

Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch®

Eco-certification Benchmarking Project

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Eco-certification Benchmarking Project

Section 1: Introduction

The Monterey Bay Aquarium’s Seafood Watch program strongly supports the concept of independent eco-certification programs to identify sustainable seafood options. Seafood Watch is working to recognize fisheries and aquaculture operations that have been certified by an eco-certification program whose standard, or standards, are consistent with at least a Seafood Watch yellow “Good Alternative” rating.

1.1: The goals

Our motivation for this work stems from business partners looking for guidance as they navigate a marketplace of proliferating eco-certification programs. We are also working to eliminate redundancies in the broader sustainable seafood movement by not researching fisheries and aquaculture operations that have already undergone assessment against a robust standard. In addition, we intend our findings to inform improvements in the standards of eco-certification programs that were not found to be consistent with at least a Seafood Watch yellow “Good Alternative” rating in this first benchmarking project.

1.2: Which standards were benchmarked?

As of April 19, 2013, we have compared 29 standards from 10 eco-certification programs against the Seafood Watch criteria for assessing the environmental sustainability of fishing and aquaculture operations.

Standards Assessed		
Aquaculture Stewardship Council: Salmon	Friend of the Sea: Farmed Atlantic Salmon	Marine Stewardship Council
Aquaculture Stewardship Council: Pangasius	Friend of the Sea: Farmed Prawn	Naturland: Carp
Aquaculture Stewardship Council: Tilapia	Friend of the Sea: Farmed Mussel	Naturland: Fresh Water Fishes
Aquaculture Stewardship Council: Bivalves	Friend of the Sea: Farmed Arctic Char	Naturland: Gadidae (cod)
Aquaculture Stewardship Council: Shrimp	Friend of the Sea: Wild Fisheries	Naturland: Mussels
Canada Organic: Salmon	Global Aquaculture Alliance: Shrimp	Naturland: Salmonidae
Canada Organic: Shellfish	Global Aquaculture Alliance: Tilapia	Naturland: Shrimp
Certified Quality Salmon EcoStandard	Global Aquaculture Alliance: Salmon	Thai Code of Conduct
Certified Quality Salmon Saltwater Rearing	Global Aquaculture Alliance: Pangasius	Thai GAP (Good Aquaculture Practice)

Table 1: Eco-certification programs' standards benchmarked (as of April 19, 2013)

These standards were identified in consultation with internal Seafood Watch staff and the North American NGOs (FishWise, Ocean Wise & SeaChoice) that utilize Seafood Watch science as the basis for their seafood buying recommendations. Priority was given to those standards most prevalent in the North American market and those of particular interest to our business partners.

Section 2.0: The process/methodology for assessing equivalency

The benchmarking project began in January 2012 with two external contractors (University of Victoria, Seafood Ecology Research Group and Blueyou Consulting) assessing aquaculture and fishery standards, respectively. Third parties were specifically utilized to address any claim of bias or pre-judgment by Seafood Watch.

There were two phases to the process: First, standards were mapped to the Seafood Watch criteria to ensure a true comparison could be made. Second, the 'worst case' fishery or farm that could be certified to each standard was assessed via the Seafood Watch criteria. If the 'worst case' fishery or farm earned at least a Seafood Watch yellow "Good Alternative" rating, the standard was deemed 'equivalent' and we would be confident recommending their certified fisheries (or farms) as procurement options for our audiences.

Section 3.0: The results

The benchmarking results for standards that were found to be equivalent to at least a "Good Alternative" can be found on the Seafood Watch Eco-Certification [webpage](#).

3.1: Results communications

Only the findings regarding those standards identified as equivalent are publically available at www.seafoodwatch.org. Seafood Watch has communicated all the findings directly to the eco-certification programs concerned to inform improvements to the standards that were included in this study. To access the findings for those standards not found to be equivalent to a Seafood Watch yellow "Good Alternative" rating please contact the eco-certification programs directly.

The equivalent eco-certification standards will eventually be highlighted in Seafood Watch outreach tools for consumers, chefs and businesses. Should a business wish to label or reference the eco-certification of a product at point of sale, it must contact the eco-certification program to determine the requirements. Seafood Watch's recognition of eco-certified seafood is not intended to supersede an eco-certification program's own requirements with respect to eco-labeling, chain of custody documentation, etc.

Section 4.0: Frequently Asked Questions

4.1: How is Seafood Watch different from an eco-certification program?

Seafood Watch assesses the current performance of fisheries and aquaculture operations against our criteria for environmental sustainability. Based on these assessments, we distribute Seafood Watch recommendations as to which seafood consumers and businesses should “Avoid”, and which are “Best Choice” and “Good Alternatives”.

Robust eco-certification programs offer more assurances and can set fisheries and aquaculture operations up for continued improvement. For example, to maintain eco-certification many programs require annual audits or may certify a fishery or fish farm but set strict timelines for completing specific improvements. Importantly, eco-certification can provide chain-of-custody traceability of the product from source to point of sale.

4.2: Why did you carry out this benchmarking project?

