

Advice

Incorporation of Measurement and Communication on Environmental and Social Sustainability in Fishery and Aquaculture Products

Brussels, 13 December 2022

1. Background

A. Revision of the Marketing Standards Framework

In 2018, the European Commission launched an evaluation of the marketing standards framework for fishery and aquaculture products¹. In 2020, the Commission launched an inception impact assessment, while aiming to address identified shortcomings in the framework, particularly connected with the CMO Regulation²'s objectives of enabling the market to be supplied with sustainable products and helping to achieve a level-playing-field. Later that year, the Commission launched a public consultation on the topic³. In April 2021, STECF published a report on criteria and indicators to incorporate sustainability aspects for seafood products in the marketing standards under the CMO Regulation⁴, which focused primarily on environmental sustainability and partially on social sustainability.

¹ Information on the initiative is available on the [Better Regulation website](#). The MAC adopted an [opinion on the framework for fresh products](#), which was followed by an [opinion on processed products](#).

² [Regulation \(EU\) No 1379/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the common organisation of the markets in fishery and aquaculture products](#)

³ On 4 February 2022, the MAC adopted [advice](#) based on the public consultation.

⁴ The [report](#) is available on the website of STECF. The MAC adopted [advice](#) on the topics covered in the report.

B. Sustainable Food System Framework

The Farm to Fork Strategy announced the adoption of a horizontal framework law to accelerate and facilitate the transition and ensure that foods placed on the EU market increasingly become sustainable⁵. The framework aims to establish new foundations for future food policies by introducing sustainability aspects and principles based on an integrated food systems approach. A proposal for a sustainable food labelling framework to empower consumers to make sustainable food choices will also be part of this intervention.

C. Previous recommendations

The Market Advisory Council (MAC) previously recommended that the Commission should, taking into account the concept of sustainability provided by the Common Fisheries Policy, assess whether the marketing standards framework was the most appropriate legal instrument to measure and communicate on sustainability or whether an alternative instrument would be more appropriate to reach the objectives of the CMO Regulation⁶. The MAC also recommended that the Commission should ensure coherence and consistency between the revision of the marketing standards framework and the upcoming Sustainable Food Systems Framework⁷.

⁵ Information on the initiative is available on the [Better Regulation website](#). On 15 February 2022, the MAC adopted [advice](#) about the initiative. More comprehensive advice is under development.

⁶ Recommendation a) of the advice, adopted on 15 October 2021, on “Incorporation of Sustainability Aspects in the Marketing Standards Framework”.

⁷ Recommendation e) of the advice, adopted on 15 February 2022 on “Sustainable Food System Framework Initiative” and recommendation c) of the advice on “Incorporation of Sustainability Aspects in the Marketing Standards Framework”.

In 2022, the MAC also adopted advice on the revision of the EU Regulation on the Provision of Food Information to Consumers⁸ and on empowering the consumer for the green transition (“greenwashing” and minimum requirements for sustainability logos and labels)⁹.

D. Policy option and operationalisation of the sustainability criteria

At the 19 September 2022 meeting of Working Group 1, a Commission representative delivered an update on the STECF Expert Working Group meetings on sustainability criteria for fishery and for aquaculture products, which took place from 5 to 9 September 2022. The Commission representative informed that one possible approach would be to integrate the sustainability criteria into the marketing standards framework, while the other option would be to integrate the indicators into the Sustainable Food System Framework. Internal discussions were ongoing and views from the MAC were welcomed.

2. Preferred Option

The MAC welcomes the development of initiatives by the Commission to enhance the role of sustainability information and to allow consumers to make well informed choices on food. Such initiatives should reflect the three pillars of sustainability. Between the two abovementioned policy instruments, the majority of the MAC¹⁰ believes that the Sustainable Food System Framework would be the most appropriate one for the incorporation of measurement and communication on environmental and social sustainability in fishery and aquaculture products.

⁸ The mentioned [advice](#) was adopted on 30 March 2022.

⁹ The mentioned [advice](#) was adopted on 6 October 2022.

¹⁰ ClientEarth expresses clear support for the development associated with the aim to provide additional information to consumers, but this member considers that, based on the level of detail that is currently available, they are not in a position to voice their preference on whether this system should be integrated in the marketing standards framework or the Sustainable Food System Framework. They recognise the pros and cons of each option, but believe that a lot will depend on questions surrounding the system’s specificities, the weighing and the interaction with other food products, to be able to answer this question.

Such an option would allow for common requirements for all food sectors, which would then be adapted to specific sectorial needs.

The integration in a general framework would facilitate consumer awareness and understanding as well as implementation. The sustainability information scheme (“EU dedicated sustainability label”) would make the choice easier for consumers between all available products. Plus, it is worth noting that consumers are not familiar with the B2B components of the marketing standards framework.

As previously advised¹¹, initiatives on consumers information should adequately convey the scientifically demonstrated health and environmental benefits of fishery and aquaculture products. This integration would also facilitate the comparison between food products in the same category (e.g., fish vs fish) and the possibility to compare food products in different categories (e.g., fish vs pork), allowing the added value of sustainable fishery and aquaculture products to be better recognised and compensated in the market.

Due to the integration in a general framework, there may be a risk that specific aspects of the fisheries and aquaculture value chain would be lost. Nevertheless, the work currently being developed by STECF on sustainability criteria for fishery and for aquaculture products could serve as a good basis for incorporation, allowing for robust criteria on aspects specific to fisheries and aquaculture. If a sustainability information scheme (“EU dedicated sustainability label”) is developed, it must cover all food products, including all fisheries and aquaculture products placed in the market, and must cover both EU and imported products, ensuring a level-playing-field.

¹¹ On 8 October 2021, [advice](#) was adopted about reflecting the health and environmental value of fishery and aquaculture products in the context of the European Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy initiatives.



The business-to-consumer and labelling components, including the voluntary or mandatory nature, of the Sustainable Food System Framework are still under development and will be expected to reflect the needs of other food-producing sectors too – the MAC agrees that the mentioned development would benefit the level-playing-field among food products. Taking into account the significant public scrutiny on fishery and aquaculture products, as wild fish is a public good and aquaculture farming takes place in public-domain spaces, the MAC believes that, if robust specific criteria on sustainability and clear communication to consumers are not achieved under the Sustainable Food System Framework, the Commission should reassess what are the most appropriate legislative instruments to achieve it (i.e., through new legislative proposals or a revision of current instruments, such as the Regulation on Food Information to Consumers, the marketing standards framework, among others).

Finally, the MAC recognises that the summarisation of all the available information in a simple sustainability information scheme (“EU dedicated sustainability label”) without making too many shortcuts as well as the gathering of sufficient data to apply this approach to all food products put on the EU market will be challenging, but still worth pursuing.