

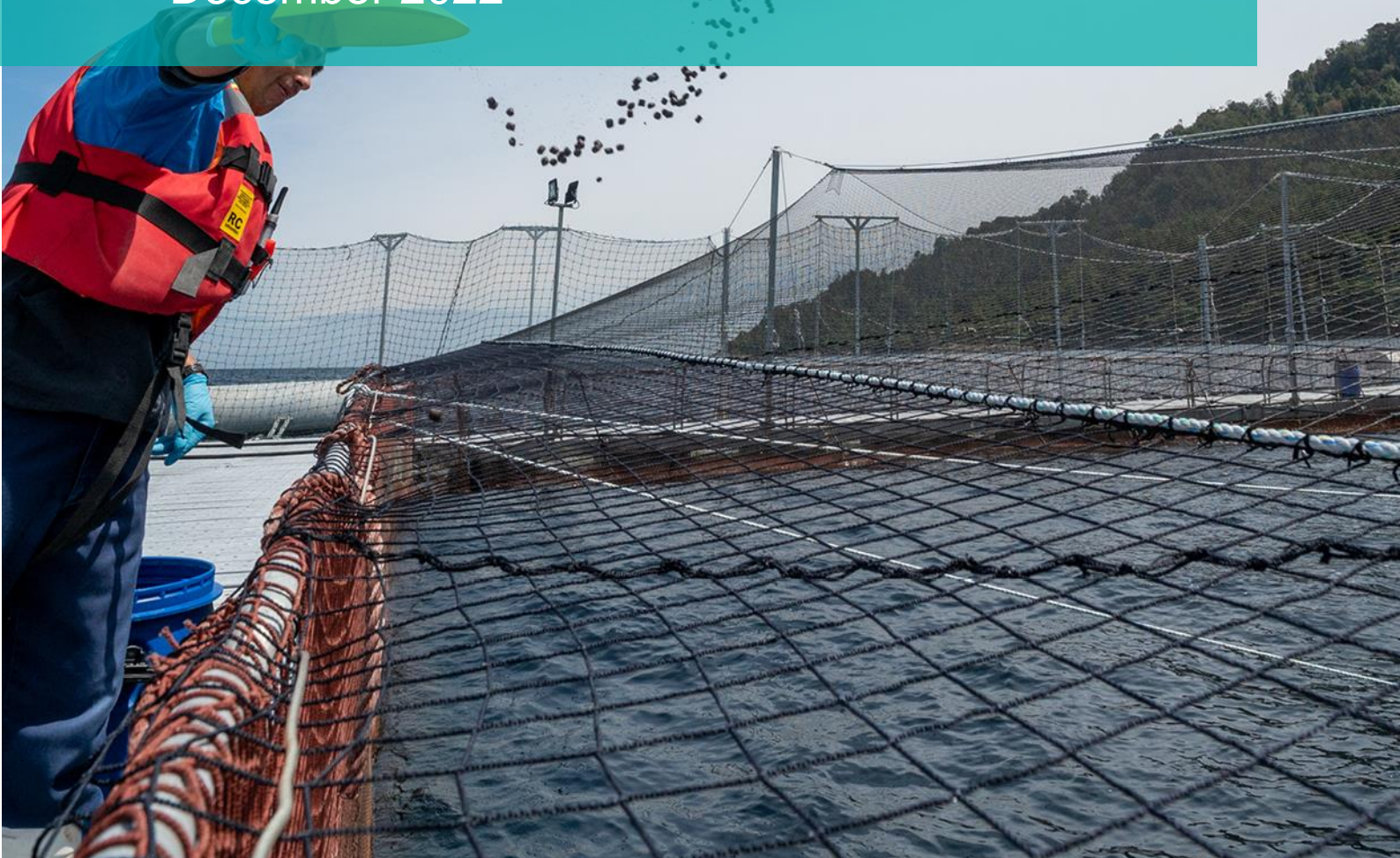


Monitoring and Evaluation at ASC

M&E System & Framework

Version 2.0

December 2022



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ASC's Monitoring and Evaluation System

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) is vital for understanding the extent of progress toward achieving intended outcomes. ASC's M&E system is comprised of strategies, activities, resources and tools collectively employed to achieve the intended change, as communicated through the indicators established in our framework. A well-designed system provides the mechanism to identify uncertainties and gaps in contributions made by strategies and activities toward achieving short and longer-term social, environmental, and/or economic impacts.

