

How committed are grocers to selling responsibly sourced seafood?

MARCH 14, 2024 | REPORTS

By SeaChoice



Far less than you'd hope.

While most major grocers have public commitments to sell seafood that meets their sustainable sourcing policies, the devil is in the details.

To start, not all the seafood you come across when shopping meets your grocer's sustainable sourcing policy. There are three categories of seafood that grocers sell:

- 1 Private label.** Grocery store brands, or "private label" brands, are owned and controlled by grocers. For example, Loblaw's President's Choice, Sobeys' Compliments, Costco's Kirkland Signature and Walmart's Great Value.
- 2 Unbranded.** Typically fresh, and sometimes frozen, these products are sold without any branding on the packaging (except perhaps for the logo of the store on the price label). Examples of "no brand" or "unbranded" products would be seafood you buy from your grocer's fresh counter, such as plastic-wrapped fillets on a styrofoam tray.
- 3 National brand.** Seafood company brands, or "national brands", are third party brands sold by grocers but owned by companies that sell products across a range of businesses. For example, High Liner, Clover Leaf, Oceans, True North and many more.

Grocers have far more control and decision-making power over their private label products and the unbranded products they sell because they work directly with suppliers to purchase these products. For important or high risk products, the grocer's involvement in the supply chain may start at the landing dock or fish farm.

The supply chains of national brand products, on the other hand, are managed by the seafood companies that own them. Although grocers have less control over where these products come from or how they are produced, as major buyers, they do have a lot of influence. **They just aren't using it.**

2023 Seafood Progress results indicate that more than half of the major grocers

profiled - including [Sobeys](#) and global giant [Costco](#) - *still* do not require the large volume of national brand seafood products they sell to meet their sustainable seafood policies.

Grocers that **do not include** all the seafood they sell under their sustainable sourcing policies

Costco	FRESH	FROZEN	SHELF STABLE	save on foods	FRESH	FROZEN	SHELF STABLE
Grocery store brand				Grocery store brand			
Seafood company brand				Seafood company brand			
No brand				No brand			
Sobeys	FRESH	FROZEN	SHELF STABLE	Walmart Canada	FRESH	FROZEN	SHELF STABLE
Grocery store brand				Grocery store brand			
Seafood company brand				Seafood company brand			
No brand				No brand			

● Included
 ● Not included
 ● Does not sell

Information derived from [2023 Seafood Progress profiles](#)

In addition to major categories of seafood being exempt from many grocers' sustainable seafood policies, the policies themselves are problematic in that most are based on the goal to source seafood that is certified "sustainable." Two major seafood eco-certifications are the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC). While these certifications have historically represented the highest bars for sustainable wild and farmed seafood, [mounting evidence](#) reveals [critical limitations](#) to both the MSC's and ASC's respective standards.

[A recent expose by Outlaw Ocean](#) provides compelling evidence that, in addition to timelines for implementation being [continuously delayed](#) and lacking third party oversight and verification, the MSC certification neglects to address human rights issues in seafood supply chains. In fact, [the report](#) claims that all plants found to be using forced labor from Xinjiang and half the plants found to be violating U.N. sanctions by using North Korean labor were certified by the [MSC](#), and that much of the seafood processed in these plants is sent to America.

Unlike their sustainable sourcing policies, all major grocers have human rights policies that apply to all of the seafood that they sell. These policies outline their expectations of suppliers to provide products that were produced in ways that do not violate human rights.

Most grocers and brands require their suppliers to undertake third-party social audits as a means of verifying compliance against their human rights policies. However, this method of verification is proven unreliable in detecting forced labor when processing facilities are subject to self assessments where information can easily be withheld, inspections are scheduled in advance and employees are afraid to speak candidly during interviews. The report claims that as a result of these failures, "thousands of tons of seafood imported from factories using forced labor continue to enter the U.S."

In other words, grocers are not walking the talk on human rights, either.

While Outlaw Ocean's latest report focuses on seafood harvested and produced in

China given its global significance, it's important to note that accounts of human rights abuses continue to be reported on in the [European Union](#) and throughout [international supply chains](#).

Grocers have a responsibility to leverage their powerful position in the seafood chain to improve global fishing and farming practices and conditions. This starts with taking ownership of *all* the seafood products they sell and adopting a due diligence approach to investigating their supply chains, which includes going beyond certifications.

Stay informed and continue to drive Seafood Progress with us by [signing up for our newsletter](#).

RELATED NEWS



Consumers tell grocers and brands to TAKE ACTION

[Read More](#)

Exposé connects seafood on North American shelves to atrocities found in China's seafood operations

[Read More](#)

Seafood Progress raises the bar on social responsibility indicator

[Read More](#)

SeaChoice is a sustainable seafood partnership of the following three conservation groups:



CONNECT WITH US



[Privacy](#) | [Contact](#) | [Press Releases](#) | ©2026 SeaChoice | Website by Backyard Creative