

CONSERVATION ALLIANCE
FOR SEAFOOD SOLUTIONS

Guidelines for Supporting Fishery Improvement Projects

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Working together, conservation groups and the seafood industry can be a powerful force for improving the sustainability of seafood and the health of ocean ecosystems.

www.solutionsforseafood.org



GUIDELINES FOR SUPPORTING FISHERY IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS

The goal of this document is to define the best practice guidelines for fishery improvement projects. The Conservation Alliance strongly believes that the standardization of the structure and process for fishery improvement projects is essential to enable seafood companies to support them and meet their commitments to sustainable seafood.

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Guidelines for Supporting Fishery Improvement Projects

The Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions (Conservation Alliance) supports the efforts fisheries are making to improve the sustainability of their seafood products.

There are many different ways to address management and environmental problems in fisheries, including policy change, targeted strategies such as bycatch reduction, and multi-stakeholder efforts called fishery improvement projects (FIPs). While the latter are the focus of these guidelines, the Conservation Alliance believes all of these methods are valuable and play an important role in helping fisheries become more sustainable over time.

In 2012, the Conservation Alliance released the *Guidelines for Supporting Fishery Improvement Projects* with the expectation that the Guidelines would need to evolve over time. Since then, the number of fishery improvement projects around the world has increased substantially. Based on feedback from the Conservation Alliance community and industry and fishery stakeholders, the Guidelines were updated in 2015 to be as clear as possible and recognize advances in the fishery improvement project landscape. Additional, minor adjustments were made in 2019 and 2020.

The Conservation Alliance believes fishery improvement projects must strive to achieve a high level of sustainability that allows fisheries — and the communities and businesses that depend on them — to thrive. Ultimately, all fishery improvement projects are encouraged to work to achieve a level of performance consistent with an unconditional pass of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) Fisheries Standard. For some fisheries, performance at this level is, understandably, a long-term goal.

The *Guidelines for Supporting Fishery Improvement* use the MSC Fisheries Standard as a tool for measuring the environmental performance of fisheries and the progress fishery improvement projects make over time. The standard is accessible to all fisheries regardless of whether they decide to pursue certification. Using the same credible standard for measuring the progress of all fishery improvement projects allows members of the Conservation Alliance community and businesses with sustainable seafood commitments to make better-informed decisions about participating in or sourcing from these projects.

Fishery improvement projects are encouraged to examine the full range of social issues that may exist in their fisheries - from human rights abuses to labor issues to community impacts - and prioritize issues to address in their workplans. The Conservation Alliance has adopted the Monterey Framework and its definition of socially responsible seafood. It includes three components:

1. Protecting human rights, dignity, and access to resources;
2. Ensuring equality and equitable opportunities to benefit; and
3. Improving food and livelihood security.

[The Social Responsibility Assessment Tool for the Seafood Sector](#) is a diagnostic tool built on the Monterey Framework. Fishery Improvement Projects in all sizes of fisheries from small-scale to industrial can use it to assess risk for social issues in their fisheries across the three components of the framework, identify areas in need of improvement, and include actions in their workplans to improve social responsibility. The Social Responsibility Assessment Tool can be applied to both wild capture and farmed seafood.

Depending on the laws of the jurisdiction(s) in which a company does business, it may face criminal, civil, or regulatory liabilities for human trafficking and modern slavery in its supply chains. The Conservation Alliance recommends seeking the expertise of regional human rights resources (e.g., local labor unions, NGOs involved in the protection of human rights, and/or legal experts to aid in understanding the laws, labor conditions, and options for addressing risk in a specific region.

The Conservation Alliance helped develop [FisheryProgress.org](#), a public website with reliable information that the seafood industry and NGO community use to track the progress of fishery improvement projects. The website is powered by FishChoice, a member of the Conservation Alliance community. Fishery improvement project implementers update project data every six months and FishChoice staff review it for completeness and accuracy before it is published to ensure that users can trust the information they find on the site. The Conservation Alliance strongly recommends that fishery improvement projects report on [FisheryProgress.org](#), as it centralizes project information, provides a standardized way to view that information, and all data is reviewed by FishChoice staff to ensure that information is complete, credible, and in compliance with the site performance and reporting requirements.

