However, the Benguela countries – Angola, Namibia and South Africa – are now working together to establish a shellfish sanitation regime for the entire region.

This move towards greater co-operation between the three countries results from the setting up of the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem (BCLME) programme.

BCLME is a regional initiative that aims to improve the capabilities of Angola, Namibia and South Africa to manage marine resources and address environmental problems across national boundaries. It is supported by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).



This move towards greater co-operation between the three countries results from the setting up of the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem (BCLME) programme.

BCLME is a regional initiative that aims to improve the capabilities of Angola, Namibia and South Africa to manage marine resources and address environmental problems across national boundaries. It is supported by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Farms hinge on safety

BCLME's current focus on shellfish safety stems from the realisation that the growth of the aquaculture industry in Angola, Namibia and South Africa hinges, to a large extent, on the three countries' ability to meet the food safety requirements of potential trading partners.

South Africa has a well-established aquaculture industry that produces mussels and oysters for the local market, as well as a variety of abalone products for markets in the Far East.

In Namibia, aquaculture is currently limited to the production of oysters for the South African market. However, the Namibian government has identified the aquaculture industry as a focal point for development and is encouraging investors to experiment with the culture of a wide range of high value species, including abalone, scallops, mussels and finfish.

In Angola, molluscs are largely eaten by coastal residents who are not protected from the dangerous – and occasionally fatal – consequences of toxic seafood.

Other nations provide model

THE shellfish safety programme proposed for the Benguela region is



Farmed oysters from Namibia will be covered by the new safety programme.

likely to be modelled on food safety regimes adopted by other shellfish producing nations such as the EU, New Zealand and the USA.

Its establishment is being driven by Bronwen Currie and Deon Louw of Namibia's National Marine Research and Information Centre (NATMIRC). They are working with a team of international scientists, including Dr Don Anderson from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in the USA and shellfish sanitation expert Paul Anderson who runs the US Maine Sea Grant programme.

BCLME's initiative is designed to ensure that shellfish products from the Benguela region will be safety-tested in line with international standards, says Ms Currie.

The programme will comply with a number of international food safety systems and provide a regulatory environment enabling the aquaculture industry to pursue international trading partnerships.

'We are trying to lay the groundwork for development of aquaculture across

the entire region,' says Ms Currie.

The programme will be designed to include different features, including the monitoring of water quality and the evaluation of shellfish growing areas.

Regulations and guidelines for handling, tagging, storing, processing and shipping live shellfish will also be developed with a view to facilitating the traceability of shellfish grown and exported from the Benguela region.

Checking algae

ONE of the key features of the proposed shellfish safety programme is the monitoring of toxic algae (harmful algal blooms – HABs).

These are relatively common in the waters of the Benguela region, particularly in late summer and early winter when the wind triggers the growth of large plankton blooms. They often give seawater a brown or reddish tint and have killed wild and farmed fish and shellfish.

HABs are a serious threat to shellfish producers in the Benguela region – mussels and oysters filter algae out of

the water and if a particular algal species is toxic, the biotoxins concentrate in the shellfish tissues. When eaten by humans, contaminated shellfish may cause illness and even death.

One of the goals of the shellfish safety programme is to monitor the occurrence of HABs throughout the Benguela region and to ensure that farmed shellfish are regularly tested for contamination.

Although there are well-established laboratory facilities in South Africa, which enable shellfish farmers to regularly test their products for contamination, no such facility exists in Namibia. As a result, farmers incur high costs because they have to transport their samples to South African laboratories.

'We are aiming to establish an accredited laboratory in Namibia,' says Ms Currie.

The proposed laboratory would carry out a range of tests on farmed shellfish, with a view to meeting the food safety requirements of the EU and other trading partners. ■