

## Alaska's Sustainable Fisheries

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Alaskan fisheries serve as the world model for how to responsibly manage and maintain a seafood fishery for long-term sustainability. (Photo courtesy of Susan Bronson)

Overharvesting is a major problem for many fisheries around the world. Such is not the case for the Alaskan seafood industry. In fact, sustainability is written into the state's constitution. Because of this, Alaskan fisheries serve as the world model for how to responsibly manage and maintain a seafood fishery for long-term sustainability.

The seafood industry is a key player in the Alaskan economy. The fishing and seafood processing industries employ more people than any other industry in the state. In addition, over 50 percent of the seafood caught in the wild and sold in the United States comes from the Alaska. Salmon, halibut, and king crab are just a few of the many seafood species harvested from Alaskan waters.

According to the Alaskan Seafood Marketing Institute (ASMI), the state's seafood industry adheres to two basic management principles. First, all parties involved take care to not harm the fish, other marine plants and animals, or the environment. And second, fish populations are never overfished.

In Alaska, fishery management is based on scientific data. Using the most recent research, fishery biologists calculate the Acceptable Biological Catch, or ABC, which is the maximum number of fish that can be sustainably caught. This value is a much smaller than the total number of each fish species in the ocean. Next, scientists determine the Total Allowable Catch, or TAC. This amount represents the total number of fish that can be legally harvested during the season. The TAC never exceeds the ABC, and this ensures that Alaska's fish populations are never overharvested. In other words, scientific researchers ensure that the number of fish that can be legally harvested never exceeds the number required for population sustainability.

To ensure the above goal is met, several different management practices have been set in place. These include:

- Time-and-area closures
- Boat size restrictions
- Fishing gear restrictions
- Fishing gear prohibitions

Regulations spell out what type of fishing gear can be used to harvest which species of fish. For example, while cod and black cod can be harvested by trawling or long line, halibut can only be harvested by long line. While this may seem somewhat inconsequential, regulations such as these help to protect marine ecosystems by preventing "by-catch," or, that is, the harvesting of unwanted species along with the target species.

Alaska Department of Safety's Wildlife Troopers, National Marine Fisheries Service Office for Law Enforcement, and members of the U.S. Coast Guard are charged with enforcing these regulations. Enforcement includes monitoring both fishing operations and seafood processors. Most Alaskan fisheries are certified as sustainable. One of the more common certifications comes from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), under the auspices of the FAO-Based Model for Responsible Fisheries Management Code. These are the world's most comprehensive and highly respected fisheries management guidelines. They were created through a collaboration among fishery biologists, environmental organizations, and fishery managers from all over the world.

Until recently, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), a London-based nongovernmental organization provided third-party certification for most of Alaska's fisheries. However, ASMI recently introduced their own certification scheme. Like the MSC certification program, ASMI's is based on the United Nations FAO Code and FAO Guidelines for the Ecolabeling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries. A third-party certification body provides independent assessment and certification of Alaska's fisheries. Given that sustainability is literally written into Alaska's state constitution, third-party certification is not really required for the state's fisheries. However, because many customers are interested in purchasing sustainable seafood, labeling remains important, particularly for those in European markets where such labeling is particularly recognized.

Earlier this year, controversy arose when it was discovered that some governmental agencies were requesting third-party certification (such as that provided by the MSC) to ensure that purchased seafood came from sustainable fisheries. Because many of Alaska's fisheries are no longer a part of MSC-certification programs, questions arose as to whether their seafood products could be purchased. For example, without MSC-certification, as part of its newly-initiated "Healthy and Sustainable Food Program," the National Park Service refused to allow its concessions operations to sell non-third-party certified Alaskan salmon.

In September, Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) introduced legislation (called the [Responsible Seafood Certification and Labeling Act](#)) that would prohibit all federal agencies from using third-party non-governmental organization certification programs to consider or label domestic catch as sustainable. Not only would federal agencies (or vendors located on federal properties) be prohibited from requiring third-party sustainability certification for any purchased fish or seafood, but they would also be prohibited from referencing any third-party certification schemes or seafood sustainability standards in the development of guidelines, regulations, or policies. While this legislation remains in committee, in the meantime, both the National Park Service and the General Services Administration (GSA) have removed any requirements that purchased fish or seafood products have third-party certification.

### More to Explore

- [Alaska Seafood Certification](#)
- [Alaska Seafood Sustainability](#)
- [Alaska Seafood Sustainability in Plain English](#)
- [Alaska Pushes Back on 'Sustainable Seafood' Label Denied by Marine Stewardship Council](#)
- [UNFAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries](#)
- [FAO-Based Responsible Fisheries Management Certification](#)
- [Marine Stewardship Council – Track a Fishery](#)

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