

## PROPOSAL CONCEPT:

Labeling of American seafood produced in NOAA-managed fisheries.

**BACKGROUND:** Seafood consumers share the responsibility with fishery managers, the fishing industry and seafood sector to support the sustainable use of fishery resources. Accurate, objective and verifiable information on fisheries is needed to help consumers identify and select seafood produced by sustainable, well-managed fisheries. In response there has been a recent proliferation of seafood ecolabeling schemes and consumer guides. With over 80% of the seafood consumed in the US now being imported, the challenge of identifying sustainable seafood is intensifying.

**PROBLEM:** *How can consumers identify sustainable seafood and who can they trust to make this determination?*

## POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

Seafood Consumer Guides. One option has been the development of consumer guides which rank types and sources of seafood according to sustainability criteria. These guides generally use a "red-yellow-green light" approach to list products that organizations believe should be avoided, consumed with caution or preferred based on a range of sustainability considerations.

Ecolabeling Schemes. Another option is the application of seafood certification schemes and ecolabels. These systems rely on third-party assessments and a certifiable chain of custody as the product moves through the market. Ecolabeling of seafood in the retail market allows marketers and consumers to identify products which meet the sustainability standards of the certifying body.

Each approach has its own set of criteria, assessment process and method of communicating the evaluations. What these approaches share is the use of third-party assessments and reliance on what the organizations decide is the best available scientific data. In the case of US fisheries, the ultimate authoritative source of this information is NOAA Fisheries.

Alternative Approach. A proposed third option is an internal-assessment approach that allows a fishery to provide information to substantiate the sustainability of seafood it produces. This approach relies on 1) the description of the fishery management system, 2) the use of the best available scientific information on the status of the fish population harvested and 3) fishery impacts on the ecosystem. In American fisheries, NOAA and the regional fishery management councils (and other agencies) comprise the integrated fishery management system. NOAA Fisheries provides the essential capacity for monitoring fishing operations, collecting and analyzing fishery data, determining fish stock status and addressing fishery ecosystem impacts.

**CHALLENGE:** *Sustainable seafood is produced by responsible fisheries. But what criteria are used to determine if a fishery is responsible and who should be trusted to say so?*

A Standard for Responsible Fisheries exists.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations adopted the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (the "Code") in 1996. This non-binding international agreement lays out the criteria for the development and management of responsible, sustainable fisheries. The FAO has also established ecolabeling guidelines for schemes that wish to claim to be based on the Code.

The Code describes the general principles, but also prescriptive and detailed criteria for nations to address the main areas of 1) fisheries management, 2) fishing operations, 3) aquaculture development, 4) integration of fisheries with coastal area management, 5) post-harvest practices and trade, and 6) fisheries research.

The NOAA-funded *Hawaii Seafood Project* has applied the Code as a scoring system in a Responsible Fisheries Assessment (RFA) of Hawaii's longline fishery. A cumulative score of 93% compliance with the applicable provisions of the Code was documented in December 2006. The RFA was the first of its kind for a pelagic longline fishery. The draft 2008 RFA of this fishery is currently under review by NOAA Pacific Islands Region, the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council and the US Coast Guard and should be completed by the fall of 2008. The RFA not only answers definitively whether this is a well-managed fishery, but also allows for monitoring and reporting on progress towards achieving the objectives of the Code.

**PROPOSED SOLUTION:** A NOAA Sustainable Fisheries label

Since NOAA plays the central role in the management of American fisheries, and because the agency is the ultimate authoritative source of information on the status of the managed fish stocks and fishery impacts on the ecosystem, it is proposed that a third-party assessment is not necessary. The credibility of the RFA stems from those agencies directly involved in the management of the fishery and does not rely on a third party's assessment.

We propose that American fisheries that undergo 1) a Responsible Fisheries Assessment applying the Code, that present 2) stock assessments and corrective management actions to avoid overfishing and 3) information on ecosystem impacts and progress towards reducing adverse impacts be allowed to label their fishery products with the NOAA Sustainable Fisheries logo.

The NOAA Sustainable Fisheries logo would signify to consumers that the seafood product was produced in an American fishery managed for sustainability by NOAA. The logo would provide consumers with assurance and confidence in the labeled products in an analogous way that "USDA Organic" labels serve the producers and consumers of organic produce. The NOAA label would also serve to inform consumers of the central and authoritative role that the agency plays in managing US fisheries for sustainability and will help the American fishing industry compete in its own market. A NOAA label would distinguish US seafood products, provide retailers with a viable option to ecolabeling schemes and reward American fishermen in the growing market for sustainable seafood.