Aquaculture Stewardship Council – a global initiative for responsible aquaculture

The Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation with a mission to transform aquaculture towards environmental sustainability and social responsibility using efficient market mechanisms that create value across the chain. The ASC was co-founded by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and The Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH) in 2010 to manage the certification of responsible farming worldwide.

ASC certification meets the needs of the market by offering the world’s most robust, credible, and science-based standards for responsibly farmed seafood. The ASC standards were developed by an open and transparent multi-stakeholder initiative with more than 2,000 participants and are built on the best scientific knowledge and industry practices.

The on-pack ASC logo identifies seafood products from farms that have been independently certified to the ASC standard. The logo assures consumers that their fish has been farmed with minimal impacts on the environment and society.

**ASC’s road towards more than 200 farms certified**

By the start of 2016, the ASC was proud to announce that more than 200 farms had achieved ASC certification in 24 countries. Three bivalve farms in Chile simultaneously achieved certification, pushing the number of ASC certified farms past the 200 mark.

The number of ASC certified farms has grown exponentially in the last five years since the tilapia standard was launched in 2012. Since May 2015, the number of ASC certified farms has expanded from 161 to 260, an increase of over 62% in one year. There is also good reason to anticipate another phase of strong growth as more than 100 additional farms are currently in assessment.

The ASC programme has an estimated total production volume (certified and under assessment) of more than one million tonnes in the three and a half years since the first farm entered ASC assessment in August of 2012.

Salmon is now the species with the highest number of ASC certified farms. The 117 salmon farms included in the official count are in line with the industry commitment to the Global Salmon Initiative. This is closely followed by shrimp, with 45 shrimp farms certified by May 2016.
Growing number of producers engaged in certification

The ASC programme’s expansion into new countries continues and certified farms can now be found in China, Japan, Germany, Iceland, and the United States.

The ASC welcomed its first certified farm on the African continent in November 2015 when Irvin & Johnson Ltd Danger Point Abalone farm in Cape Town, South Africa was successfully assessed against the ASC Abalone standard. The farm supplies abalone products to South Africa, as well as to Hong Kong, China, Singapore and Japan.

This March, ASC announced that Taylor Shellfish Farms had become the first U.S. grower to achieve responsible aquaculture certification for their farming operation in Washington State. The Shelton, Washington based company received ASC bivalve certification for a portion of its operations in the South Puget Sound basin, after an on-site assessment by independent certifier SCS Global Services.

In November 2015, the two tilapia farms Qionghai Zhongpingzi Grobest and Chengmai Xingyuan Development Co Ltd became the first Chinese farms to achieve ASC certification. This landmark achievement was celebrated during the Sustainable Seafood Forum in Qingdao, an event organised by the ASC, Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), and China Aquatic Products Processing and Marketing Alliance (CAPPMA).

In Japan, the Shizugawa Branch of the Miyagi Prefecture Fisheries Co-operative was the first farming collective in the country to become ASC certified in March 2016. The oyster farming co-operative earned its ASC certification in recognition of their responsible environmental and social practices following an independent assessment against the ASC Bivalve Standard by AMITA, a certification assessment body based in Japan.

ASC also saw the first farms in Germany and Iceland certified. Freshwater trout farm Heidefisch from Wietzendorf in the north of Germany gained its ASC certificate in February 2016. And most recently, the Dyrafjordur and Önundafjordur farms, both part of Arctic Fish’s sea farm operations situated in northwestern Iceland, became certified to produce ASC rainbow trout.

Last year also saw the first abalone farm achieve certification when Jade Tiger Abalone’s Indented Head abalone farm in Australia was recognised for its environmental and social responsibility.

A logo for responsible aquaculture

The ASC logo is a globally recognised mark for responsibly farmed seafood that can be traced back through every step of the supply chain. The ASC label enables farms to demonstrate their environmentally and socially responsible credentials – proving that they are responsible producers, implementing good management practices and minimising their environmental and social impact.
With a growing selection of ASC certified seafood available, consumers across 57 countries can now choose from more nearly 5,300 ASC labelled products. As more new standards such as seriola and cobia, seaweed, and marine finfish are introduced, and as initiatives including group certification and multi-site certification gain participants, this number is only set to increase.

