Effective Date: June 25, 2025

Fisheries Management Standard

Version 3.0

MEL Council

Introduction

Marine Eco-Label Japan (MEL) Council have developed a certification standard for fisheries management to promote sustainable and responsible fisheries production by confirming the important aspects, such as the conservation of natural resources and environment, and the improvement of consumer's trust. Fishers must satisfy this standard to become MEL certified fisheries.

Japan has one of the world's richest biodiversity with about 3,700 marine fish species which comprise 25% of the 15,000 species known in the world and fishers target a wide variety of species[1]. Also, a large number of fishers exist in Japan, and the proportion of small-scale fishers is particularly high. Fishers have historically belonged to the local fishing communities and/or the regional fisheries organization. Fishers have been engaged in practical resource management that aligns with the situation of local and regional fisheries under the basic principle of resource management by resource users.

It is commonly said that *"Iso-wa jitsuki, oki-wa iriai"* ("coastal areas are to be managed by local communities, while offshore areas are for communal use"), the management system was established that the coastal areas are exclusively used by local fishers while the offshore areas are commonly used by many fishers. This management system is called co-management and it enables to maintain the high levels of biodiversity and productivity. Also, co-management is often referred to as "*satoumi"*, where people manage resources with consideration of the surrounding environment, livelihoods, ecosystems and material cycles that extend from mountain to sea.

Institutionally, the Fishery Act and the Act on the Protection of Fishery Resources set the legal framework of input control in fisheries management by limiting the allocation of fishing right and license. Following the ratification of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1996, the Act on Preservation and Control of Living Marine Resources was enacted, introducing the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) system to manage and conserve the resources. This system was also complemented by fishing effort control by the Total Allowable Effort (TAE) system. The Basic Act on Fisheries established in 2001, along with the Basic Plan for Fisheries formulated based on it, outlines measures to ensure a stable supply of marine products. These measures include the control of catch volume and fishing effort, the promotion of enhancement fisheries and aquacultures, and the conservation of fishing ground and habitats. Scientific data-based resource assessments are required for these developments, conducted through various surveys by national and prefectural research institutions in collaboration. The data collected and compiled from these different types of research and surveys are

[1] Mitsutaku Makino (2013) Analysis of Japanese Fisheries Systems: Fisheries Management and Ecosystem Conservation (In Japanese), Koseisha-Koseikaku

evaluated and approved by committees comprised of government officials and other relevant stakeholders. The catch volumes and fishing efforts are managed based on the results of these resource assessments. Since 2011, a new resource management system has been introduced where the national and local governments prepare the Resource Management Policies, and fishers develop and implement the Resource Management Plans based on these policies to engage in sustainable resource management practices on-site.

Furthermore, the Basic Plan on Fisheries formulated in 2017 set forth the goal of balancing proper management of fishery resources with the development of the fisheries industry as a growth sector. In December 2018, the revised Fisheries Act, a major reform after nearly 70 years, was enacted and took effect in 2020. The main pillar of this fisheries policy reform is the acceleration of resource management based on scientific evaluation. This involves expanding the target species for resource assessment conducted by the government and setting resource management targets based on assessment results. The primary objective is to restore and maintain resource levels to target levels to achieve stable catch volumes and improve fishermen's incomes. The revised Fisheries Act stipulates that basic matters concerning resource management be specified in the Basic Policy on Resource Management and the Prefectural Resource Management Policies, regardless of whether the regulation is administrative or voluntary. The framework for promoting resource management, combining administrative regulation by the national and prefectural governments with voluntary efforts by fishermen, will continue to exist. The Resource Management Plans defining voluntary efforts by fishermen are transitioned to Resource Management Agreements based on the revised Fisheries Act.

Another pillar of fisheries policy reform is the Act on Ensuring the Proper Domestic Distribution and Importation of Specified Aquatic Animals and Plants (Act on Proper Distribution of Seafood), enforced in December 2020 and enacted in December 2022. This law aims to eliminate illegal catches from market distribution, such as those from IUU (illegal, unreported, and unregulated) fisheries, by mandating information transmission and transaction record retention among operators in the distribution of seafood products. This contributes to the sustainable use of fishery resources and the sound development of fisheries and related industries.