THE ROLE OF SEAFOOD BUYERS IN IMPROVING FISHERIES

In 2008, the Conservation Alliance released the [Common Vision for Sustainable Seafood](#), a guide that outlines six steps businesses can take to develop and implement a sustainable seafood policy. One of these steps is for retailers, suppliers, and processors to make responsible sourcing decisions. To fulfill this step, buyers that purchase seafood from sources that are not yet sustainable can pursue a variety of strategies to help those sources move toward sustainability.

One strategy is to temporarily stop purchasing seafood from those sources until they meet the criteria required by the company's sustainable seafood purchasing policy. The Conservation Alliance recommends that companies that take this approach also communicate the problem areas in the fishery that need to be addressed for sourcing to resume.

Another strategy is to engage suppliers, producers, and other industry partners in a fishery improvement project. Fishery improvement projects need to be accountable for meeting specific milestones and deadlines for improvement. If a fishery does not make measurable improvements in its environmental performance over time, the Conservation Alliance recommends buyers and suppliers engaged in the improvement project share their concerns over the lack of progress. If no improvement occurs after direct engagement with the project, the Conservation Alliance recommends companies stop buying seafood from that source and communicate the reason for doing so.

The decision about whether to engage one's supply chain in an improvement project or stop buying until improvements are made rests with the buyer and will depend on the specific requirements of the company's sustainable seafood policy. Both approaches are legitimate when structured to create incentives for measurable, positive change in our oceans and seafood supply — which is the ultimate goal.

A fisherman in a boat at dawn, with a white text box overlaid on the image. The fisherman is wearing a dark jacket and is looking out at the water. The boat is filled with fishing gear, including a large net. The background shows a calm sea and a clear sky.

DEFINITION OF A FISHERY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

A fishery improvement project is a multi-stakeholder effort to address environmental challenges in a fishery. These projects utilize the power of the private sector to incentivize positive changes toward sustainability in the fishery and seek to make these changes endure through policy change.¹

¹The definition of a fishery improvement project will be expanded to consider additional dimensions of sustainability in the next substantial update of these guidelines.



DEFINITION OF A FISHERY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

The following are key qualities of a fishery improvement project.



Participation

A fishery improvement project must draw upon market forces, which might include suppliers, retailers, food service, fishing industry including fishermen, etc., to motivate fishery improvements. Specifically, a fishery improvement project must include active participation by companies in the supply chain. Other important participants include government, fishery managers, and nongovernmental organizations. Participation means contributing financial or in-kind support to the project and/or working on actions in the workplan.



Public Commitment

Participants must commit to financially invest in (directly or in-kind) and make improvements to the fishery (e.g., a signed memorandum of understanding, published participant list, etc.).



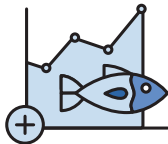
Objectives

A fishery improvement project must define the near-term scope of the project with a set of time bound objectives. In addition to setting environmental objectives as described in the table below, the Conservation Alliance encourages fishery improvement projects to consider setting objectives to address social challenges within their fisheries.



Workplan

A fishery improvement project must develop and implement a workplan, with an associated budget and deadlines, designed to address the deficiencies in the fishery necessary to achieve the project's objectives. The workplan and deadlines must be made publicly available. The budget need not be made publicly available.



Progress Tracking and Reporting

A fishery improvement project must regularly track and report progress, including: 1) publicly reporting progress on actions and their results with supporting documentation every six months, for instance, on [FisheryProgress.org](https://fisheryprogress.org); and 2) updating indicator scores and providing supporting evidence for score changes every 12 months. All fishery improvement projects are expected to make progress over time.

BASIC AND COMPREHENSIVE FISHERY IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS

The Conservation Alliance has defined two fishery improvement project levels:

BASIC	COMPREHENSIVE
Good entry point for fisheries to begin addressing specific environmental challenges.	Aim to address the full range of environmental challenges necessary for a fishery to achieve a high level of sustainability.

The primary differences between basic and comprehensive fishery improvement projects are the level of scoping to inform development of the workplan, the objectives, and the verification required.

The Conservation Alliance encourages fisheries developing new improvement projects to pursue the comprehensive model. The Conservation Alliance also encourages basic fishery improvement projects to transition to comprehensive projects over time.