Research has shown that the ASC logo reassures consumers that the seafood they purchase is produced using methods of the highest environmental and social integrity, reinforcing their trust in retailers.

With the ASC label seafood buyers, processors, retailers and food service companies can assure their customers that the seafood they are buying comes from a well-managed responsible farm. These businesses play a leading role in making certified seafood available to buyers and consumers, and creating demand for seafood from responsibly managed fish farms.

**Growing global commitment to responsible aquaculture**

The growing engagement of farms in the ASC programme has been matched by significant commitments from influential retailers, seafood brands and suppliers, including the Rio 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games who have pledged to source ASC certified seafood from ASC certified farms throughout the Olympic village for both athletes and spectators.

The largest global commitment to date was announced in the autumn of 2015 when IKEA pledged to offer only ASC certified farmed seafood across all their stores in 47 countries. As a result, ASC certified seafood became available to consumers in eight new markets where it had not been on sale before such as Turkey, Thailand and the Middle East.

In the end of 2015, AEON, the largest retailer in Japan made ASC certified farmed shrimp products available in their retail outlets throughout Japan. AEON’s own-brand products are the first ASC certified shrimp to be introduced in Japan, and are an extension of the retailer’s ongoing commitment to sourcing responsibly farmed seafood.

Earlier in 2015, the retailer also announced plans to increase the volume of ASC certified seafood available across its stores by ten percent, from the current three percent, by 2020. Referring to the forthcoming Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, AEON confirmed that the fact that ASC certified seafood would be served at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games is a clear sign that recognition of certified farmed seafood is increasing worldwide. AEON predicts that ASC in particular will expand on a wide scale globally in the coming years, and it sees the Tokyo 2020 Games as an opportunity to introduce more ASC certified seafood in Japan.

In Australia, Coles became the first major supermarket to introduce ASC certified salmon in their deli. Australian seafood consumers can now buy fresh salmon certified as responsibly farmed in the deli at their local Coles supermarket.

In June last year, the largest retailer in the Netherlands, Albert Heijn, switched to only selling ASC certified farmed salmon in their 832 stores across the country. And other Dutch retailers such as Jumbo, PLUS, Aldi and Lidl - who have all pledged to source only ASC certified seafood - are selling an increasing amount of ASC salmon. In Belgium, Colruyt is also offering a broad range of certified products.

At the end of last year, Lidl Germany unveiled an ambitious commitment to only sell ASC certified or organic farmed fish in its permanent selection from 2018. And, in November 2015, leading South African retailer Woolworths became first to introduce ASC certified tilapia products in South Africa. This year also saw the Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd (RCL) and the WWF sign a five-year global partnership setting out a commitment to source ASC products as they increase supply chain responsibility, meet environmental targets and engage millions of passengers in ocean conservation. Under the Sustainable Seafood 2020 Target, RCL’s North American and European operations will source 75 per cent of their farmed seafood lines from ASC certified farms.

Last autumn, leading north European hotel chains, Nordic Choice Hotels, become the first chain in Scandinavia to offer ASC certified seafood to their guests. One of their Swedish flagship hotels, the spa and conference hotel Yasuragi, made a commitment to offer their customers ASC certified seafood in the hotel’s restaurants. To support responsible aquaculture, Yasuragi has become ASC Chain of Custody certified. It will be the first hotel in the Nordic region to offer its customer full traceability for its farmed seafood.
This year, Brakes Group became the first foodservice supplier to launch ASC certified shrimp in the UK. With the introduction of the Brakes’ new ASC certified warm water prawns at the end of March thousands of customers at pubs, hotels, restaurants, schools and hospitals across the UK can now enjoy shrimp sourced from farms that care for the environment, the people and local communities.

Working together towards a responsible aquaculture sector
ASC works closely with fellow organisations to strengthen its commitment to responsible aquaculture. Through collaboration, ASC and its partners can achieve their mutual goal more effectively by realising and recognising good aquaculture practices.

