

Sustainable Seafood Labeling and Marketing

One of the primary goals of the state's Marine Life Management Act (MLMA) is fisheries sustainability. Although the MLMA lays out policies for achieving this goal, it does not provide a method for measuring sustainability of California's vast marine resources. This challenge exists on an international scale, prompting the formation of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). The MSC was established in London as an independent, international organization to promote sustainable and economically sound fisheries practices across the globe. Toward this end, MSC created a certification process complete with a recognized sustainable label that is awarded to fisheries that meet the standards set for fisheries sustainability. More than 20 fisheries worldwide have been certified sustainable.

In 2009, California's Legislature passed the Sustainable Seafood Act requiring the state's Ocean Protection Council (OPC) to develop and implement a voluntary sustainable seafood program for California. This program would include establishing a protocol to certify sustainable fisheries, creating a marketing and assistance program for this effort, developing a competitive grant and loan program for certification, and designing an eco-label to designate seafood caught in California. An advisory committee to be composed of experts within the fisheries industry, such as state or federal fishery managers, non-governmental organizations, the commercial fishing industry, restaurateurs, public health/nutrition officials, fishing port officials and the scientific community, will be charged with making recommendations on the certification protocols.

It is expected the protocols used successfully by the MSC will be considered by the advisory committee, and a case could be made that the state's effort would be duplicative of the MSC's fully developed and internationally recognized sustainability rating and eco-labeling program. Since California's seafood products are on the world market, it also could be asserted that a second eco-label used specifically for California fisheries would be confusing to the public domestically and internationally. It has been suggested the significant costs of creating a state certification program would divert funds that could be better spent to improve the management and research of California's fisheries.

While the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) is not directly involved in the efforts to establish a California certification program, its biological data and expert consultation on the state's fisheries will be required in determining fisheries sustainability. Since the level of DFG involvement is not clear at this time, the staffing and fiscal resources DFG would need to expend cannot be anticipated. However, it is following the actions of the Legislature and the OPC, and is ready to consult on the proposed program.