

ASC's new sea lice limits protects industry, not wild salmon

September 7th, 2022: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Halifax/Kjipuktuk AND Vancouver/traditional unceded territories of the xwməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səilwətał (Tsleil-waututh) First Nations — The salmon farming industry's go to eco-certifier, the Aquaculture Stewardship Council, continues to weaken its standard for certified farms. It is now prioritizing business-as-usual practices over protecting vulnerable wild salmon and sea trout from farm-derived sea lice.

The ASC's new Salmon Standard (v1.4) dramatically increases — up to 1,550 per cent in some regions — the number of sea lice allowed on certified farms. The revised standard removes the precautionary maximum sea lice limit, which was established through technical expertise and multi-stakeholder dialogues and was meant to hold farms to a higher standard than what is merely legally required of them.

Instead of a scientific robust lice limit for farms seeking the ASC label to earn a premium price in the marketplace, the ASC is allowing fish to be certified as “responsibly farmed” as long as they meet status quo sea lice limits set by governments. Such lice limits have failed to protect out-migrating juvenile wild salmon from farm-generated sea lice.

“Over the past decade, sea lice outbreaks on farms have worsened and drug resistance has accelerated, while regulations and enforcement are either insufficient or non-existent,” said Kilian Stehfest, SeaChoice representative from David Suzuki Foundation. “This should be reason enough to tighten sea lice requirements. Instead, the certification scheme's decision to default to local laws means it no longer pushes industry to do better. It supports the status quo and the serious risk to wild fish populations that represents.”

Not only do wild salmon lose under the revision, but so do decimated sea trout populations. They're particularly vulnerable to sea lice infections because they spend much of their lives in coastal waters alongside salmon farms in regions such as Norway and Scotland. Recently, researchers found more than 50 per cent of sampled sea trout had critical infestation levels and called for Norway, arguably the leader in sea lice management, to include sea trout in its sea lice regime.

“ASC asserts that it is the gold standard of salmon certification. Yet, throughout the 2021 juvenile wild salmon out-migration period, five of one company's six Scottish operational ASC-certified farms consistently breached ASC's sea lice limit,” said Wildfish Scotland director Andrew Graham-Stewart. “However, these farms remain certified by ASC. Now, by substantially lowering the bar on its sea lice standard, ASC has at a stroke further devalued the dubious credibility of its certification.”

The revision includes a new 21-day deadline for farms to bring lice levels down below the limit or face not being able to use the ASC label. “While we hope this means we will no longer see ASC-certified farms with sea lice levels as high as 31 lice per fish sold into the marketplace, nothing prevents a farm

during that three-week period from harvesting and selling their fish with the 'farmed responsibly' label," said Kelly Roebuck, SeaChoice representative from Living Oceans Society.

During the consultation phase of the sea lice revision, multiple conservation groups argued that the ASC must go beyond mere government regulations to remain a credible and meaningful certifier.

"Unfortunately, the ASC did not heed the calls of the conservation community. There is nothing "responsible" about placing juvenile wild salmon at risk," concluded Roebuck.

Note: The absence of other eco-certifications from this news release should not be taken as an endorsement for those schemes.

-end-

Media contacts:

Karen Wristen, Executive Director of Living Oceans Society and SeaChoice Steering Committee member: mobile 604-788-5634; email kwristen@livingoceans.org

Kilian Stehfest, Marine Conservation Specialist at David Suzuki Foundation and SeaChoice representative: mobile 778-686-7472; email kstehfest@davidsuzuki.org

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 a science-based, solutions-focused influencer, advocate and watchdog leading the next evolution of seafood sustainability in Canada.

SeaChoice member groups have been active stakeholders in the ASC and Salmon Aquaculture Dialogue for over 15 years. This included steering committee representation during the original Dialogue, core participation in numerous ASC advisory and working groups, active stakeholder engagement on ASC audits and projects and public watchdogging of the ASC.

About WildFish: WildFish (formerly known as Salmon & Trout Conservation) is a conservation charity working to protect wild fish and their waters. Using science and the law, its dedicated team campaigns to influence government policy, industrial practice and individual behaviour. Its goal is the measurable improvement of the state of the water environment so we can enjoy healthier wild fish stocks, improved biodiversity and less pollution in our rivers, lakes and oceans.

