

# Seafood Buying Guide

**W**ith so many different seafood options in markets and restaurants, how can you make choices that are best for your health, the environment and the communities that bring fish to your table? There are so many different factors to consider, choosing the right seafood can be a challenge. By asking questions and knowing what to look for and what to avoid, you can better choose seafood that is clean, green and safe. Check out Food & Water Watch’s new Smart Seafood Guide that lists better alternatives to common, but potentially harmful, seafood choices. This guide can explain why certain choices are recommended and help you ask the right questions to make informed decisions.

Below are some of the questions you can ask about your seafood when you’re at grocery stores and restaurants.

**1. Was it caught or farmed locally?** Often the shorter the distance food travels to get to your table, the less fuel is used to get it to you. You’ll also have a better chance of supporting historic fishing communities and getting fresher seafood.

**2. Was it caught or farmed domestically?** Seafood safety standards in the United States are often stronger than elsewhere in the world, reducing the likelihood that your fish is contaminated with toxic substances the United States considers illegal. And of course, you help the U.S. economy that way.

**3. Is it farmed or wild?** In general, choose wild-caught. If the answer is farmed, see tip number 5. Wild fish often carry fewer health risks for consumers than most farm-raised fish because they aren’t grown in large crowded cages with antibiotics and pesticides. Wild-caught fish aren’t always perfect though — some species may contain higher levels of mercury, so women of child-bearing age and parents of children should be careful about which fish they choose.

**4. How is it caught?** Some fishing methods have high levels of bycatch — other animals that are accidentally caught and not wanted — or cause habitat damage.



## Labeling

“Organic,” “sustainable,” “eco-friendly” — what do they all mean? Seafood labels can be very confusing. For example, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) says its label certifies that seafood is sustainably managed. Unfortunately, many of the fisheries it approved are actually associated with significant environmental problems. Organic labels, if you see them, don’t mean a thing here in the United States for seafood — there are not yet U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) organic standards for seafood. While some attempts are made to provide information, the best method for you as a consumer is to ask questions and learn directly from the people who are selling the seafood.

## COOL

Country-of-origin labeling (COOL) is important, but existing laws fall short of requiring all information to be provided for all fish products. In 2005, the USDA developed mandatory COOL rules, which were intended to help inform consumers about where seafood comes from and if it is farm-raised or wild-caught. Unfortunately, USDA did not create a strong labeling program.

- “Processed” seafood is exempt, leaving more than 50 percent of fish products sold in the United States without labels. Processed seafood can be anything that has been altered in a substantial way, such as cooked, smoked or canned seafood, or that has been mixed with other ingredients. Examples include seafood soups, seafood medleys, fish blocks and breaded or salted seafood. Excluding processed seafood from COOL requirements is especially troubling, because this category of seafood product has a high risk of contamination.
- 90 percent of fish sellers, such as wholesale markets, don’t have to label the origin.
- No enforcement mechanism exists and violators face minimal fines.

Ask whether the fish has been caught using sustainable methods.

**5. How is it farmed?** Choose species that need few inputs. Farm-raised mussels and clams are often a good choice, because they can grow more easily without chemicals and antibiotics — and are more likely raised by small-scale operations. Ask your grocery or restaurant where they came from.

Avoid farm-raised finfish, especially salmon, that require high wild fish inputs. Wild fish are used to produce feed for many farmed fish, placing an added burden on wild fish populations. Farmed fish are often grown in large overcrowded open ocean cages that can harm wild fish and the environment, and are dosed with chemicals that



can cause human health problems. The large businesses that grow these fish often overtake independent fishermen and put them out of business, hurting smaller-scale, local fishing communities.

With shrimp, choose U.S. wild or U.S. inland farmed. Avoid imported farm-raised shrimp. From 2003 to 2006, shrimp accounted for between 15 and 84 percent of imports that were refused at the United States border for being contaminated with illegal chemical residues. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration inspects less than two percent of seafood imports, meaning a large amount of contaminated shrimp could be reaching U.S. consumers.

When available, buy seafood that has been farmed in the United States in inland, recirculating facilities. Tilapia, shrimp, hybrid striped bass and arctic char are examples of fish that are or are soon to be farmed this way.

## States’ Safeguards

Though federal laws tend to be weak on labeling, some states have implemented stronger labeling safeguards to protect their own public health:

- Alaska requires the labeling of all farm-raised halibut, salmon or sablefish — even in restaurants. Alaska also requires labels for genetically modified farmed fish.
- Since the early 1990s, Washington State has required labeling for farm-raised salmon sold in retail and wholesale fish markets.
- Arkansas and Louisiana require labeling for farmed catfish sold in retail and wholesale markets.

**6. Is it fresh?** Avoid processed seafood like whole frozen meals in the grocery store, which often travel farther, use more fuel, and lack county-of-origin labeling, so you don't know where it came from originally.

**7. Is it associated with any contaminants?** See our "Avoiding Seafood Contaminants" fact sheet for information on how to better protect your health while enjoying seafood.

Overall, try to eat a variety of fish — don't stick to just one type. By doing so, your exposure to possible seafood contaminants can be reduced. This also helps to lower pressure on wild fish that have become over-popular seafood choices. And *always* ask where your seafood comes from before you buy — you have a right to know! This will also prompt restaurants and markets to pay attention to what

### **Shrimp Is America's Favorite Seafood.**

Nearly 90 percent of shrimp eaten in the United States is imported. Shrimp imports have increased by 95 percent in the past 10 years. U.S. shrimpers, especially from the Gulf of Mexico, are struggling to keep afloat, due to the massive flood of cheap imported farm-raised shrimp. Brazil, China, Mexico, Thailand and Vietnam are the top producers of farmed shrimp.

Americans are largely unaware of the health concerns associated with imported seafood products. The often crowded, unsanitary conditions in foreign industrial shrimp farms breed bacteria, viruses and parasites. This forces producers to use antibiotics and chemicals, many of which are illegal in the United States, to prevent disease outbreaks. Residues of these chemicals can end up in the shrimp that consumers in the United States eat. Also, transport of seafood imports across the world increases the opportunities for seafood to become contaminated or decompose due to improper handling and refrigeration.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is responsible for ensuring the safety of seafood imports by inspecting shipments at the border. In reality, a lack of funding means that FDA physically inspected less than two percent of all import shipments in 2006, and only 0.59 percent was sent to a laboratory to be tested. This is hardly enough to ensure the safety of seafood we eat here in the United States.



they buy once they know their patrons care. Learn about your seafood and share your knowledge with others.

### **What You Can Do**

- Always ask where seafood comes from and how it was produced — was it wild-caught or farmed? Choose wild-caught, or otherwise sustainably produced, domestic shrimp over imported farmed shrimp. Shrimp from the Gulf of Mexico, in particular Florida pinks, whites from the South Atlantic, Oregon pinks and spot prawns from the Pacific are the best choices.
- Tell FDA to increase inspection of imported seafood.
- Ask Congress to increase funding and oversight for FDA's seafood import inspection program.
- Tell USDA to expand country-of-origin labeling so that it includes processed seafood and includes every store and restaurant.

### **For more information:**

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