ASC - a global initiative to move aquaculture towards sustainable farming practices

The Aquaculture Stewardship Council’s (ASC) mission is to transform fish farming towards environmental sustainability and social responsibility.

ASC works with stakeholders around the world including farmers, seafood processors, retail and foodservice companies, scientists, government agencies, and other NGOs. Together these stakeholders developed the credible and robust ASC standards for responsible aquaculture.

ASC operates an exciting and ambitious certification and labelling programme that helps drive improvements in aquaculture by encouraging farms to adopt more responsible practices.

A year of growth

This year ASC celebrated its fifth anniversary, announcing there are now more than 150 ASC certified farms and close to 3,000 ASC labelled products globally.

Notable work over the last year includes moving ahead with the ASC Feed Standard and group certification scheme; kicking off the standard harmonisation and operational review project; and further collaboration with its MOU partners Global Aquaculture Alliance (GAA) and GLOBALG.A.P.

In addition, the Seriola and Cobia Standard was handed over to the ASC; and the first certified trout, shrimp and bivalves farms were welcomed into the programme.

ASC Feed Standard: driving improvements in the aquaculture feed industry

Feed is an essential element in farming, but it is also a major contributor to the overall environmental impact of aquaculture. The environmental pressure created by the production of the key ingredients in fish feed needs to be addressed.

The ASC is developing a globally applicable Responsible Feed Standard. A multi-stakeholder expert group including industry, scientists and conservation group representatives has been carefully selected to develop the standard. The feed standard will set requirements that reflect industry best practice and develop the consensus needed to support the aquaculture feed industry to operate on a more environmentally sound and socially responsible basis.

In September 2014, around 50 experts met for the first time in Amsterdam for the ASC Responsible Feed Project briefing event. Experts in marine, plant and animal ingredients, as well as supply chain and feed mill representatives, came together demonstrating that the sector is committed to a responsible future for fish feed production.

This year there will be two public review rounds of the draft Feed Standard. The related audit manual that will guide auditors in applying the standard will then be developed, followed by a field test for the standard and audit manual.

The ASC Responsible Feed Standard is set to go live in the first quarter of 2016. When the standard is finalised it will be available for anyone who wants to use it.

To find out more about the ASC Responsible Feed Standard development, or to provide feedback on the draft standard, please visit the Responsible Feed Project page on ASC’s website www.asc-aqua.org.

Photo courtesy of Nicolas Privet
Harmonising the ASC standards

ASC has launched a project to harmonise its eight farm standards, with a primary focus on structure, to create one core ASC Standard. The core standard will cover the generic requirements, while species’ or production method specific requirements will be covered in related annexes.

The current ASC farm standards are being reviewed and commonalities across them identified. The aim is to harmonise criteria where possible while maintaining species’ or production method specific requirements where needed.

Having one core standard will ensure consistency across common issues, and provide greater clarity for farmers, auditors and other stakeholders. It will allow ASC to include other species in a more efficient manner, therefore, shortening the time it takes to get the certified products of new species to market.

To find out more or get involved in the project visit the ASC Core Standard Development page on the ASC website www.asc-aqua.org.

Operational review of three ASC standards

A public consultation on the proposal for improving the ASC pangasius, tilapia and salmon standards was launched in 2015. This is an opportunity for stakeholders to take part in ASC’s operational review and offer their views on how to improve ASC’s standards.

This is not a complete review of the standards. There will be a focus on areas where the effectiveness of a standard has not met expectations. The review is governed by the guidelines set out in the ISEAL Code of Conduct for Standard Setting. The Terms of Reference will be revised based on public feedback and the standards will be reviewed according to the identified improvement areas.

Read more about the Operational Review on the project page on ASC's website www.asc-aqua.org.

ASC group certification

The majority of farms globally are small to medium sized operations. The ASC is now adjusting its requirements to enable groups of farms to work collectively towards compliance with its standards. These requirements will support a group certification approach.

Group certification will allowASC to operate a more open and inclusive programme, making certification attainable for a broad range of producers. It will ensure that the ASC programme is accessible to small-scale farmers, creating valuable opportunities for them to seek ASC certification.

An initial draft of the group certification requirements is expected to be available at the end of 2015. When finalised, these will be added to ASC’s existing Farm Certification and Accreditation Requirements and will apply to all of the ASC standards.

The initial draft methodology will be field tested and published for public consultation. Pilots are anticipated to take place between the end of 2015 and early 2016.

Field test participation is a useful step for farms to prepare for their certification, as it provides a gap-analysis between the farm’s current performance levels and the ASC standard’s requirements. Interested farms and certification bodies can register for the pilot at certification@asc-aqua.org. Farms and certifiers will share the costs for the pilots.

The programme is expected to go live in 2016.

For more information visit the Group Certification project page on ASC’s website www.asc-aqua.org.

ASC, GAA and GLOBALG.A.P. to introduce combined audit checklists

To increase audit efficiency, ASC, Global Aquaculture Alliance (GAA) and GLOBALG.A.P. have drafted and agreed combined checklists for farms that seek more than one certificate.