Backgrounder:

The Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC)

Founded in 2010, the [ASC](#) is one of the most prominent certification and labelling programs for farmed seafood. Approximately 45 per cent of the global salmon farming industry is ASC-certified.

The ASC salmon standard

The ASC salmon standard was established in 2012 following a multi-stakeholder process known as the Salmon Aquaculture Dialogue. The standard criteria claims to eliminate or minimize the environmental and social impacts of aquaculture. Third-party auditing companies assess farm clients against the standard and grant certification. [Version 1.4](#) of the standard was published on September 5, 2022.

ASC's new version of the Salmon Standard — sea lice changes

In 2019, ASC began an operational review of its sea lice criteria. Prior to this, the ASC had begun [exempting](#) British Columbian farms from needing to meet sea lice criteria; farms instead deferred to Canada's sea lice regime, which resulted in salmon from ASC farms with lice loads [up to 31 lice](#) per fish entering the marketplace with their "farmed responsibly" label. The publication of salmon standard v1.4, confirms that all major salmon farming regions operating in wild salmon habitat will now defer to government-defined limits. Farms will have 21 days to bring lice loads below the limit when an exceedance occurs; if not, they will not be able to use the ASC label.

Significant increase in the number of allowed sea lice permitted on farms

The revision replaces the precautionary 0.1 female lice per farmed fish established by multi-stakeholder Salmon Aquaculture Dialogues, and defers to local regulators' defined sea lice limits for the wild salmon out-migration period. For Scotland, a voluntary industry code of conduct limit is used. All regions see a significant increase in the number of sea lice allowed on ASC farms.

Comparison of ASC's previous and new sea lice (*L. salmonis*) limits

Region	Previous limit	New limit	Increase
Canada (B.C.)	0.1 mature female	3 motile*	540-1550%
Faroe Islands		0.5 adult female	400%
Iceland		0.5 mature female	400%
Ireland		0.3 ovigerous female	200%
Norway		0.2 adult female	100%
Scotland		0.5 adult female	400%

*Equivalent to 0.64-1.65 adult females according to DFO.

Caligus sea lice impacts to wild salmon ignored

ASC-certified B.C. farms are excluded from a Caligus sea lice on-farm limit via deferral to the government's *L. salmonis* regime. This ignores evidence that suggests that salmon farms can act as additional [host reservoirs](#) of Caligus and that infestation [negatively impacts](#) wild salmon. Instead, B.C. farms need only "monitor" Caligus numbers — something salmon farmers have been doing since 2011 as part of their government licence conditions.

At-risk sea trout and "ocean-type" Chinook ignored

ASC's new sea lice standards also defer to regionally government-defined "sensitive periods" for the timing of out-migrating juvenile wild salmon. ASC-certified farms will not have to limit their sea lice numbers outside of these periods.

This ignores the reality that some species of wild salmon and sea trout remain in coastal waters in proximity to salmon farms *other* times of the year (i.e., outside the "sensitive period") and are negatively impacted by sea lice. For example:

- The Norwegian and Irish regulations and Scotland's industry code's defined sensitive periods do not adequately address sea trout, which are particularly vulnerable to sea lice infestations due to their life history of "largely spending their marine phase in coastal waters, where [salmon lice have the highest impact](#)." For example: Norwegian [researchers](#) found more than 50 per cent of sampled sea trout had more than 0.3 lice per gram fish, the defined critical infestation level for sea trout. They argue that regulations ought to include sea trout.
- B.C., Canada's defined sensitive period fails to factor in "ocean-type" West Coast Vancouver Island Chinook that [remain](#) within a few hundred kilometres of their natal stream until at least their second year at sea (unlike most salmon); making them [more at risk](#) to the immediate impacts of sea lice infestations.

Conservation groups overwhelmingly critiqued ASC's deferral to local regulation

The following excerpt quotes are from different conservation groups, as part of ASC's sea lice [consultations](#):

"We think it is inappropriate to defer to local legislation when setting sea lice load thresholds. ASC should use data on-farm performance in these regions and benchmark the thresholds to the top 15% of performance, as reference in the Theory of Change."

"ASC must go beyond regulation to be considered a robust and meaningful certification standard."

"ASC must not accept or portray this as a sad but inevitable trade-off between fish health and wild fish survival."

"In general, WWF is concerned that in particular the levels being set for BC of 3, which is in line with legislation there are (sic) a weakening of the ASC standard. ASC should represent a higher bar than legal requirements."