

**Eco-certifications fail to hold Canadian fisheries and aquaculture
accountable for their full environmental impacts**

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HALIFAX, VANCOUVER — Seafood eco-certifications by two prominent organizations are falling short, according to a new report by SeaChoice, a coalition of Canada's leading sustainable seafood advocacy organizations. *What's behind the label? Assessing the impact of MSC and ASC seafood certifications in Canada* is the first review of whether the Marine Stewardship Council and Aquaculture Stewardship Council have improved sustainability in Canadian seafood production.

With two-thirds of Canadian fisheries MSC-certified, and an industry goal to achieve ASC certification for all British Columbia farmed salmon by 2020, it is crucial these eco-labels are credibly applied and delivering genuine improvements 'on the water'.

SeaChoice found that, over the past decade in Canada, MSC catalyzed engagement of the fishing industry in sustainability issues and led to important progress in management transparency, timely research and information availability. However, it has fallen short in helping reduce critical fishing impacts, such as harm to ocean habitats and threatened species. Only 15 per cent of certification requirements to improve such collateral impacts have led to tangible change in fishing practices. SeaChoice also found that deadlines for fisheries to meet mandatory improvements were often not met. Some fisheries have up to nine years *after* certification to fully achieve MSC requirements, all the while continuing to use the eco-label on products.

"Reducing the full ecosystem impacts of fisheries is necessary for a thriving ocean and so we have healthy fisheries for generations to come," says Shannon Arnold, report author and Marine Policy Coordinator at the Ecology Action Centre. "If the MSC fails to hold its fisheries accountable for promised improvements, the label will no longer act as an incentive for change. We worry it is just rewarding status quo. We need more than that to get to truly sustainable fisheries in this country."

For ASC, SeaChoice found frequent deviations from the '100 per cent compliance' it requires for the salmon standard. British Columbia farms regularly have "non-conformities" and rely on "variances" to the standard criteria to be certified. Variances to overcome minor technical difficulties (e.g., a missed sampling date because of bad weather) make sense, but variances in B.C. frequently change standards or defer to government. "It has never been more important to reduce the impacts of open-net aquaculture on wild salmon," says Kelly Roebuck, report author and SeaChoice representative from Living Oceans Society. "Yet,

after only two years, ASC is undermining any potential improvements by overriding the multi-stakeholder agreements that established the standard in order to accommodate industry norms.”

SeaChoice also found the full impact of farmed salmon is often not assessed because up to a year of the production cycle may never be audited against the ASC standard. ASC’s suspension and revocation rules for certified farms that violate the standard’s requirements also appear inadequate or underused. One certified farm that experienced several sea lion deaths, a breach that would have prevented initial certification, has twice successfully sent salmon to market with the ASC label.

“While MSC and ASC are the leading seafood-certification systems, our analysis revealed very real risks to the credibility and application of both labelling schemes,” says Susanna Fuller, SeaChoice steering committee member. “This ultimately leads to a lack of trust in the standards and the certification processes. MSC and ASC must address key concerns we identified if they truly aim to contribute to a sustainable future for our oceans.”

SeaChoice is committed to working with both certification schemes on recommended improvements as well as with government regulatory agencies to ensure that Canada’s laws and policies for fisheries and aquaculture operations set a high bar for sustainability. SeaChoice representatives will be attending the World Seafood Congress which starts today in Reykavik, Iceland where eco-certifications, seafood traceability and labelling are key topics of discussion.

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About SeaChoice

SeaChoice is a collaboration of three internationally recognized organizations — the David Suzuki Foundation, Ecology Action Centre and Living Oceans Society — that use their broad, national expertise to find solutions for healthy oceans. SeaChoice is working toward a new and ambitious goal of increasing sustainability throughout the entire seafood supply chain, from water to table. SeaChoice is a member organization of the Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions, and works with consumers, retailers, suppliers, government and producers to accomplish its objectives. For over a decade, SeaChoice member organizations have participated in MSC and ASC standard advisory committees (including the Salmon Aquaculture Dialogue Steering Committee), contributed to their standard development consultations and actively engaged on fishery and farm audits.