ASC's M&E system relies on information gathered through farm and chain of custody assessments, farm data submissions, markets for ASC products and communications with partners and stakeholders, along with data sources external to the ASC.

The objectives of ASC's M&E system are to:

1. Demonstrate impacts and progress towards achieving ASC's intended change and evaluate the effectiveness of the ASC programme in driving the aquaculture industry towards socially responsible and environmentally sustainable practices;
2. Provide accountability to stakeholders and to those who are affected by, and are meant to benefit from the ASC programme;
3. Promote and facilitate data-driven decision making internally throughout ASC's work and externally in support of driving responsible aquaculture operations;
4. Maintain credibility and transparency in ASC operations;
5. Add value to our beneficiaries, partners and stakeholders through provision of information and reports documenting impacts; and
6. Contribute to societal learning by sharing results to understand the landscape impacts of sustainability standards systems and other actors working in the sustainable seafood space.

The development and implementation of our M&E system is designed to ensure conformance with best practices and the ISEAL Alliance Code of Good Practice for Assessing the Impacts of Social and Environmental Standards (the ISEAL Impacts Code). ASC communicates activities and impacts through newsletters, blogs, social media, presentations, reports, and an online Impacts Dashboard. These various outputs enhance our ability to broadly share messages appropriate for varied audiences.

Context and Scope

The long-term goals and desired impacts of ASC are set out by the mission, vision and Theory of Change.

ASC's MISSION: TO TRANSFORM AQUACULTURE TOWARDS ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY USING EFFICIENT MARKET MECHANISMS THAT CREATE VALUE ACROSS THE CHAIN.

ASC's Vision: A world where aquaculture plays a major role in supplying food and social benefits for mankind whilst minimising negative impacts on the environment.

Improvement towards social and environmental sustainability is fundamental for the long-term engagement of companies in the ASC programme; therefore, impact measurement must begin with improvements made on the farm, as this is the unit of change under which the standard system impacts.

ASC's M&E system focuses on three major result areas:

- I. social and environmental performance of the farm,
- II. certification system effectiveness and efficacy, and
- III. market performance.

As a code compliance ISEAL member and active player in the seafood commodity sustainability sector, we recognize the importance to deliver impacts at scale by aligning with common sustainability indicators and UN Sustainable Development Goals. These needs may not be the drivers behind the M&E system but are recognized as critical components that add to the value and credibility of our system and are reflected in the framework and indicators in Appendix A: ASC M&E Framework.

An M&E Refresh

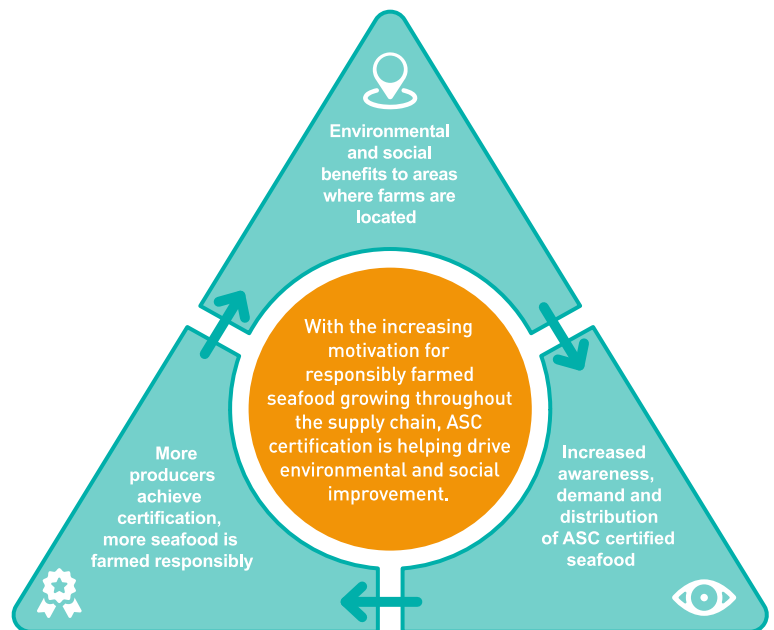
ASC released our first Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (v1.0) in 2017 providing the mechanism to monitor progress towards ASC's Theory of Change. With a certification programme that now manages 11 species standards, along with a joint ASC- MSC standard for seaweed, there is an increasing need for a more consistent and rigorous approach to data collection, use, and reporting. Expansion in scope and impact have required a review of the framework to ensure it accurately represents ASC's strategies and activities and effectively utilizes the information collected across our certification and chain of custody programs.

