

## On cusp of releasing updated standard, Aquaculture Stewardship Council amps marketing push

*'At the end of the day, we're trying to just move the needle a little bit more with every change we make' -- Athena Davis, North America marketing manager, Aquaculture Stewardship Council*

By [Cliff White](#) | April 28, 2025 14:36 BST



📍 Athena Davis, ASC North America marketing manager. Photo by Cliff White/Undercurrent News.

The Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) is going big in 2025.

The sustainability certification for farmed seafood will launch its new farm standard in Q2 2025 with a two-year transition period, while its feed standard version 1.1 will be published in Q2 2025 and take effect in November. It is also making a new version of its certification and accreditation requirements (CAR) effective within the year.

Development of the ASC farm standard took more than five years, according to ASC CEO Chris Ninnis. The new standard unifies previous species-specific standards into a single framework built around four core principles: legal compliance and effective business management; environmental stewardship; respecting and promoting human rights; and responsible animal health and welfare practices, he said.

"[It] has been a monumental effort made possible by the collaboration and hard work of ASC staff, auditors, NGOs, farmers, retailers and many other partners. Their collective input has helped shape a standard that provides greater consistency across the species we certify, embraces the innovation that has become established in seafood farming and addresses shortcomings inherent in the legacy standards."

The new standard adopts a comprehensive framework for ensuring animal health and welfare, covering best practices in handling and slaughter, and adding several new social and environmental rules to its certification qualifications, according to a draft of the standard seen by *Undercurrent News*.

"By promoting high standards of animal health and welfare, ASC not only reinforces its commitment to responsible aquaculture but also addresses consumer concerns, and contributes to the ethical production of sustainable blue food," it reads.

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Producers have been granted a two-year adoption period to transition to the new standard, which will become mandatory in May 2027. In response to stakeholder feedback, ASC will be providing support and training on the new standard.

"The farm standard will support the industry's transformation toward greater sustainability and accountability," Ninnes said.

ASC is also making a major update to its feed standard to align it with its new farm standard. Originally rolled out in 2022 and put into effect in 2022, the standard is used to certify aquafeed-producing feed mills and their

ingredients suppliers. The ASC has instituted a requirement that all ASC-certified farms must use ASC-conforming feed by the end of October 2025.

With its version 1.1 update to the feed standard, ASC is changing its greenhouse gas reporting requirements "in recognition of data limitations" and providing flexibility to deforestation and rainforest conversion cutoffs for some lower-risk ingredients.

"Stakeholders broadly supported the proposals for improving environmental accountability, including species-specific greenhouse gas reporting and expanded deforestation-free standards," ASC said in its release.

Additionally, ASC updated its CAR to simplify its audit process in response to feedback from a number of conformity assessment bodies, which carry out all ASC audits.

## Major marketing push

Athena Davis, ASC North America marketing manager, said her organization has launched a major marketing push in conjunction with the rollout of the new standards.

The campaign, "Sea Green. Be Green," is intended to raise awareness and understanding of the ASC label, particularly among the US foodservice industry and US consumers.

"We want to make sure we're building awareness amongst consumers. We need to make very clear that the ASC eco-label is not a marketing gimmick, it's an assurance tool that helps with traceability," Davis told *Undercurrent* in March.

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The campaign will include partnerships with restaurants, highlighting chain of custody certification and local licensing agreements between ASC and individual restaurants. A focal point of the campaign will be activation events at the Seattle, Washington, and Denver, Colorado locations of the Bamboo Sushi chain with yellowtail provided by The Kingfish Company and hamachi supplied by Blue Ocean Mariculture. Media, social media and culinary



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influencers and local industry representatives will be invited to the events in the hope they spread awareness of the ASC brand and mission.

"We want to bring it to the consumer to understand there's something beyond seeing the ASC label on [packaging] and knowing it means the fish is good,"

Davis said.

ASC also wants to demonstrate how its program can be used by restaurants, where its label doesn't carry as much weight.

"We're still trying to figure out how to make foodservice work. It's very different for ASC than retail, but also really exciting for us. We see it as a big area that needs to be moved forward, and we think we can make a big impact with [the campaign]," Davis said.

One way it's doing so is through a planned pilot of its Trace Element Fingerprinting (TEF) program, which provides elemental verification of the origin of farmed seafood. ASC is currently recruiting US foodservice companies to adopt and work with the program to prove traceability to restaurant owners, chefs and customers.