Background information

Reports can be downloaded here:

What's behind the label? Assessing the impact of MSC and ASC seafood certifications in Canada

<http://www.seachoice.org/whats-behind-the-label/>

The review

What's behind the label? Assessing the impact of MSC and ASC seafood certifications in Canada is the first review undertaken of all Canadian MSC and ASC certifications. It examines if and how these third-party schemes are contributing to improving the environmental sustainability of Canadian fisheries and aquaculture operations.

Marine Stewardship Council Review (MSC) key findings

- Since 2008, 36 MSC certifications have been granted in Canada, covering 80 per cent of fisheries landings by value and 66 per cent of landings by volume.
- In many cases, MSC has acted as a catalyst for increased data transparency, improved research and analysis and more timely policy implementation from the government.
- MSC Fishery certification holders and Fisheries and Oceans Canada respond to MSC certification requirements and have invested resources to meet some of the certification milestones as demonstrated by efforts to complete conditions of certification related to the target stock and management policies.
- SeaChoice's analysis identified major concerns with the how the MSC certification is being implemented in Canada including:
 - ◆ Only 15 per cent of certification requirements for improvements of a fishery's impact on the ecosystem and habitat or bycatch and threatened species result in fisheries making tangible changes in how they fished.
 - ◆ Timeline extensions and flexible interpretation of standard requirements are reducing MSC's credibility in Canada.
 - ◆ Due to time extensions and generous allowances for fisheries to meet requirements these fisheries are taking 7 – 9 years from when the labelled product is on the shelves to be at MSC "global best practice" level.
 - ◆ Fisheries have lost MSC certification when the health of their target fishing stock went below acceptable population levels, however no Canadian fishery has lost their MSC certification for failing to meet deadlines to improve impacts on bycatch species, endangered species, or damage to ocean floor habitat
 - ◆ With the majority of Canadian fisheries MSC-certified, there may be little leverage left for further improvements until the MSC Fishery Standard requirements are raised and more strictly implemented.

- ◆ Stakeholder comments are rarely substantively addressed, despite significant time commitments to engaging in the third-party certification.

In light of these findings, SeaChoice views the best strategic engagement with MSC in Canada is 1) working to improve remaining non-certified fisheries in their “pre-MSC assessment” phase; 2) raising the bar for minimum best practice required by the MSC standard; and 3) ensuring credible and rigorous application of new certification requirements. SeaChoice believes the most significant opportunity to affect sustainability improvements in Canadian fisheries is through direct engagement in government fisheries management processes and industry outreach.

Aquaculture Stewardship Council Review (ASC) findings

- Around 25 per cent of active B.C. salmon farms are ASC-certified, with the first farm certified in 2015.
- Direct operational reduction in environmental impacts as a result of certification are therefore difficult to determine.
- Emerging patterns of implementation of the salmon standard in Canada suggest the ASC is lowering its sustainability bar to accommodate current industry practices. Key examples include:
 - ◆ ASC’s claim of 100 per cent compliance to be certified is misleading.
 - ◆ A total of 167 non-conformities have been raised against B.C. salmon farms, and variances deviating from the standard criteria have been used 64 times.
 - ◆ Without the approved sea lice variances, no B.C. salmon farm would be certified had the standard been applied as written.
 - ◆ At least nine farms were certified without assessment of their intermediary farm stage, leaving up to a year from the production cycle unassessed for compliance.
 - ◆ ASC’s suspension and revocation rules were found to be inadequate. The rules allow for certified farms in major violation of the standard’s requirements that would have otherwise disqualified them from initial certification to enter the marketplace with the ASC label.

SeaChoice identified several leverage points and offers key recommendations to strengthen the eco-certification scheme over the long term, particularly as significant changes are expected in the ASC scheme in 2017-2018. These include harmonizing all individual single species standards under one standard and enabling groups of farm sites to be certified at once (i.e., instead of individually). SeaChoice argues that these shifts will move the ASC further away from the original intent of the multi-stakeholder agreements that established the standard(s).