The new Basic Plan on Fisheries formulated in March 2022 outlines various measures, including resource management in response to changes in the marine environment, the introduction of individual catch quota systems, and the development of the fisheries industry as a growth sector. Among these measures, acceleration of seafood ecolabel utilization and promotion of MEL are clearly stated.

Regarding the cultivation fishery as resource enhancement method, the 8th Basic Policy on Cultivation

Fishery formulated in 2022 aims to promote effective cultivation fishery within the framework of resource management. It is stated that, based on the verification results of the effectiveness of seedling release, the release methods for target species with high resource enhancement effects and suitable locations are to be considered. For species that have achieved the resource enhancement goal or can maintain resource level even with reduced release volumes, a transition from resource enhancement to catch management is being promoted. Through understanding the effects of release, efforts are to be made to deepen the consideration of genetic biodiversity conservation.

Furthermore, the Coastal Fisheries Grounds Enhancement and Development Program Act stipulates that fishermen themselves should manage the cultivation and release of the targeted aquatic animals, verify the effects of release, and promote the development of fishing grounds and seedling production facilities. The national and prefectural governments should work together to promote cultivation fisheries. The Basic Act on Fisheries also mandates that the national government systematically promote the production and release of aquatic animals and plants' seeds in harmony with the environment, along with implementing other necessary measures.

In accordance with the Basic Act on Biodiversity, the National Biodiversity Strategy 2023-2030 aims to reduce the stress and improve the quality of biodiversity under Basic Strategy 1 “Restoration of Ecosystem Health”. To prevent the deterioration of the seabed and eutrophication in aquaculture farms, efforts are to be made to develop feed and optimize farm management. Furthermore, a sustainable fisheries resource management system should be established to both ensure biodiversity and restore Japan's capture fisheries production. Under Basic Strategy 3 “Realization of a Nature-Positive Economy”, the goal is to achieve the coexistence and sustainability of ecosystem protection and sustainable aquaculture systems.

In the revision of this standard (Ver. 3.0), securing appropriate working environments and preventing human rights violations for fishery workers are additionally included as requirement. Additionally, in connection with biodiversity conservation, proactive efforts of fishers to reduce environmental impacts such as reducing CO2 emissions and reducing the loss of fishing gears are to be evaluated to prompt the entire industry toward achievement of sustainable development goals. Additionally, MEL aims to pioneer seafood eco-label certification in Asia and developing countries located in mid to low latituted regions, where fishery resources are diverse in nature and many small-scale fishers exist, similar to Japan.

Framework of Certification Scheme

MEL certification scheme consists of three standards; Fisheries Management Standard (FMS), Aquaculture Management Standard (AMS) and Chain of Custody (CoC) Standard (CoCS). MEL aims to evaluate the fishers who positively conduct the sustainable utilization of fishery resources and the conservation of ecosystems. MEL is operated based on the relevant policies, laws and regulations in conformity with the natural, social and historical background of Japanese fisheries.

The Fisheries Management Standard set the requirements to practice the effective management of fisheries. Specific requirements for the assessment of applicants are explained in the supplemental documents;

1) Guidelines for Auditors of the Fisheries Management Standard,
2) Checklist for Auditors of the Fisheries Management Standers, and
3) Requirements for Certification Bodies Certifying Fisheries Management Standard.

Certification shall be handled by an independent third party (certification body) having the capacity and ability conforming to the ISO standard (ISO/IEC 17065:2012) and accredited by a member organization of the IAF (International Accreditation Forum).

Based on the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (1995), the FAO Guidelines for the Eco-labelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries adopted (2005, revised 2009), and the FAO Guidelines for the Eco-labelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Inland Fisheries (2011), MEL sets three principles as follows;

1. Requirements for fisheries management system
   (Fisheries shall be operated under an established and effective management system),
2. Requirements for stocks under consideration
   (Stocks under consideration shall be maintained as sustainable level),
3. Requirements for ecosystem considerations
   (Proper measures shall be practiced for the conservation of the ecosystem).