The Monterey Bay Aquarium strongly supports the concept of independent eco-certification programs that can identify sustainable seafood options, and reward fisheries and farms that are environmentally responsible. Our motivation for this project stems from business partners seeking guidance as they navigate a marketplace of proliferating eco-certification schemes. We are also working to eliminate redundancies within the broader sustainable seafood movement by deferring to fisheries and aquaculture operations that have already undergone assessment against a robust standard. In addition, we intend that our findings will potentially inform improvements to the standards of eco-certification programs that were not found to be equivalent, and will outline a roadmap for other standards that would like to be recommended by Seafood Watch as an option to ‘buy’ along with our existing green “Best Choice” and yellow “Good Alternative” recommendations.

4.3: What do you mean by ‘realistic worst case scenario’?

To ensure that Seafood Watch can confidently defer to an eco-certified fishery or farm we need to make certain that the standard – when applied in the real world – will be equivalent to at least a Seafood Watch yellow “Good Alternative” recommendation. To do so, we benchmarked the score of the worst-performing farm or fishery capable of being eco-certified against our own assessment criteria. We are not actively pursuing a theoretical worst case score; the ‘realistic worst case scenario’ has to represent a real-world situation. The benchmarking reports for each individual program (or standard within a program) detail the ‘realistic worst case scenario’ we used in each assessment.

4.4: What does it mean if a standard did not rate as equivalent?

At this time, Seafood Watch will not recommend this standard to seafood buyers. However it should be noted that this does not mean that *all* fisheries/farms certified to that standard are below a Seafood Watch yellow “Good Alternative” rating. But because we used a ‘realistic worst case scenario’ we found that some standards *could* certify a fishery or farm that would not meet our criteria for at least a Seafood Watch yellow “Good Alternative” rating. Accordingly we are not able – with confidence – to defer to that standard overall as a ‘buy’ recommendation at this time. We will continue, however, to try and work with the eco-certification programs to improve these standards so that we may be able to recommend them in the future.

4.5: How can an equivalent certified farm/fishery have an existing red “Avoid” recommendation?

It is feasible for a farm/fishery certified by an equivalent eco-certification standard (i.e. benchmarked to a minimum of a Seafood Watch yellow “Good Alternative” rating) to have a Seafood Watch red “Avoid” rating. There are a few explanations for this:

1. The benchmarking analysis was carried out using our revised assessment criteria, which were published in January 2012. Some of our existing recommendations are still based on our old assessment criteria.
2. In a generically named fishery certification, the ‘unit of certification’ may not fully align with the Seafood Watch assessment scope. Therefore different performance levels could be measured, resulting in ultimately different results.
3. For aquaculture, Seafood Watch carries out assessments at the country/region level; we do not conduct farm-level assessments. It is feasible, indeed likely, that an individual farm or farms could be operating at a higher level of performance than the ‘average’ and thus be certified by a standard that benchmarks at a Seafood Watch yellow “Good Alternative” or green “Best Choice” equivalent level despite the country/region level being a red “Avoid”.

Going forward, Seafood Watch will not be assessing fisheries that have been certified to equivalent standards and the likelihood of such discrepancies is therefore minimized. Should such a discrepancy arise we will maintain our Seafood Watch report recommendation and postpone deferral until a re-assessment produces a Seafood Watch yellow “Good Alternative” or green “Best Choice” recommendation.

4.6: What about certifications that are ‘controversial’ or in a formal objection process?

In some circumstances, Seafood Watch may determine that an automatic deferral will not be applied and may undertake an independent assessment to ensure whether the fishery/farm in question is actually equivalent to a Seafood Watch “Good Alternative” recommendation. Information about objections or evidence can be submitted to sfwresearch@mbayaq.org.

4.7: I thought you were also assessing the credibility of eco-certification programs?

At the start of our project we had every intention of assessing the credibility of eco-certification programs. As Seafood Watch has become more engaged in the Global Seafood Sustainability Initiative (GSSI) and learned more about the forthcoming [ISEAL comparison tool](#) we have made a strategic decision to release our study results without this component. We will instead await any developments

with respect to these initiatives. In the interim we will be clear in communicating to our audiences (especially our business partners) that our benchmarking only considered equivalency against the Seafood Watch sustainability criteria. We will advise buyers to seek any additional reassurance regarding credibility from the respective eco-certification programs.

4.8: If not currently found to be equivalent, how can a standard be recognized in the future?

Seafood Watch is a member of the Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions, and we're committed to eco-certification strengthening. Should any standard be interested in having Seafood Watch promote them as a 'buy' option, the eco-certification programs can use our benchmarking assessment to identify which components of its standard should be modified and strengthened. We welcome the opportunity to work with eco-certification programs to achieve this, and will work with any organizations interested in being recognized by Seafood Watch.

4.9: Can I see the results of the standards not found to be equivalent?

We have circulated all the results to the eco-certification programs. Please contact them directly to review their results.

4.10: What about other prevalent standards not included in this study?

Seafood Watch anticipates that this exercise will be a dynamic and ongoing process. We will re-assess eco-certification standards should improvements be made, and are willing to assess standards not included in the original study. Please contact Seafood Watch as fwresearch@mbayaq.org with any requests.