Key Differences Between Basic and Comprehensive Fishery Improvement Projects

BASIC	COMPREHENSIVE
SCOPING	
<p>Fishery improvement project completes a needs assessment and scoping document based on the MSC standard to identify environmental challenges. The needs assessment must include at minimum a subset of indicators from each of the three principle areas of the MSC standard. The needs assessment and scoping document must be made publicly available.</p>	<p>Fishery improvement project engages a party experienced with applying the MSC standard² to complete a pre-assessment and scoping document. The pre-assessment and scoping document must be made publicly available.</p>
OBJECTIVES	
<p>Fishery improvement project defines time bound objectives for addressing a specific set of the fishery's environmental challenges to improve its performance against the MSC standard.</p>	<p>Fishery improvement project defines time bound objectives for addressing all of the fishery's environmental challenges necessary to achieve a level of performance consistent with an unconditional pass of the MSC standard.</p>
VERIFICATION OF PROGRESS VIA AUDIT	
<p>Independent, in-person audits of activity results and performance against the MSC standard are encouraged but not required for basic fishery improvement projects.</p>	<p>Every three years, comprehensive fishery improvement projects must arrange for an independent, in-person audit of activity results and performance against the MSC standard by someone that is both experienced with the MSC standard² <u>and</u> independent from the organization implementing the project.</p>

² A party experienced with applying the MSC standard can be a registered MSC technical consultant, an accredited conformity assessment body, or someone who has [other demonstrated qualifications](#) that meet the FisheryProgress.org criteria.



PROCESS FOR FISHERY IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS

There are five stages of fishery improvement project progress, defined below, along with four status definitions. While the path to improvement is not always linear, these stages and status descriptions help groups and companies evaluate improvement projects and make decisions about engagement and/or sourcing.

PROCESS FOR FISHERY IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS

Stages

STAGE 0

Fishery Improvement Project Identification

During the identification stage, a target fishery that may benefit from a fishery improvement project is identified and a supply chain analysis is conducted to understand who else is involved in the fishery and what market leverage exists.

STAGE 1

Fishery Improvement Project Development

During the development stage, the fishery's performance is evaluated against the MSC standard and stakeholders are recruited to participate in the project. The development stage includes:

An assessment of the fishery's environmental performance.

- Basic fishery improvement projects conduct a needs assessment that must include at minimum a subset of the indicators from each of the three principle areas of the MSC standard to determine environmental challenges and improvements needed in the fishery. The Conservation Alliance recommends basic projects include all MSC indicators in their needs assessment if possible and consider conducting an MSC pre-assessment as their needs assessment if they anticipate transitioning to a comprehensive project in the future.
- Comprehensive fishery improvement projects conduct an MSC pre-assessment to determine where the fishery falls short of the MSC standard. The pre-assessment must be completed by a party experienced with applying the MSC standard (i.e., a registered MSC technical consultant, accredited conformity assessment body or has other demonstrated qualifications that meet the FisheryProgress.org criteria).

- In addition to assessing environmental challenges, fishery improvement projects are encouraged to assess their social risk across the three principles of the Monterey Framework. Resources such as the Social Responsibility Assessment Tool to complete this assessment.

A scoping document.

- A scoping document summarizes the results of the needs assessment/ pre-assessment and recommends strategies for addressing the fishery's challenges. The scoping document must be made public. For comprehensive fishery improvement projects, the scoping document must be completed or audited by a party experienced with applying the MSC standard (i.e., a registered MSC technical consultant, accredited conformity assessment body, or has other demonstrated qualifications that meet the FisheryProgress.org criteria).

Note: If the needs assessment or MSC pre-assessment includes a summary of results and recommended strategies for addressing the fishery's challenges, the fishery improvement project need not complete the additional scoping document.

A stakeholder mapping and engagement process.

Identify which parties are the most relevant to the fishery improvement project. Consider the full range of stakeholders who will be impacted by the project or have a role in making changes to address environmental challenges in the fishery. Determine who needs to become a participant in the fishery improvement project, including government representatives, industry (fishermen, processors, exporters, mid supply chain and end buyers, etc.), environmental and social NGOs, and the scientific community.

Fishery improvement projects are encouraged to make the process for adding participants transparent. Additionally, projects at the development stage are encouraged to determine whether other improvement projects exist within the same fishery and to collaborate where possible rather than duplicate existing efforts. Projects can consult FisheryProgress.org to determine if there are other active or prospective improvement projects within the same fishery.

