

Decoding the Labels: A Comprehensive Guide to Aquaculture Certification Schemes

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ABSTRACT

Fish farming now produces more than half of all fish eaten worldwide. With this growth, many certification programs have emerged claiming that fish is "responsibly farmed." Understanding these labels is important for both farmers and consumers. This article explains different certification schemes in simple language, including ASC, BAP, Global G.A.P., organic certifications, and animal welfare programs. It also discusses recent changes in 2025-2026 and offers practical advice for farmers considering certification and consumers making purchasing decisions.

INTRODUCTION

Walking through a fish market or supermarket reveals many different labels on seafood packages. Some have green logos, some have blue stars, and some say "organic" or "responsibly farmed." The meaning behind these labels is not always clear to shoppers or even to fish farmers themselves.

Fish farming, also called aquaculture, now produces more than half of all fish eaten by

people worldwide. In 2024, fish farms produced about 130 million tonnes of fish and other aquatic animals (FAO, 2023). This growth helps feed a growing global population without putting more pressure on wild fish populations.

With so much fish coming from farms, people want to know whether farms harm the environment, whether fish are treated well, whether workers are treated fairly, and

whether the fish is safe to eat. Certification programs were created to answer these concerns through independent inspection.

When a fish farm gets certified, independent inspectors visit and check water quality, fish health, feed quality, worker conditions, and environmental impact. If the farm passes all checks, it receives a certificate and can display a special label.

According to the FAO, at least 30 different certification programs for fish farming exist around the world. Each program has its own focus and requirements.

MAJOR CERTIFICATION SCHEMES

1. Retailer-Led Certifications

Global G.A.P. began when European supermarkets wanted to ensure food safety. Today it is one of the most common certifications worldwide. It focuses on food safety, traceability, and worker safety. Farmers selling to European supermarkets typically need Global G.A.P. certification first (Global G.A.P., 2025).

Safe Quality Food (SQF) is another food safety program popular in North America.

2. Industry-Led Certifications

Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) uses a simple star system showing how much of the supply chain is certified. One star means the processing plant is certified. Four stars mean farm, hatchery, feed mill, and processing plant are all certified (Global Seafood Alliance, 2025). In August 2025, BAP announced that by 2030 all certified shrimp farms must stop eyestalk ablation, affecting nearly 1,900 farms.

3. Government-Led Certifications

Thai Quality Shrimp helps Thai shrimp compete internationally. China's Certification Schemes include Safety Agri-food

Certification, China GAP, and Green Food Standard. Vietnam GAP promotes good practices for shrimp and pangasius. Hong Kong Accredited Fish Farm Scheme certifies local farms.

4. NGO-Led Certifications

Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) was started by WWF. The turquoise logo indicates the farm has been checked for environmental impact, fish health, worker rights, and community relations. In May 2025, ASC launched a unified Farm Standard with four principles: legal management, environmental protection, fish welfare, and human rights (ASC, 2025).

Friend of the Sea (FOS) offers simpler, affordable certification popular with smaller producers.

Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch rates seafood as green (best choice), yellow (good alternative), or red (avoid).

5. Organic Certifications

IFOAM sets basic organic rules worldwide. Naturland (Germany), Soil Association (UK), BioGro (New Zealand), Bio Suisse (Switzerland), and KRAV (Sweden) certify organic aquaculture with no chemicals or antibiotics.

6. Animal Welfare Certifications

Certified Humane® started with farm animals but now includes fish. In the 2025 Aquatic Life Institute Benchmark, it scored highest among seafood certifications with 8.75/10 points (Aquatic Life Institute, 2025).

- ✓ RSPCA Assured from the UK ranked second with 7.75 points, tied with ASC.
- ✓ Label Rouge is a French quality label for salmon raised to higher welfare standards.

7. Fair Trade Certifications

Fairtrade International and Fairtrade USA ensure farmers receive fair prices. Ethical Trading Initiative protects workers rights globally.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS (2025-2026)

The Aquatic Life Institute published its fourth Benchmark in late 2025, evaluating 11 certification programs. Certified Humane® scored highest (8.75/10), followed by ASC and RSPCA (7.75 each). New criteria included transport conditions, octopus farming bans, and insect use in feed (Aquatic Life Institute, 2025).

In May 2025, ASC launched its unified Farm Standard after five years of development. In August 2025, BAP announced the elimination of eyestalk ablation in shrimp farming by 2030.

WHAT CERTIFICATION MEANS FOR FARMERS

For farmers, the choice depends on target markets:

- European supermarkets: Global G.A.P.
- Eco-conscious buyers: ASC or Friend of the Sea
- Welfare-focused markets: RSPCA or Certified Humane®
- Organic markets: Naturland, Soil Association
- Full supply chain: BAP four-star

Certification costs include inspection fees and farm improvements. Group certification helps smaller farmers share costs. ASC's Improver Programme allows step-by-step progress toward certification.

Research by Hammarlund et al. (2025) shows price premiums are not guaranteed, but certification provides better market access, improved practices, and reduced risks.

WHAT CERTIFICATION MEANS FOR CONSUMERS



ASC certification logo



BAP certification logo



Certified Humane® certification logo



Global G.A.P. certification logo

For consumers, any reliable certification label means the farm was independently checked. Different labels tell different stories:

- ASC: Good for nature and communities
- BAP four-star: Whole chain checked
- RSPCA/Certified Humane®: Fish treated kindly
- Organic: No chemicals or antibiotics
- Global G.A.P.: Basic food safety

Choosing certified products supports cleaner environment, kinder animal treatment, fairer worker conditions, and safer food.

CONCLUSION

Fish farming certification may seem confusing, but the basic idea is simple: certification means an independent inspector confirmed the farm operates responsibly. For farmers, certification provides access to better markets and improved farming methods. For consumers, certification offers a reliable shortcut for making informed choices. Recent

2025 changes show continuous improvement. ASC unified its standards. BAP banned eyestalk ablation. Animal welfare is becoming more important across all programs. Whether farming or buying, any reliable label represents progress toward more responsible fish farming.

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