

Fish labelling for consumers

Since the end of 2014, consumers in the European Union (EU) have had access to better information when buying fishery and aquaculture products. Mandatory labels or markings for retail sale of seafood (including some types of processed seafood) must, in particular, include information on both the commercial and the scientific names of the species, whether it has been fished or farmed, the catch area or country of production, and the fishing gear used.

Food information to consumers

Information for EU consumers when purchasing fishery and aquaculture food products is governed, as with other food types, by Regulation No [1169/2011](#) on the Provision of Food Information to Consumers (the 'FIC' Regulation'). In force since December 2014, this regulation has established [measures](#) for the labelling, presentation and advertising of foodstuffs. It has set additional requirements for providing nutrition information, applicable since December 2016. Aimed at improving legibility of mandatory information to be given to consumers, particularly for processed and pre-packed food, it also addresses the need for increased protection (e.g. information on allergens) and awareness of citizens when making their choice. While indication of origin was already mandatory for [beef and beef products](#), the FIC Regulation requires provision of indications on the origin of meat from other land-farmed species, i.e. pigs, sheep, goats and poultry.

Seafood: specific additional mandatory information

In 2013, when reforming the EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), and notably its [common market organisation](#) (CMO), the European Parliament and Council decided to set some additional obligations for information on fishery and aquaculture products (often referred to under the generic term of 'seafood', even though it may include products from inland freshwaters). These additional information requirements for seafood also apply since December 2014. According to the CMO Regulation ([Regulation 1379/2013](#)), consumers and mass caterers must be given more information, to better inform their choice: **unprocessed** and **some forms of processed** food from **fishery and aquaculture products** must be labelled or marked with indications on:

- the exact species used,
- how this species has been produced, and
- where it originates from.

The CMO Regulation establishes that mandatory indications must also include – as already provided under the general FIC rules – the date of minimum durability ('use by' or 'best before') and whether the product has been defrosted (with some exceptions, e.g. products previously frozen for food safety purposes, or defrosted before smoking, salting, pickling, drying...).

These requirements apply to a large range of seafood, whether of vegetal (all algae and seaweeds) or animal source. Concerning the latter, the additional information obligation covers fish, crustaceans, molluscs and other aquatic invertebrates, notably when sold alive, fresh, chilled or frozen, as whole animals or in the form of fillets or other pieces of meat (minced or not). Some processed products, such as smoked, dried or salted fish fillets, out-of-shell molluscs and cooked crustaceans are also covered.

In practical terms, both the **commercial designation** and the **scientific name** must be displayed when these types of seafood are offered for retail sale. However, one designation may be commonly in use for different [fish species](#), and a fish species may have several common names in a given language. Each Member State must therefore establish and publish its [national list of accepted commercial designations](#) by species or group of species on its territory, including region-specific names in some cases.



When the product originates from **capture fishing** at sea, the consumer must know that it has been '**caught**', and in which **fishing area**. For seas bordering the EU (North-East Atlantic, Mediterranean and Black Sea), the fishing zone must be indicated more precisely using the partitioning system of sub-areas and divisions established by the FAO. As this system is not necessarily well known, the indication must be accompanied with the name of the zone in terms understandable to consumers (or replaced by a [map](#) or pictogram). Indication of the catch area in other oceans can be given at a larger scale (based on [FAO major fishing areas](#)).

When the fishery product has been fished in rivers or lakes, its marking or labelling must include the mandatory indication '**caught in fresh water**', accompanied by a reference to the body of water of origin in the Member State or third **country of provenance** of the product.

Concerning the production method for fishery products, the consumer must also be provided with an indication on the type of **fishing gear used**, among seven defined [main categories of nets](#): seines, trawls, gillnets and similar nets, surrounding nets and lift nets, hooks and lines, dredges, and, lastly, pots and traps.

For products originating from [aquaculture](#), the mandatory indication for consumers and mass caterers must refer to both the production method (using the word 'farmed') and the **country of farming**. The country of farming corresponds to the Member State or third country in which the farmed aquatic organism actually underwent a large part of the cultivation or rearing process (namely in which it reached more than half of its final weight or in which it underwent more than half of the rearing period; for farmed shellfish, the farming country is that in which a final rearing stage of at least six months took place).

For non-pre-packed seafood, these mandatory indications for retail sale can be provided in different forms (e.g. posters and billboards) and must be easily visible and legible. For pre-packed products, indications must appear directly on the package or on a label attached thereto, so as to ensure visibility and readability.

The CMO Regulation furthermore defines which of the mandatory information described above must be displayed in cases of retail sale of mixed products (e.g. same fish species but different production methods or different catch areas or farming countries). Other processed forms of food, such as products containing seafood as an ingredient, are generally subject to the FIC rules only, although some specific marketing standards have long been established for canned tuna and bonito ([Regulation 1536/92](#)), and for preserved sardines and sardine-like products ([Regulation 2136/89](#)).

Voluntary labels

Provided the information is clear, unambiguous and verifiable, retail sellers of fishery and aquaculture products may choose to provide the consumer with more indications on production techniques and practices. This voluntary labelling or marking may refer in particular to more detailed data on the gear used, indication on the flag state of the vessel that caught the product, the port or the date of landing, the date of catch of a fishery product or the date of harvesting for an aquaculture product.

Voluntary labels or marking can also be provided concerning nutritional content (while respecting EU rules on [nutrition and health claims](#)) and concerning information of an ethical, social or environmental nature.

Notwithstanding the fact that some producers may want to use one or other of the private labels developed in these domains, fishery and aquaculture products can also benefit from voluntary labelling possibilities among EU-regulated logos and corresponding standards. A number of fish and shellfish products, of wild or farmed origin, already benefit from EU [quality logos](#) for food ('protected designation of origin' (PDO), 'protected geographical indication' (PGI) and 'traditional speciality guaranteed' (TSG)). Regarding environmental performance in particular, aquaculture products may also claim the EU label on [organic farming](#). In a [report](#) based on different [options](#), the European Commission considers that the aim of driving for sustainability by developing a voluntary eco-label in seafood on EU-defined criteria may not only be of limited need, but even not consistent with the EU commitment to improving environmental sustainability and delivering on sustainable fisheries through the common fisheries policy.

Overview

The labelling of seafood is governed under general EU consumer protection policy and complemented by additional provisions under the EU common fisheries policy. Rules for mandatory and voluntary information of fishery and aquaculture products vary depending on their nature, their level of processing and their presentation or packaging for sale. The European Commission has also published a pocket [guide](#) to contribute to increasing knowledge and facilitating the understanding of consumers and stakeholders on these issues.