STAGE **2**

Fishery Improvement Project Launch

During the launch stage, the project participants and workplan are finalized and made public. The launch stage includes:

- **Confirmation of project participants.** A list of fishery improvement project participants is posted publicly. A memorandum of understanding may also be provided to offer additional detail on the roles of participants.

- **Participant meeting.** The fishery improvement project participants meet in person to discuss the assessment and determine a course of action.

- **Development of the workplan.** Based on the assessment, scoping document, and participant input, the fishery improvement project develops a workplan with activities that will help it correct the deficiencies necessary to achieve its objectives. For a comprehensive fishery improvement project, the workplan must be developed with someone experienced with applying the MSC standard.

A workplan must include:

- **Objectives.** The Conservation Alliance recommend objectives focus on a time frame of five years (or less). For basic fishery improvement projects, objectives will address a specific set of the environmental challenges identified in the needs assessment to improve the fishery's performance against the MSC standard. For comprehensive fishery improvement projects, objectives will address all the fishery's environmental challenges necessary to achieve a level of sustainability consistent with an unconditional pass of the MSC standard. All fishery improvement projects are encouraged to work toward including traceability and addressing social issues as part of their objectives
- **A list of actions.** Actions are major activities that must be completed to address the deficiencies identified in the needs assessment/pre-assessment. A workplan may also include tasks, which break actions down into specific steps that describe how the action will be accomplished.
- **Responsible parties.** Organizations/people responsible for completing each action.
- **Timeframes.** An estimate of the timeframe needed to complete each action and/or task (e.g., January 2021 – June 2021).
- **An associated budget.** At minimum, a budget includes a list of main expenses and revenue sources for the fishery improvement project, and must be updated yearly.

During this stage, the workplan must be made public and the budget must be adopted by participants (although the budget details need not be made public). When developing the workplan, the Conservation Alliance recommends assessing risks that may impact the ability of the fishery to make progress as planned.

STAGE **3**

Fishery Improvement Project Implementation

During the implementation stage, the fishery starts taking action toward addressing its shortcomings and begins tracking its progress.

This stage includes:

Implementing actions and/or tasks in the workplan and consistent engagement with regulators on these actions.

Tracking and reporting on progress. Basic and comprehensive fishery improvement projects self-report their progress on implementing their workplans as follows:

1. Publicly report progress on workplan actions and their results with supporting documentation every six months.
2. Update indicator scores and provide supporting evidence for score changes every 12 months.

For fishery improvement projects reporting via FisheryProgress.org, FishChoice staff review progress reports for completeness and accuracy before they are published (see the [FisheryProgress Review Guidelines](#) for more information). If an improvement project on FisheryProgress misses two sequential six-month reports, it will be designated inactive. An improvement project must fully update its reporting to return to active on FisheryProgress.org.

Every three years, comprehensive fishery improvement projects must arrange for an independent, in-person audit of activity results and performance against the MSC standard (e.g., changes in fisheries policy, management, or fishing practices and ultimately the health of the fishery) by someone who has demonstrated experience applying the MSC standard (e.g., a registered MSC technical consultant or accredited conformity assessment body or has other demonstrated qualifications that meet the FisheryProgress criteria) and is independent from the organization implementing the fishery

improvement project.

Course correcting if needed. If a fishery improvement project does not achieve the actions in its workplan within the specified timeline, the project should report the reasons actions were missed and update the workplan to reflect adjusted actions and deadlines.

STAGE

4

Improvements in Fishing Practices or Fishery Management

In this stage, fishery improvement projects document any demonstrated improvements based on implementation of the workplan. Improvements in this stage include:

Improvements in policy or management or modifications in fishing practices.

Increases in scores for MSC performance indicators focused on management or information.

STAGE

5

Improvements on the Water

In this stage, fishery improvement projects document any demonstrated improvements on the water. Improvements in this stage include:

Increases in scores for MSC performance indicators focused on outcomes.

Verifiable change on the water, such as a reduction in fishing mortality, an increase in biomass of the target stock, a reduction in habitat impact, etc.

Note: Stages Four and Five are not necessarily sequential. These stages evaluate the fishery improvement project on two different sets of results. Both stages may not be required with every fishery improvement project.