ASC Theory of Change

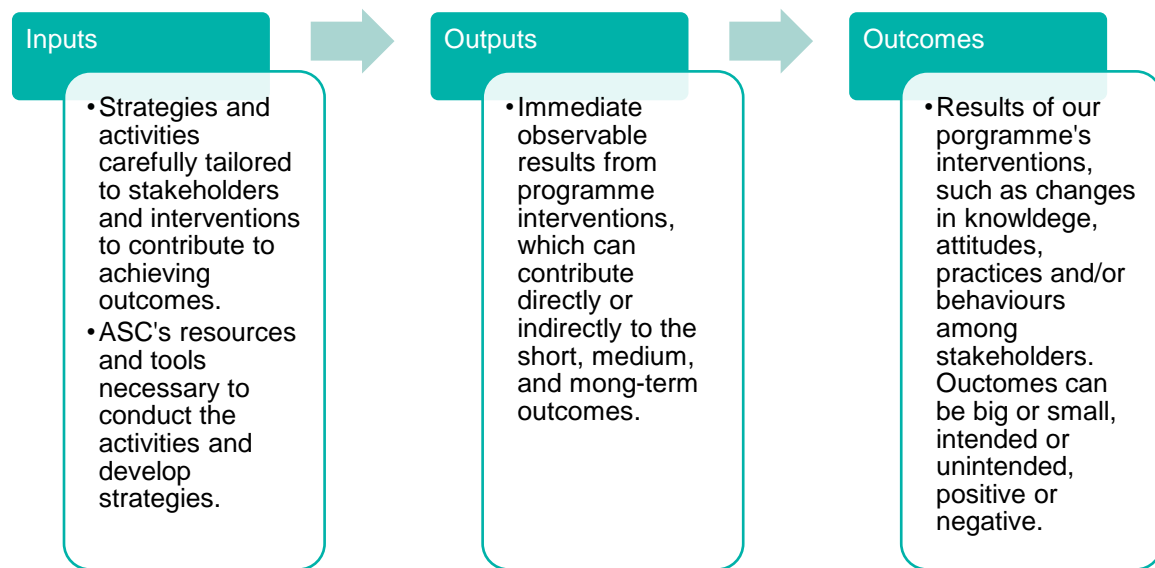
The ASC Theory of Change (ToC) provides an articulation and description of the building blocks required to achieve our mission. It recognizes the role of aquaculture as the fastest growing food production system and the need to minimise its footprint on the environment and local communities. ASC has recognized that a means to transform aquaculture towards environmental sustainability and social responsibility, is through the promotion and reward of responsible farming practices and influencing the choices people make when buying seafood. ASC standards define responsible aquaculture practices based on the core principles of legal compliance with regulations; management of a farm site's impact on natural habitat and diversity; conservation of water resources; responsible use of feed and energy resources; conservation of wild populations and species diversity; improved fish health; and social responsibility towards workers and local communities.

Fish farms and feed mills that meet ASC's scientifically robust standards gain the right to sell their products bearing the ASC logo. This assures consumers that they're making responsible purchases and rewards the certified farms for their responsible practices., thus increasing global demand and market access for certified seafood. This, in turn, provides incentives for farms to improve their practises to reduce any damaging environmental and social impacts.

The implementation of ASC standards and associated strategies are envisioned to collectively demonstrate that (i) aquaculture is transformed towards environmental sustainability and social responsibility, and (ii) there is an increased global demand for (sales of) ASC certified seafood.



