



Aquaculture  
Stewardship  
Council

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# ASC Theory of Change

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The ASC certification and labelling program promotes and rewards responsible fish farming practices when it influences the choices people make when buying seafood.

## Introduction

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Over half of the seafood consumed globally comes from aquaculture. It is the fastest growing food-production system in the world. As the sector grows, so does its footprint on the environment and local communities.

The Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) is an independent, not-for-profit organization that operates a certification and labelling program based on a set of scientifically robust standards that assess whether fish farms are operated responsibly.

The standards are helping to transform aquaculture towards environmental sustainability and social responsibility, by promoting and rewarding responsible farming practices and influencing the choices people make when buying seafood.

Seafood products from farms that meet the ASC's standards can bear the ASC

logo. Through the use of the ASC consumer-facing logo, purchasing decisions are reinforced.

The ASC adds value to certified farms by working collaboratively with the fish farming industry, seafood business sector, scientific community, environmental groups and other stakeholders; and by promoting the purchasing and sale of certified seafood using the ASC logo.

## Creating market incentives to improve global aquaculture

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The ASC is a market-based program designed to create incentives to reward responsible farming practices. When any buyer chooses to purchase ASC certified fish, certified farms are rewarded for their responsible practices through that market preference. ASC and its partners encourage processors, suppliers, retailers and end consumers to give priority to purchasing seafood from ASC certified

farms and to demonstrate this through use of the ASC logo.

Globally, buyers in major markets are making strong commitments to purchase up to 100 per cent of their farmed seafood products from ASC certified farms, and these commitments are increasing. ASC's supporters include leading retailers, global A-brands and prominent supply chain actors<sup>1</sup>.

These purchasing preferences increase the global demand and market access for certified sustainable seafood, providing the critical incentives needed for farms to undergo the rigorous and transparent assessments required in the ASC program. The same incentives also provide a significant influence on many farms that are operating below the performance requirements defined in the ASC standards. If such farms want to enjoy these market rewards, they will need to reduce any damaging environmental and social impacts they make and improve their operations to become eligible for certification. This 'pull' for certification and the improved performance required **reduces adverse environmental and social impacts**. It also enables farms to compete better in a global marketplace that increasingly demands proof of environmental and social stewardship.

ASC is not alone in seeking to improve global aquaculture – many stakeholders work towards this goal, using an array of approaches. The ASC's market-based approach is designed to complement them, so that collectively we will contribute to significantly reducing the environmental and social impacts of fish farming.

### The ASC Standards: defining responsible fish farming

Assessing a fish farm's operating systems and their environmental and social impacts is complex. But the basic concept is simple – a farm must conform to best

<sup>1</sup> For a full list of supporters see ASC's website: [www.asc-aqua.org](http://www.asc-aqua.org)

practice<sup>2</sup> limits with respect to its environmental impact and its adherence to accepted social norms.

Global best practice performance requirements for farms were defined during the development of the standards. The ASC standards outline practices, typically as a metric based indicator, that are only found within the best operated farms globally. Collectively they represent a challenging but achievable test for farms wishing to demonstrate compliance with the ASC's farm standards.



The ASC's standards for responsible farming are based on seven core principles, which require:

- legal compliance with national laws and local regulations
- site management of the farm's impact on local natural habitat and diversity
- conservation of water resources
- responsible use of feed and energy resources
- conservation of species diversity and wild populations
- improved fish health through better stocking densities and control of antibiotics and chemicals
- farms to be socially responsible towards their workers and the local community.

Within each principle a number of metric-based Performance Indicators (PI) are defined that establish the best practice

<sup>2</sup> ASC definition of 'best practice': at the launch of a standard, approximately 15 per cent of the best performing farms will be able to meet that standard's requirements.

performance levels required. Collectively these PIs describe a benchmark that was developed when the standards were defined based on the collective experience of over 2,000 stakeholders worldwide.