"We're looking at testing things out to see how we may be able to further adapt our program to purpose, and do it in a way that still maintains integrity through the supply chain, but also addresses the realities of a foodservice business," Davis said. "We think this can have a huge impact, but it also gives us a trial period to see what works and what doesn't."

## Strengthening retail relationships

ASC has also upped its work with retailers, recognizing they are a vital conduit through which the program reaches consumers, according to Davis. A consumer research survey commissioned by ASC in 2024 showed the ASC label is the most widely recognized farmed seafood label in North America, and is also the highest-rated for trustworthiness and for providing responsibly harvested seafood, Davis said.



"That said a lot to us in terms of the work we've been doing to build that value. It shows that people trust eco-certification labels other than any of our labels in the store when it comes to sustainability. [The survey was] reinforcing, but it also told us we have a lot more work to do to keep building that awareness," she said.

## Addressing legal concerns

Over the past three years, ASC and other eco-labels including the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) have been named in a bevy of class-action lawsuits accusing seafood companies and retailers of greenwashing.

Lawsuits from consumers alleging false or misleading sustainability claims against Mowi, Bumble Bee Foods, JBS, Walmart, Aldi, Trader Joe's and Red Lobster have ended with settlements or remain pending, meaning companies that use eco-labels are still at risk of a lawsuit, as *Undercurrent* has reported.

Davis stated flatly that "certifications are not the solution to everything," but said they remain an important tool for producers, sellers and consumers of seafood to know where their seafood came from and how it was raised.

"The use of the label is that key factor. And it's on us to be able to know exactly where that fish was at every single point along its journey to consumers. If we can't do that, or if companies are just widely saying their seafood is sustainable, it's responsible, it's traceable, and they don't have proof, then that's where it becomes dangerous territory," Davis said.

Davis said ASC works closely with the industry and retailers to make sure its certification is providing a benefit to them.

"It's about how we all work together, so we have to have a lot of different people at the table, and we all have to be willing to make changes, and also know our limitations," she said. "ASC is really aware of that, but also aware of the fact that there are additional impacts we can make with the information we have, the data collection we do beyond certification."

For example, retailers that partner with ASC are warned if the organization detects an anomaly in the supply chain.

"We have a lot of additional information we provide to them so that they can go back and make immediate changes to try to address that," Davis said. "If you're not in the program, you're not using the label, you're not going to get that same benefit. So I think that's really important, and we have seen really strong encouragement of that, because unfortunately, in the seafood industry, things happen. We've been able to help a lot of companies make improvements that otherwise they wouldn't have been aware of at all."

ASC is also going above and beyond for the aquaculture industry in helping set up aquaculture improvement projects (AIPs) and performing greenhouse gas impact calculations.

"We see ourselves as having a wider role as we're gathering information to share it with the scientific community and bring more different types of stakeholders together to help try to solve industry-wide problems," Davis said.

Criticism of ASC, and of aquaculture in general from groups like Don't Cage Our Oceans, is an omnipresent factor the organization must confront, Davis said, and ASC deals with it by focusing on making incremental progress.

"It's nobody's first rodeo with the criticism. There certainly are a lot of groups out there who really do wish aquaculture just didn't exist," she said. "We just have to have the understanding that we're working to move the needle forward. It may not be as fast as we all want it to be, but we want to make [the standard] practical, challenging, but not impossible to meet, because we have to be able to meet people where they are and then help them be able to improve. That's really with the feed standard, the farm standard and everything else. That's the attitude we've taken."

For Davis and ASC, aquaculture is a "no-brainer" solution for meeting growing global demand for protein as the world's population rises, as seafood is a healthy food and farming it is less harmful to the environment than terrestrial farming.

"The fact of the matter is, our oceans are being depleted, and our wild fish need help. Over half of all seafood eaten in the US and globally is already farm-raised, and that number is not going down," Davis said. "We will just keep fighting the good fight. And I appreciate that the leadership we have at the organization really takes the attitude on. We're really great about listening to serious concerns -- we're not brushing them off. That's why we have open stakeholder input for pretty much everything we do. That's really valuable, and we want to hear everybody's perspective. But at the end of the day, we're trying to just move the needle a little bit more with every change we make."