The intended change draws from ASC's resources, tools, strategies and activities to progress towards addressing the recognized sector and farm sustainability issues.



Defining Success

Data from the performance of aquaculture farms and feed mills that meet the requirements of ASC standards provide the evidence necessary to demonstrate progress towards achieving the ToC. Success is recognized where barriers to entry are reduced and small- and large-scale producers can achieve ASC certification and realize benefits of the ASC programme, responsible aquaculture demonstrates improvements at scale, and market growth encourages continued programme uptake.

A key component in measuring success is understanding performance in the absence of intervention, e.g., how did a “typical” farm operate before complying with the requirements of ASC standards?

Unlike some other sectors, such as fisheries, there are no large-scale datasets on aquaculture performance. Data on non-certified farm performance are limited in scope, by species produced, geographical region, and environmental or social issue, making comparisons difficult and limiting the extrapolation of results. Implementation of the ASC Improver Programme and design of contrast studies are expected to provide insight into the effects of certification that cannot yet be evaluated.

Unintended Effects

Unintended, or unanticipated, effects are those outcomes not foreseen or intended by a purposeful action.

The ToC represents how ASC intends to make change happen, and while it is based on the best knowledge, there can be both positive and negative implications that ASC did not anticipate. Therefore, ASC considers all aspects of the certification programme and relies on stakeholder consultation to identify these unintended effects. ASC maintains an assessment of possible risks to both reinforce the potential positive “spill over” and take proactive measures to manage, avoid and mitigate the negative ones. The M&E system tests the assumptions of the ToC by monitoring both quantitative and qualitative information in relation to the unintended effects.

Those “spill over” lesser objectives that are thought to yield positive socio-economic results include:

- **COST REDUCTION** | Reduced inputs (e.g., on feed, use of chemicals) in pursuit of improving environmental performance, can create efficiencies that result in economic benefits.
- **OPPORTUNITIES FOR ATTRACTING INVESTMENT AND LOAN** | Potential investors are attracted to the reduced risks associated with the implementation of better practices and professionalization achieved through ASC certification.
- **SUPPORTING REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS** | Where national and local regulatory frameworks are either lacking or ineffective in terms of enforcement, the ASC standards and assurance system are instrumental for governments in meeting their goals.
- **TRANSPARENCY OF FARM PERFORMANCE** | Lack of consistent, accessible, and quality data have been a challenge to understanding of farm changes and sector level trends. The ASC’s transparency policy requires public reporting of all audit reports accessible to stakeholders, providing for a key contribution to the body of knowledge, ultimately leading to improved interventions and outcomes.

The potential negative effects of the ASC programme might include:

- **HIGH IMPLEMENTATION AND CERTIFICATION COSTS** | Increased stringency of ASC standards and requirements for the assurance scheme increase the likelihood that costs for farms to get certified are high, especially regarding initial investment costs in improving farm infrastructure.
- **DECREASE IN PRODUCT PRICES** | Increase in certified products in the market could have the unintended effect of increased competition resulting in product price reductions.
- **STALLED IMPROVEMENT** | Due to performance-based nature of the standards, there is the risk that once certified farms have fully met ASC requirements, there is little room or incentive for farms to continue to improve their practices unless the standards are revised to raise the bar.
- **BARRIERS TO ENTRY** | Standards and requirements that do not fully consider the array of production systems across countries and habitats leads to a system that narrows applicability of the programme.

- **INEFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE REQUIREMENTS** | Limits set in standards may not represent best practices given lack of scientific data.
- **UNGOVERNED EXPANSION OF LAND/WATER USE FOR FISH FARMING** | Achieving ASC certification may motivate farms to expand their production in areas at competition for resources with other staple crops (e.g., rice), or other sources of incomes (e.g., tourism), or cause detriment to the environment and surrounding community (areas of high conservation values). Competition in countries with ineffective governance can have enhanced negative impacts.

Influencing Factors

As with any performance interventions, ASC operates in a complex environment and change is not linear. The success of ASC in achieving its mission is influenced by factors, some of which are not within control. These can be both enabling factors, those that make it possible (or easier) for individuals or populations to change their behaviour or their environment, and hindering factors, those that cause delay, interrupt, or add difficulty to making progress.