The ASC program allows farms to receive qualified ASC certification in circumstances where at the time of assessment they do not meet all of the performance requirements for each PI but agree a timeframe acceptable to the auditor for so doing. When this occurs a non-conformity is raised by the certifier that requires the farm to take remedial action to bring the farm into compliance with the standard within a defined period. Non-conformities are classified into major and minor. A farm must resolve all major non-conformities either prior to certification or within three months if a certificate has already been issued. Minor non-conformities must be resolved within 24 months, unless a grouping of minor non-conformities are determined by the certifier to require more immediate resolution.

The ASC believes that the improvements required to resolve non-conformities is a positive outcome for the farms and is directly in line with the ASC's vision. This is one of the three tenets of ASC's theory of change. The other two include the improvements required to take place prior to assessment and, finally, the evolution of the performance requirements to maintain best practices as they improve over time.

A farm certificate is valid for three years following the initial assessment, provided that annual surveillance audits establish that the farm continues to meet the ASC standard and is making adequate progress on required performance improvements.

### [Assuring credibility through independent assessment and robust process](#)

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ASC adheres to the most rigorous international processes applicable to certification programs, including the UN Food and Agriculture Organization guidelines and the ISEAL Codes of Good Practice. ASC makes use of third-parties to assess farms against its standards. It is

the third-party certifier who determines whether to award certification, not the ASC. The ASC is not involved in the contractual arrangements between the farm and the certifier nor does it receive any financial remuneration from these transactions.

The assessments are carried out by professional certification companies, who are themselves held accountable and overseen by a separate accreditation organisation. This approach is used in all credible certification and audit programs.

To ensure rigor and objectivity, the assessment process is highly transparent and is open to the scrutiny of all interested parties. A farm's intent to be audited is posted publicly on the ASC website 30-days prior to the scheduled audit. Anyone interested in or having an issue with a particular farm and its audit can contact the auditor and comment. The assessment is undertaken by a highly qualified audit team employed by the certifier. Team members must not only possess recognized auditor qualifications but also have attended standard-specific training and passed related exams.



Following an assessment, the certifier and team produce a report of the assessment results. The draft report outlines the achievement of the farm against each performance indicator (PI) within the standard and the related justification for why it has met (or not met) each PI. This report is posted on ASC's website. There is a public comment period during which stakeholders can provide input to inform the outcome of the assessment. The final report incorporating all public comments and associated changes is then produced. This determines whether the farm does or

does not meet the ASC standard.

The final report and determination can also be questioned by any party who participated in the assessment through an appeal to the independent accreditation company. An appeal against the certifier's performance related to the PI justifications or the assessment process will be heard and judged in accordance with the Appeals Procedure established by the ASC and operated by ASI.

Once certified, farms and other segments of the seafood supply chain are eligible to use the ASC logo or otherwise claim that products from that farm are responsibly produced. Use of the ASC logo or the claim requires further independent verification and assurance of traceability. The ASC requires all companies processing certified seafood to have in place traceability systems that ensure no product mixing or substitution can occur. Checks that confirm a product's unadulterated progress through the supply chain are undertaken.



### Improving aquaculture's performance towards environmental sustainability and social responsibility

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A core tenet of economics is the powerful effect of incentives and how they shape behaviour. This is at the heart of the

ASC's market-based program. Many of the first farms that will undertake an assessment against an ASC standard are well operated and will probably not need to make more than a few changes to meet the standard. These pioneers will provide the foundation for ASC to become established and the market's recognition of these farms will provide the necessary incentives for other farms to follow.

Many farms that will subsequently achieve certification will have to make more substantial changes prior to entering the assessment process, to reduce damaging environmental and social impacts they create and to meet the ASC standard. And this is where the ASC will deliver its greatest contribution towards promoting environmental sustainability and social responsibility. There are already many examples globally where farms are engaging with governments and NGOs to take the actions needed to improve their performance.

In many of these cases, farms are using the ASC standards as the benchmark against which to measure their current performance and are creating 'aquaculture improvement plans' and partnerships to address performance issues identified.

The improvements that the ASC program encourages will promote the future stewardship of the aquaculture industry, minimizing damaging environmental impacts and promoting social responsibility. These transformations are the expectation of the ASC; and an unprecedented example of how a market-based program can promote farming practices towards a more environmentally sustainable and socially responsible future.

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