A combined checklist minimises duplication of audit points between schemes. The checklist will comprise all the audit points of one standard supplemented by specific add-on clauses for the other standard(s). A farm that seeks multiple certifications can select any one of the three programmes as the primary standard and then select the desired
add-on(s). If a farm proves to be compliant with the schemes’ standards it may be eligible to gain two certificates (or later even three) through this process.

Pilots for combined ASC and GLOBALG.A.P audits covering shrimp, salmon and pangasius, and for ASC and GAA’s BAP standards covering pangasius, are underway this year. If successful, these audits can result in farms obtaining multiple certificates. Auditors will be able to combine audits to a large extent. In order for them to grant certification against individual schemes a farm will need to meet all the scheme’s requirements.

Other species are likely to be considered after the field tests have been evaluated and other combined pilot audits will be available soon.

In 2013, ASC, GAA and GLOBALG.A.P signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) pledging to work together to achieve greater efficiencies and enable wider access to their certification programmes. By reducing duplication across the three programmes’ auditing processes, the three organisations hope to make certification more accessible for farmers and processors.

GAA and GLOBALG.A.P. are also involved in the development of ASC’s global feed standard, acting as feed steering committee observers and providing expertise in the technical working groups. Last year, the three organisations identified and published common requirements on responsible sourcing of fishmeal and fish oil across the programmes’ standards.

Other activities identified in the MOU include joint work on developing common approaches to auditor training, shared approaches to chain of custody and to the management of certificate information through shared IT platforms.

ASC became a full member of ISEAL in 2012. All ISEAL members must adhere to the ISEAL Credibility Principles, meet the criteria set out in ISEAL’s Codes of Good Practice and commit to continuous improvement.

The standard setting process introduced by ASC was evaluated by an external assessor to confirm it was in compliance with the ISEAL Standard-Setting Code. Following the defined standard setting procedure, the assessor will review ASC’s implementation of its ongoing projects later this year. ASC will then be subject to a peer review to assess its monitoring and evaluation system against the ISEAL Impacts Code and its accreditation and certification system against the ISEAL Assurance Code.

**Dutch consumer campaign helps retail promote ASC certified seafood**

The second edition of the annual Think Fish Week was held in the Netherlands in September 2014. The consumer campaign attracted a record-breaking number of participants including Dutch supermarket chains, seafood suppliers and well-known seafood brands. During the week, responsibly farmed and sustainably caught seafood was promoted by Dutch retailers in almost all stores across the Netherlands.*

The Think Fish Week is an initiative of the ASC, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

During Think Fish Week consumers are reminded that they can contribute to a healthy ocean. Through in-store promotions and out of store campaigns customers are informed that they can easily make a responsible choice for certified seafood. The on-pack ASC logo assures consumers that the fish has been farmed in a responsible manner that limits the environmental and social impacts of aquaculture.

Dutch consumers increasingly prefer sustainable seafood. And, with one out of three products in Dutch retail stores carrying the ASC logo or MSC ecolabel, retailers actively invest in helping customers make this choice.

This September, Think Fish Week will be held in Belgium for the first time as well as in the Netherlands.

To find out more about Think Fish Week, please visit the Think Fish Week website (in Dutch) at www.bewustevisweek.nl.

* Dutch retailers that took part in Think Fish Week 2014 include: Albert Heijn (Ahold), C1000, COOP, Dekamarkt, Dirk, EMTE, Hoogvliet, Jan Linders, Jumbo, Lidl, MCD supermarkets / Boon, PLUS, Poiesz, Spar and purchasing organisation Superunie.
ASC celebrates fifth anniversary

In April, the ASC came together with its partners and supporters to recognise half a decade of working together on transforming aquaculture towards environmental sustainability and social responsibility.

Around 100 people joined ASC to help celebrate its fifth anniversary at the Seafood Expo Global in Brussels. And, guests enjoyed samples of ASC certified oysters, supplied by Jersey Oyster Company which was certified against the ASC Bivalves Standard in April 2015.

The ASC programme has only been certifying farms for a couple of years. In this short period, more than 200 farms entered the programme, of which more than 150 have been certified to the ASC standards. Now, there are nearly 3,000 ASC labelled products, more than 500,000 metric tons of ASC certified seafood, over 500 chain of custody certified companies and almost 250 logo licence holders.

ASC has seen a growing willingness from retailers, food service companies and brands in committing to improving global aquaculture by driving demand for ASC certified seafood. And, the collective support by several key global initiatives has helped establish the ASC as a leader in aquaculture certification and labelling.

ASC also hosted its annual partner update during the Seafood Expo Global in Brussels. It brought together a panel of industry representatives including Marine Harvest, Skretting Group, Seafish and Belgian retailer Colruyt. The panel session focused on current aquaculture issues, highlighting feed and social concerns and how businesses are addressing these risks and challenges. It also allowed for discussion around the role of certification programmes in relation to these issues and how ASC can further support the industry.

To watch a video recording of the ASC partner update meeting, please visit the ASC video channel on YouTube.