While not explicitly reflected in ASC's ToC or defined in ASC M&E framework, influencing factors are identified and considered in ASC's strategic review to evaluate the relevance of these factors, mitigating activities to be considered and identification of gaps or emerging factors.

- Increased awareness of nutritional values of seafood has led to a steady growth of aquaculture due to the unstable production of wild catch. The ASC programme can contribute to sustaining aquaculture in a responsible manner.
- Some of the larger seafood consuming markets are not yet receptive to certified products to environmental and social standards, making the uptake pace on the demand side mismatched with the supply speed.
- Policy may change on international and national scales, where these changes may fall in or out of favour for the ASC programme.
- Disease outbreaks or natural disasters can redirect farmers from certification to focus their resources on coping with the issue and consequent financial damage.
- Climate change and extreme weather patterns can also affect farmers directly with impacts on production and productivity that would disrupt supply chains.
- Literacy levels of farmers (especially smallholders) can prevent uptake of performance improvements.

ASC M&E Framework

Applicability

ASC's M&E framework describes the indicators monitored as a part of our M&E system. The framework is relevant across ASC's certification programme to support evaluation, ensure that we maintain rigorous science-based requirements, and be transparent in providing evidence of our impacts and benefits to programme participants. The framework links ASC strategies to organizational directions as detailed in our Strategy and directed by our Mission, Vision and Theory of Change. The framework supports ASC to:

- Contribute to the wider understanding of which indicators contribute to mitigating impact,
- Maintain scientific rigor in our approach to defining responsible aquaculture,
- Raise awareness of the standard by making the information manageable and digestible to all our stakeholders,
- Understand and evidence against what stakeholders value in our programme,
- Provide a mechanism to deliver value propositions to our beneficiaries, and
- Demonstrate sustainability to the markets to promote the programme and meet stakeholder needs.

Beyond certification, the M&E framework is applicable to link impacts with initiatives led by others active in the seafood sector. ASC's M&E results are publicly reported to encourage use by stakeholders in their own research and understanding on responsible farming practices. We also rely on external partner data and collaborations with similar organisations to improve our ability to report impacts at scale.

As an international organization committed to environmental and social responsibility, ASC is active in the global partnership to achieve peace and prosperity for people and the planet. The United Nations (UN) blueprint for sustainable development, now and into the future, identifies 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that represent an urgent call to action. With increasing populations globally and threats to food security, the rapidly growing aquaculture sector is recognized as having the potential to provide a critical contribution to meeting many of the SDGs. The work of ASC in defining and certifying responsible aquaculture directly and indirectly contributes to multiple SDGs.

Data Sources

The information to support M&E are primarily (i) internal databases – those comprised of data from various programmatic aspects, such as ASC assessment reports against species and feed mill standards and Chain of Custody (CoC) standard, along with all compliance data, farm performance transparency reports, and Logo Licensing (LL), and (ii) secondarily, data and reports from management agencies, global datasets on aquaculture production, ecologically important features (e.g., protected areas and mangroves), and social indices, where available and aligned to our internal datasets.

The (internal) data maintained by the ASC certification programme are collected through several mechanisms. Third-party audits against ASC standards by conformity assessment bodies develop audit reports, which are shared publicly on our website. Producers provide data for these reports that detail species produced, numbers of farm sites within a Unit of Certification, harvested product volumes from the previous calendar year, and farm performance during that production cycle related to environmental and social requirements. Only data from final audit reports are applied. These data are used to verify farm compliance against the requirements within our standards and to monitor and evaluate our programme's performance. Where appropriate, we can apply at site, landscape and global analyses. Certification volumes reported represent the cumulative harvested production volume as reported to ASC in that month for all valid certificates (not monthly production volume).

Organisations within the supply chain that place ASC labels on their packaging adhere to the terms of logo license agreements. These agreements provide data on which product types are available across the various markets and when products are internal to the supply chain or consumer facing, and whether those products are active in the marketplace.