PROCESS FOR FISHERY IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS

Status

Prospective


Fishery improvement projects in Stage Zero (Fishery Improvement Project Identification or Stage One (Fishery Improvement Project Development may be listed on FisheryProgress.org as prospective for up to 12 months. The intent of listing prospective projects is to help businesses identify fishery improvement projects to participate in as well as to prevent the development of multiple FIPs in the same species/geographic region. Once an improvement project completes Stage Two (Fishery Improvement Project Launch, it may be listed as active on FisheryProgress.org.

Active/Completed/Inactive

Active improvement projects in Stages Two (Fishery Improvement Project Launch), Three (Fishery Improvement Project Implementation), Four (Improvements in Fishing Practices or Fishery Management), and Five (Improvements on the Water) may remain active on FisheryProgress.org until they:

1. End and provide [independent verification](#) that they have completed their objectives, upon which they will be listed as completed.
2. Report that they have suspended work without completing their objectives, upon which they will be listed as inactive.
3. Miss two sequential six-month reports, upon which they will be listed as inactive.
4. Report no Stage Four or Five results (Improvement in Fishing Practice or Management or Improvement on the Water) in three years, upon which they will be listed as inactive.

FisheryProgress.org offers a set of [templates](#) developed by the Conservation Alliance community that fishery improvement projects can use in Stage One (Fishery Improvement Project Development) or Stage Two (Fishery Improvement Project Launch).

A blue-tinted photograph of a fishing boat on the water. The boat is in the foreground, moving towards the right, with a wake visible. A large white rectangular box is overlaid on the center of the image, containing text. The background shows a calm sea and a distant shoreline under a clear sky.

SUPPORTING FISHERY IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS

Supporting fishery improvement projects can help to engage additional seafood businesses in existing projects as well as spur demand from buyers and suppliers for new projects to improve other fisheries with environmental problems.



SUPPORTING FISHERY IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS

There are different ways to support fishery improvement projects. The Conservation Alliance strongly recommends that projects be listed on [FisheryProgress.org](https://fisheryprogress.org) in order to report publicly in a standardized manner. This makes it easy for seafood companies and other stakeholders to review a project's stage and status and determine if they want to support or source from a fishery improvement project. While the Conservation Alliance community, especially NGOs, may evaluate information on [FisheryProgress.org](https://fisheryprogress.org), companies make the final decision about whether to engage in or source from a project.

Alliance Support of Fishery Improvement Projects

The Conservation Alliance applauds all fishery improvement projects working to address environmental challenges. To recognize these important efforts, the Conservation Alliance encourages fishery improvement projects that meet at minimum the criteria for basic projects outlined in these guidelines to submit information to [FisheryProgress.org](https://fisheryprogress.org).

Business Decisions

After reviewing publicly available information from sources such as the FIP profiles on FisheryProgress.org and/or consulting with NGO partners, companies can engage in improvement projects in a number of ways:

- Participate in a projects by contributing financially/in-kind or getting involved in project activities;
- Send a letter of support for the project to its organizers, government representatives, or suppliers; and/or
- Ask its supply chain to participate in the project or source from a fishery engaged in an active fishery improvement project.

Conservation Alliance community members have varying criteria for recommending FIP sourcing or engagement to companies. Fisheries engaged in fishery improvement projects that meet the Conservation Alliance comprehensive criteria include traceability, and are demonstrating progress are the most likely to be recommended for procurement. But some community members may recommend companies source from fisheries engaged in basic projects as well.

Progress is Critical

In addition, procurement decisions are contingent on the fishery making progress over time against the actions in its workplan and reporting on the results of those actions. An important tool many companies and NGOs use to evaluate fishery improvement project progress is the [FIP Progress Ratings](#), developed by Sustainable Fisheries Partnership, that are reviewed by and included on FisheryProgress.org.

Clear communication and reporting from the fishery improvement project is key. If a project misses deadlines for actions in the workplan, it should report on the reasons deadlines were missed and provide a new plan for meeting them. A fishery improvement project can make progress even if it misses deadlines for some actions. However, consistently missing deadlines and/or failing to make measurable improvements in environmental performance over time may result in the withdrawal of support for a fishery improvement project.

Note: For more information, including a glossary of terms used in this document, please visit solutionsforseafood.org/projects/fishery-improvement.