



AQUACULTURE
ACCOUNTABILITY
PROJECT

Behind the Label

What “sustainable seafood” certifications actually deliver for dining programs

If your dining program has committed to certified fish and shrimp, you may be surprised by how little those certifications actually guarantee. There is no government regulator defining what “sustainable seafood” means. While many people have worked in good faith to fill that gap, the aquaculture industry has heavily influenced and funded the certification programs meant to hold it accountable. As a result, certifications have become tools that let fish farming companies obscure factory farming practices behind a label of trust.

Paid for by the companies they certify

The two dominant aquaculture certifications—Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) and the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC)—are both funded through fees paid by the companies seeking certification.² If standards rise too high and companies drop out, the program loses revenue. There is no built-in incentive to raise the bar or remove bad actors.

69%

OF BAP'S BOARD

BAP compounds the conflict of interest further: more than two-thirds of its governing board is made up of **the seafood producers and distributors it is supposed to oversee.**¹



What a certification logo actually permits

Across feed, disease, and drug use, the standards behind these labels allow far more than the word “sustainable” implies.



2.5×

WILD FISH FOR FEED

ASC certifies salmon farms that require up to 2.5× the wild fish for feed as the salmon they produce—while claiming to “ease pressure on natural resources.”³



1,550%

SEA LICE LIMITS RAISED

In 2022, ASC raised its sea lice limits in British Columbia by 1,550%.⁴ BAP sets no lice limit at all; certified farms have been documented at 51 lice per fish.⁵



No caps

ANTIBIOTIC USAGE

BAP requires only vague veterinary oversight of antibiotics, with no caps on drug use.⁶ Meanwhile, ASC’s cap of six drug treatments per cycle has not changed since 2012.

8×

OVER ASC’S
OWN LICE LIMIT

In 2022, five of six ASC-certified Scottish salmon farms averaged sea lice counts **eight times higher than ASC’s own limit**—some exceeding it thirtyfold. All kept their certification.⁸ A review of 456 ASC audit reports found many farms certified despite failing core requirements.⁹

Forced labor inside a BAP-certified supply chain

A 2024 Outlaw Ocean investigation found that Choice Canning—a BAP-certified Indian shrimp processor supplying Walmart, ShopRite, and other major retailers—kept workers on-site who were not free to leave, paid below minimum wage, and housed in dormitories infested with bedbugs. In recorded conversations, a manager admitted that shrimp was fraudulently documented as BAP-certified.⁷



Inside a shrimp peeling shed in the supply chain exposed by the investigation. Photo: Joshua Farinella / The Outlaw Ocean Project.



A farmed salmon with an eroded tail at an ASC-certified salmon farm, where many fish suffered from injury and disease. Credit: Abolish Salmon Farming.

Accountability gaps extend further

Feed certifications: another layer of opacity

BAP and ASC defer to the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and MarinTrust to certify the wild fish used in feed. Essentially, they pass off oversight of the feed supply chain to yet another certifier that carries the same pay-to-play flaw. More than 90% of MSC-certified fisheries hold only “conditional” status, letting them market as certified before meeting full standards.¹³ MSC also permits bottom trawling; researchers estimate over 80% of MSC-labeled products come from destructive gear types.¹⁴ MarinTrust was created by the fishmeal industry’s own trade association.¹⁵

Seafood Watch: ratings without farm visits

Seafood Watch, the most trusted consumer guide, does not visit or audit individual farms.¹⁰ It rates fish by species and broad region, so a farm with serious problems can hide inside a favorable regional average. The program’s standards also permit factory farm conditions, including setting no mortality thresholds, despite on-farm salmon deaths exceeding 30% in Scotland in 2023.¹¹ Since 2017 it has benchmarked directly against ASC’s standards, automatically upgrading ASC-certified farms even where its own assessments flag major ecological concerns.¹²

Aquaculture “sustainability” labels vs. consumer expectations

Label / Program	Independent from industry funding?	All farms audited yearly by a 3rd party?	Antibiotics banned?	Limits on disease, parasites & mortality?	Farms removed for violations?	Reduces pressure on wild fish?
Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC)	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP)	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Seafood Watch	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗

LEGEND ✓ Meets expectation ✗ Does not meet expectation

What this means for your institution

Certifications were meant to make ethical sourcing simpler, and many people who helped build and maintain them believed in that promise. But the industry uses them as marketing tools, collecting the goodwill of conscientious buyers without meaningfully changing factory farming practices. Today, a certification logo is not a guarantee. Dining programs that rely on them may be unknowingly overstating what their sourcing commitments actually deliver, undermining the values they set out to uphold.

Making measurable reductions in farmed fish and shrimp while shifting toward more plant-based proteins is the surest way to lighten your impact on the oceans.

TAKE THE NEXT STEP

For help getting started, get in touch or visit our website at www.AquacultureAccountability.org.

✉ info@aquacultureaccountability.org



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*Find full citations and learn more about certifications in our report, *The Myth of “Sustainable” Aquaculture* (published in partnership with Farm Forward, January 2026): aquacultureaccountability.org/myth.*

SOURCES & CITATIONS

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- 7 Ian Urbina, “The Whistleblower,” The Outlaw Ocean Project, March 20, 2024.
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