Indicators

ASC strategies collectively work on transforming aquaculture towards environmental sustainability and social responsibility and facilitating the uptake of the programme through market mechanisms. Our M&E indicators¹ are essential to telling us whether our work is making a difference, and how we can learn and adapt where we are not. In measuring impacts, we want to identify the effect of an action on something, recognizing this may not only result in a positive impact. Therefore, clear and measurable indicators are developed and tracked to evaluate whether a desired impact is achieved.

Indicators were developed in their ability to respond to ASC needs and alignment with ISEAL's Common Core Indicators² and Performance Metrics for Key Sustainability Issues³. As ASC programmes grow, data availability, accessibility and quality will evolve. The framework acknowledges current limitations in data and future plans and opportunities, to allow for flexibility in the implementation of the framework.

Our revised M&E Framework monitors our key results areas (social and environmental performance of the farm, certification system effectiveness and efficacy, and market

¹ The indicators in this framework rely on data collected in assessment against ASC standards to address key environmental and social sustainability issues, which provide the evidence for achieving success in the ASC programme.

² ISEAL Common Core Indicators. 2012. Online: <https://www.isealalliance.org/about-iseal/our-work/common-core-indicators>

³ Jennings, S., C. McCormack and R. Sheane. 2020. Performance metrics for key sustainability issues. Report by 3Keel and ISEAL Alliance. August 2020. Online: https://www.isealalliance.org/sites/default/files/resource/2020-09/3Keel_Performance%20metrics%20report_2020.pdf

performance) through a series of indicators that measure our Growth and Reach, Strategy, and Sustainability.

GROWTH AND REACH | We monitor indicators of growth and reach to relay information on characteristics, participation, uptake, and awareness of our programme at local, regional, and global scales.

STRATEGY | We monitor indicators that evaluate ASC’s activities to communicate the strategies employed and their effect on programme assurance and credibility.

SUSTAINABILITY | We monitor indicators across environmental, economic⁴, and social well-being to measure ASC’s ability to reach our desired outcomes and understand the effects that the programme has on its participants.

The outputs and outcomes of ASC’s results chain are mapped to each of the indicator categories, with indicator details provided in Appendix A.

	Intended change	Indicator category
Outputs	Accessibility of ASC certification	Growth and Reach
	Strengthened Global Standards	Strategy
	Expansion of scope	Growth and Reach
	Farmers confidence & trust in ASC Programme	Growth and Reach
	Reach & engagement of seafood producers/farms	Growth and Reach
	Reach & engagement of seafood buyers/procurement	Growth and Reach
	Reach & engagement of consumers	Growth and Reach
Short-term Outcomes	More farms implementing ASC standards & increase awareness of programme benefits	Growth and Reach; Sustainability
	ASC fosters/implements effective, efficient and transparent assurance system	Growth and Reach; Strategy; Sustainability
	Increased awareness of ASC programme relevance and benefits among retailers & processors	Growth and Reach; Strategy
	Increased awareness, likeability, & trust for ASC certified products among consumers	Growth and Reach; Strategy
Mid-term Outcomes	Minimised negative effects on the environment	Sustainability
	Increased efficiency through reduced production costs	Sustainability
	Improved working conditions & enhanced positive effects on the local community	Sustainability
	Increased awareness, preference for and promotion of ASC certification & Label	Growth and Reach; Strategy
Impacts	ASC certified farms create less pressure on the environment & ensure social responsibility	Sustainability
	Deepen the demand (uptake & buying) for ASC products throughout the value chain in existing markets & develop interest in new ones	Sustainability

⁴ Notably, economic and social sustainability are more difficult to measure and highly dependent on local situations and some of the indicators remain in development.

Monitoring, implementation, and associated challenges

Components critical to the success of an M&E system are actively reviewed and invested in at ASC to ensure our system delivers on the defined objectives.

ROBUSTNESS OF THE FRAMEWORK | Robust indicators are established and maintained with clear linkages between data and expected outcomes. This includes defining data needs and ensuring standardization, accessibility, and application of data for analysis. The scope of ASC's certification system covers various production systems across dozens of species and therefore impacts should be measured both locally and globally across these systems to reflect variability.