ASC and MSC sign MOU to add value to partners
The ASC and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) signed an MOU last year furthering their collaboration and commitment to finding additional efficiencies and adding value for partners handling both ASC and MSC certified products.

The ASC and MSC share a common heritage and vision that global seafood supplies should be sustainable, responsibly managed and supported by secure supply chains. Cooperation between the two organisations will bring greater operational efficiencies and adds value to their partners.

While the organisations operate in different seafood sectors, they have the same theory of change, seeking to recognise and reward existing best practice and to incentivise improvements by recognising fisheries and farms that meet their standards as assessed by third party independent audits. Furthermore they share a vision that standard systems should conform to international norms and codes of good conduct, including FAO Guidelines and ISEAL Codes.

Key to delivering on this intention is the continued, long-term collaboration on the use of the MSC’s Chain of Custody Standard and the complementary approach both organisations take in administering their respective logos. ASC and MSC will also collaborate in projects that seek to investigate and ensure supply chain integrity, such as product trace-backs and genetic testing.

The MOU extends cooperation between the organisations to include collaboration on new standard development, particularly for producers straddling the wild-enhanced-aquaculture boundary, such as seaweed.

ASC and D-Fish join forces to promote responsible aquaculture in Vietnam
In June 2015, the ASC and Vietnamese Directorate of Fisheries (D-Fish) signed an MoU pledging to work together to promote responsible aquaculture in Vietnam through a step-wise approach from VietGAP to ASC certification.

The Vietnamese government is committed to reducing the negative impacts of fish farming in the country. Building on the mandate that farms must meet VietGAP standards, the project will help move farms towards an internationally recognised standard, provide access to international markets and ensure a more responsible aquaculture sector.

The two organisations will implement a joint programme to create guidance for VietGAP certified farmers to help them progress to ASC certification. The project will allow farms to make step-by-step improvements in their practices with the goal of reaching the ASC standard.

The initiative will allow ASC to engage with a tier of farmers that are currently not able to meet the ASC requirements.
including smallholders, who will benefit from greater support in delivering improvements in their practices. The approach can also reduce costs for producers who wish to gain ASC certification, thereby helping ASC become a more efficient service provider.

Supporting Belgian consumers to choose certified seafood

For the last three years, the ASC has worked in partnership with MSC and WWF Netherlands on a joint initiative, Think Fish Week, that encourages Dutch consumers to choose ASC or MSC certified seafood.

In 2015, the first Think Fish Week also took place in Belgium. The Belgian campaign had a flying start with six major retailers taking part, representing 60 per cent of the market share. Albert Heijn, Aldi, Carrefour, Delhaize, Lidl and Spar participated in the campaign and helped show Belgian customers how easy it is to choose responsibly farmed seafood. Restaurants McDonalds and Quick also took part, and the campaign was supported by 17 well-known Belgian chefs.

Together with participating companies, the Think Fish Week encourages seafood lovers to choose ASC or MSC certified seafood. All the companies taking part in the campaign put competition aside to invest in an increased understanding of the importance of certified seafood and an increased recognition of the ASC and MSC labels.

In the Netherlands, the third Think Fish Week was supported by 36 participants including leading retailers Albert Heijn (Ahold), Jumbo/C1000, COOP, Lidl, and Aldi, key brands such as Iglo and John West, food service provider Sodexo, as well as local fish mongers.

Over the last year, standard development for new species including seaweed and marine finfish have been kicked off, the seriola and cobia standard has entered its final phase, and ASC has conducted the operational reviews of the salmon, tilapia and pangasius standards. This year, group certification and multi-site certification are expected to go live, and the responsible feed standard is on track to be launched in 2017.

More standards for responsible fish farming

Seriola and cobia standard enters final phase

The ASC Seriola and Cobia Standard was handed over to the ASC in February 2015. The standard aims to address the key negative environmental and social impacts of seriola and cobia farming, including preservation of local habitats and biodiversity, conservation of water and quality, responsible sourcing of feed ingredients, minimal use of therapeutics and antibiotics, caring for their employees and fostering good community relations.

