

Program

MENDING THE NET



National

(Australia)



Strengthening Australia's seafood import controls

Illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing is one of the most critical challenges for achieving sustainable fisheries^{1,2}. These activities include illicit or unsustainable fishing practices as well as human and worker rights violations on fishing vessels and in seafood processing and packaging facilities.

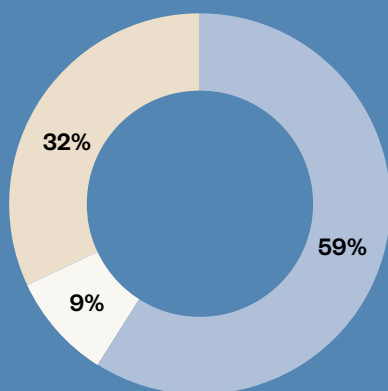
Approximately 65 per cent of the seafood we eat in Australia comes from overseas – primarily countries in Southeast Asia with known instances of illegal fishing and forced labour. Australia's lax seafood import controls – and limited labelling requirements – mean that illegally produced seafood is regularly finding its way onto our plates.

The Mending the Net report reviews Australia's seafood import regulations and the information required for importation under Australia's current framework to trace imported seafood back to the source. Specifically, we assess reporting of 22 key data elements recognised as critical for establishing a robust import control program to combat illegal fishing.

1. United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation 2014, *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture: Opportunities and Challenges*, Rome. Available from: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i3720e.pdf> [4 December 2020].

2. The PEW Charitable Trusts 2019, *Study Measures Countries' Exposure to Illegal Catch, Actions to Keep it from Markets*. Available from: https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2019/12/psma_brief_round2_v3.pdf [4 December 2020].

We identify significant gaps in Australia's policy framework that currently allow illegal, unsustainable and exploitative seafood to be imported into the Australian market and onto our plates. These gaps compromise national and global efforts to combat illegal fishing and forced labour. They also undermine the domestic fishing industry by providing access to cheap, illegal products that outcompete local, sustainable seafood.



Our insights:

- 1. Australia consistently collects only two of the 22 pieces of information needed to provide catch-to-plate traceability.** The current system is unable to ensure step-by-step traceability or confirm the legality of imported seafood.
- 2. Australia lacks a targeted seafood import policy to ensure legality.** It relies on a patchwork of legislation focused on food safety and biosecurity.

3. Australia's seafood labelling systems is inadequate.

Outside of the Northern Territory, seafood sold in restaurants and cafés is exempt from country of origin labelling.

Australia needs to **'mend the net'** on its current seafood import regulations by adopting strong controls that require imported products to demonstrate legality prior to import. A comprehensive and verifiable traceability and catch documentation scheme is essential to cover all aspects of the supply chain, from boat to plate.

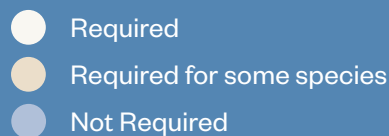


Figure 1: Reporting status of key data elements for preventing importation of illegal seafood into Australia.

Recommendations



Photo credit: Antonio Busiello via Getty Images.

We recommend that the Australian government urgently implement:

- A comprehensive catch documentation scheme that allows seafood products to be traced at every step from point-of-catch to point-of-sale — and a formal verification process to ensure that reported information is legitimate.
- Strict regulations that require seafood importers to demonstrate a product's legality prior to border clearance, including compliance with the supplier country's laws and backed by strong compliance and enforcement mechanisms.
- A national seafood labelling system that provides consumers with accurate information on the product's species, country of origin, and method of catch/production, at all points of sale.

These improvements would benefit Australian industry and consumers by:

- Creating a level playing field between domestic and imported seafood by keeping cheap, illegally produced seafood from outcompeting local, sustainably managed fisheries.
- Preventing misrepresented seafood which can impose an economic cost and a health risk (some species have unique parasites or lower nutrients that can impact human health³).
- Providing consumer assurance that all seafood sold in Australia is legally and responsibly produced.

3. Michelle Williams, Marta Hernandez-Jover, Shokoofeh Shamsi, 2020, "Fish substitutions which may increase human health risks from zoonotic seafood borne parasites: A review", Food Control, Volume 118, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodcont.2020.107429>.