M&E GOVERNANCE AND RESOURCES | ASC resources our M&E programme with a dedicated Impacts Team to provide governance, implementation, data collection, maintenance and analysis, and geospatial capacity. ASC's Data Management and Research Teams contribute to data maintenance and analyses that inform development and revision of ASC standards and maintain best available science on aquaculture operations and impacts. Together, these resources are critical drivers to data-informed decision making throughout the organisation.

COUNTERFACTUALS | The ASC's commitment to data and transparency delivers considerable information about compliance and performance of ASC certified farms, but the body of information around uncertified farms is far more limited and inconsistent, limiting our understanding of farm performance in the absence of intervention. We utilize data on the environmental and social performance of farms against the indicators in our standards, with interviews, and increases in certifications and approved products to communicate how more farms are operating responsibly and farmers and consumers are realizing those benefits. However, we cannot yet compare these gains globally to farms not in our programme; though in some cases, these comparisons can be made for certain production systems and/or regions. With the development of the ASC Improver Programme, schedule for operational delivery in late 2023, we anticipate increased ability to understand status changes across those transitional farms.

CONSISTENT MONITORING | The indicators of the M&E Framework were designed to communicate ASC's impacts at appropriate scales and allow for consistent, meaningful and ongoing reporting. Growth and Reach indicators also serve as strategic key performance indicators (KPIs) against ASC's strategy and are reported publicly on ASC's Impacts Dashboard. Strategy and Sustainability Indicators require deeper data management and analysis, and therefore are reported at various frequencies, including Annual Reports, newsletters, and conferences. As data collections improve and ASC implements dedicated impacts studies, the frequency of reporting various indicators will be enhanced and defined.

LEARNING | ASC is developing processes to ensure that results of analyses and indicator tracking directly inform our programmes. Learning from evaluations is an ongoing process and requires that the M&E system is adaptive to feedback.

REPORTING ACROSS AUDIENCES | Stakeholder engagement is key to ASC's success. With an array of interested stakeholders, the M&E system must communicate impacts in a digestible manner. Audiences include participants in the seafood industry, other certification schemes, academic and research institutes, non-governmental organisations, governmental organisations, foundations, retail and market interests, ASC's Steering Board, technical advisors, staff, and other interested partners. Given the diversity of audiences, results will continually be reported through various mechanisms at appropriate and meaningful scales.

COLLABORATION WITH OUR PARTNERS | Measuring our impacts beyond certification and at landscape scale will require close collaborations. ASC is committed to realizing the lasting benefits of environmental and social responsibility that extends beyond the requirements of our standards and establishing and maintaining collaborations that further progress towards our vision.

Looking Forward

ASC launched its initial standards in 2012 and the first farms were certified later that year. Since then, certified and labelled products have become increasingly available in a growing number of markets globally. While ASC's standards are designed to address the same key negative environmental and social impacts of the aquaculture industry, there is discrepancy in requirements and data collections across farming operations – as necessitated by the variation in activities. However, this challenges ASC's ability to monitor and evaluate the effects of our programme in a consistent and scalable manner.

The ASC Farm Standard⁵ will create a unified set of requirements applicable to all species and production systems and will contribute to the ASC Vision and Mission by reducing, mitigating or eliminating negative impacts from aquaculture operations. The single standard will increase the potential for scaling by improving consistency, effectiveness and efficiency, relevance, and deliver more impact. Select M&E indicators recognized for their value may not be fully realised until implementation of the Farm Standard.

⁵ Following public consultations in 2023, the Farm Standard is scheduled for release in 2024 and targeted to become operational in 2025.

A monitoring and evaluation framework is a living document that is expected to both be implemented but also evolve based on programmatic learnings. This framework recognizes impending changes to the ASC programme, but as we monitor and evaluate, the framework may evolve to meet objectives as necessary.

Definitions relevant to ASC's Monitoring and Evaluation system are maintained in the [ASC Vocabulary Portal](#). To learn more about [ASC's Monitoring and Evaluation Programme](#), please contact Jill Swasey, Head of Monitoring & Evaluation (jill.swasey@asc-aqua.org).