The pilot testing of the draft audit manual for the seriola and cobia standard started in early 2016. The pilots will help ASC to field-test the audit manual and allow the pilot farms to measure their operations against the standard.

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A global standard for seaweed

The ASC and the MSC have kicked off the work to create a joint global standard for certifying seaweed operations. The collaboration offers the unique opportunity to build on the expertise of the two leading seafood certification and labelling programmes.

With seaweed production increasing alongside demand for certification, ASC recognises the importance of having a...
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global standard that rewards responsible seaweed production, and provides a benchmark for improvement. Wild harvest supports a significant portion of the industry, however seaweed aquaculture has grown rapidly to meet increasing demand.

The Seaweed Standard will contribute to the health of the world’s aquatic ecosystems by promoting environmentally sustainable and socially responsible use of seaweed resources.

The standard will allow certification from both wild harvest and farmed seaweed, regardless of the scale or location of the operation. The assessment of seaweed farms and fisheries will be guided by five core principles: sustainable populations; minimizing environmental impacts; effective management; social responsibility; and community relations and interactions.

Seaweeds and other algae are integral in our daily life. They are used widely as food, in cosmetics and fertilizers, and are processed to form binding agents (emulsifiers) for toothpaste and fruit jelly. They also play a critical role in our aquatic ecosystems, providing food, shelter and habitats for a wide range of organisms including fish, shellfish, marine invertebrates and corals.

Marine finfish standard development

This year also saw the start of the new marine finfish standards development, based on the soon to be released standard for seriola and cobia.

Because the knowledge and expertise necessary for the development of standards for seriola, cobia and, in some cases salmon, is applicable to the development of standards for similar fish and farming systems, the forthcoming release of the seriola and cobia standard creates an opportunity to test the applicability of the standard to expand the programme. This is the first time the ASC has taken such an approach.

The marine finfish development is a direct result of the many requests ASC has received to create a standard for barramundi, European seabass and seabream. If it is determined that using the seriola and cobia standard is feasible this will provide a quicker route to the creation of standards for new species.

As a market-based programme, the ASC must find ways to effectively respond to the needs of the growing community of farms and retail partners seeking certification for an increasing range of species. This new process could be an innovative way to leverage efficiencies across the organisation in order to respond more quickly to calls for new standards that will help farmers, workers, local communities and improve environmental protection.

Group certification: helping small holders farm responsibly

As the majority of global aquaculture production is done by small to medium-sized farmers, it is vital to ensure that the ASC programme evolves to accommodate farms of all sizes. Group certification is an opportunity to expand the number of farms eligible to participate in the certification scheme.

The creation of the group certification methodology was announced in December 2015. The project is a key milestone in the ASC’s mission to move the industry towards environmental sustainability and social responsibility.

Under group certification, farmers will come together to implement the ASC standards to achieve certification as one entity, with a central office to take care of the administration of the group as a whole. Taking a collective approach will bring efficiencies for all parties.

This year, the ASC, with support from experts representing NGOs, farmers, and a cross section of stakeholders, has created a working draft for the methodology, and group certification is anticipated to go live by the end of 2016.

Multi-site certification

Multi-site certification will enable companies owning five to 50 sites within the same jurisdiction to achieve certification for all locations in one go. To qualify, the organisation must have a central office managing the sites’ compliance with the ASC standard through a documented management system.

The goal is to achieve the maximum level of assurance that is credible yet affordable, applied consistently across different farms and certifiers. The approach will increase the efficiency for both farms and the ASC will significantly.

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Details accurate as at May 2016

Quick facts about the ASC

Certified farms
- 2 abalone farms
- 16 bivalves farm
- 32 pangasius farms
- 117 salmon farms
- 45 shrimp farm
- 31 tilapia farms
- 17 trout farms
- 110 farms in assessment

- 886 chain of custody holders
- 417 logo licence holders
- 5,293 approved ASC labelled products
- 57 countries*
- 26 certifiers accredited to conduct chain of custody audits
- 8 certifiers accredited to conduct farm audits

* Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macau, Malaysia, Malta, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Romania, Russian Federation, Saud Arabia, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States, Uruguay and Vietnam.