ASC helping to transform aquaculture in the State of Rio de Janeiro

The Rio 2016 Organising Committee has pledged that by the time of the Rio 2016 Olympics all of the seafood coming from aquaculture that enters the Olympic village will be ASC certified.

This March, ASC launched a new film ‘Transforming Aquaculture in the State of Rio de Janeiro’. It tells the story of some of the Brazilian farmers who are dedicated to the transformation of aquaculture in the state of Rio. The film supports the efforts of the State of Rio de Janeiro, its aquaculture industry and the Rio 2016 Olympic Committee to improve the environmental and social impacts of aquaculture in the region.

Seen for the first time at Seafood Expo North America in Boston, the film highlights how commitments such as that of the Rio 2016 Olympic Committee can act as a catalyst for environmental and social improvements. In the film, ASC Brazil Manager, Laurent Viguié, talks with representatives of the Rio 2016 Olympic Committee and State of Rio de Janeiro; and visits some of the farms that have committed to ASC certification in order to supply seafood to the Rio 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Brazil is one of the global emerging markets where ASC must demonstrate relevance if it is to achieve its vision. The State of Rio is among the leading seafood producers in the country. And, according to estimates, there are approximately 1000 aquaculture farmers in the state.

The film was part of ASC’s partner update meeting in Boston, which drew an audience of supporters who discussed what drives change in aquaculture. With a programme focusing on how commitments to the ASC are helping to transform aquaculture, the meeting brought together a distinguished panel representing the aquaculture industry, including producers Marine Harvest Canada and the Belize Shrimp Growers Association, and distributor and wholesaler Calkins & Burke Ltd. The panel discussion revolved around how producers are driving change, and the role of supply change partners in this process.
Programme overview:
initial eight ASC standards launched

ASC Shrimp Standard
Since spring 2014 farms have been able to enter assessment against the ASC Shrimp Standard, and the first audit took place in the summer. In October 2014, Ecuador-based OMARSA became the first farm to gain certification against the ASC Shrimp Standard. The first ASC certified shrimp products were launched in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark and Sweden in December.

ASC Freshwater Trout Standard
The first trout farm audits took place in spring 2014. By July Danfore's Christiansminde Freshwater Farm in Denmark became the first ASC certified trout producer. Since then a further five trout operations in Denmark and seven in Italy have gained certification, making a total of 13 ASC certified trout farms globally. ASC certified trout products have been in the market since last year, and the volume continues to grow as more trout farms enter the ASC programme.

ASC Bivalves Standard
The first farm to be certified against the ASC Bivalves Standard was Peru-based scallop producer AquaPesca. Their certified scallops were launched to the market earlier this year.

In May 2015, three Jersey-based oyster farmers – Jersey Oyster Company, Seymour Oyster Company and Jersey Sea Farm - became the first oyster producers to gain ASC certification against the bivalve standard. ASC certified oysters are set to hit the market later in the year.

ASC Salmon Standard
At the start of the year, Marine Harvest Canada's Marsh Bay Farm in British Colombia became the first salmon farm in North America to be certified to the ASC Salmon Standard. They join ASC certified salmon producers in Australia, Chile, Faroe Islands, Norway and Scotland.

ASC Pangasius Standard
The ASC Pangasius programme was launched in 2012, with the first certified products entering the market the same year. Within three years, 20 per cent of the Vietnamese pangasius production for export became certified to the ASC standard. There are now 46 ASC certified pangasius producers, with more farms in assessment.

ASC Tilapia Standard
In 2012, the ASC Tilapia Standard was the first to go live, and by August that year ASC celebrated the launch of the first certified tilapia products to the market. Since then the ASC tilapia programme has been steadily growing, with 28 farms certified to date in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Taiwan and Vietnam.

ASC Abalone Standard
The ASC Abalone programme was opened in 2014 following a successful pilot audit and certifier training on the standard. This May, the Jade Tiger Abalone’s Indented Head Farm in Australia was audited against the abalone standard; it is now awaiting the outcome. More farms are expected to join the abalone programme. ASC certified abalone is anticipated to be available later in the year.

Seriola / Cobia Standard
The Seriola and Cobia Standard was handed over to the ASC by the Seriola and Cobia Aquaculture Dialogue in February 2015. It is the final of the initial eight standards developed by the Aquaculture Dialogues, and joins the ASC standards for tilapia, pangasius, salmon, shrimp, trout, bivalves and abalone.

ASC is developing the audit manual and will launch the pilot farm audits when the draft audit manual is finalised. There has been interest in the pilot testing from farms in Japan, Brazil and Mexico. These pilots will ensure the standard for seriola and cobia can be thoroughly tested and give farms a chance to see how their operations match up against the standard. Once the pilot audits have finished the results will be used to inform the final version of the audit manual. This will guide certifiers and farmers on how the standard should be applied.

The ASC anticipates that the standard and audit manual will be ready for launch in the last quarter of 2015.

Standards development: grouper, snapper, barramundi
A new Aquaculture Dialogue for grouper, snapper and barramundi was set up by the WWF in 2013. Further information can be found on WWF’s website at www.panda.org.

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Details accurate as at May 2015