MEL also applies following principles and philosophy in the FAO Guidelines.

1) The implementation of FMS shall be based on the best scientific evidence available (BSEA). Relevant local and traditional knowledge should be obtained, where appropriate, and considered as BSEA when knowledge can be objectively verified.
2) FMS can be applied to the small-scale fisheries. Management systems differ substantially for different types and scales of fisheries. Since the data of small-scale fisheries are limited in many cases, the historical record of good management practices can be considered as supporting

evidence of the adequacy of the management measures and systems. However, if scientific evidence available for the assessment of the stock under consideration is limited, resulting in increased uncertainity about the evaluation, the management of the fishery should take a more precautionary approach.

3) In case where information regarding the stock under consideration is limited, general evidence based on similar species can be used, if the fishery has low risk of seriously impacting the stock. However, the greater the risk, the more specific evidences should be collected.

The FMS shall be reviewed at least once every five years to ensure its continued relevance and effectiveness, and revised as necessary in a timely manner. Additionally, it can be reviewed and updated when revisions are made to the FAO Guidelines, the national Basic Plan on Fisheries, or other relevant legal mandates.

In 2013, the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI) was established to recognize seafood ecolabel certification schemes which are in alignment with FAO guidelines through its Global Benchmark Tool and to promote certified sustainable seafood. MEL, as a Japan-originated sustainable seafood ecolabel aligned with the efforts of Japanese fishermen, has been recognized by GSSI since 2019.

References

This standard was prepared in conformity with the following existing documents;

- FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries
- FAO Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries (Revision 1)
- FAO Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Inland Capture Fisheries
- GSSI Global Benchmark Tool (Version 2)
- 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
- World Trade Organization (WTO) Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT)
  Agreement Annex 3 Code of Good Practice for the Preparation, Adoption and Application of Standards
- ISO/IEC Guide 59:1994 Code of Good Practice for Standardization
- ISO/IEC 17065:2012 Conformity assessment - Requirements for Bodies Certifying Products, Processes and Services
- ISO/IEC 17067:2013 Conformity Assessment - Fundamentals of Product Certification and

Scope and Unit of Certification

The scope of certification shall encompass a fishery licensed and operated under the relevant laws and regulations of Japan's national and local governments.

The unit of certification is a fishery harvesting the target stocks and using a specific fishing method under the uniform management procedures. (Note: seafood produced by certified fisheries of FMS can be subject to the certification of CoCS.)

Glossary

1. Fishing Effort

The amount of effort employed for fishing activity, such as the number of fishing vessels, the duration (days) of fishing operations, the number of fishing gears, and the duration (hours) of net-towing, etc.

2. Stocks under International Management

1) Transboundary stock

Fish stocks distributed and migrating over the exclusive economic zones of two or more countries

2) Straddling stock

Fish stocks distributed and migrating over the high seas and the exclusive economic zone

3) Highly migratory fish stock

Fish stock with a high swimming capacity migrating not only within or outside of the exclusive economic zone and the high seas but also throughout the ocean

3. Maximum Sustainable Yield

The largest catch or yield that can be allowed continuously from the stock under existing biological or non-biological environmental conditions

4. Reference Point

1) Target reference point

The benchmark that is set as a level of stock for a fishery to be maintained over the long term,

corresponding to the state of the stock and the fishery

2) Limit reference point

The benchmark that requires the management to take measures to take measures to promote recovery of the stock, in cases where the stock falls below the biological limits or where there are risks of it falling below biological limits

5. Total Allowable Catch (TAC)

In order to manage the target stock, the annual upper limit of the harvesting level shall be set and distributed to the related fishers.

6. Recruitment Overfishing

A situation in which the stock for the next generation is not used sustainably due to the strong pressure from capture fisheries before coming to maturity. Overfishing by capture fisheries is the cause of recruitment overfishing.

7. Disturbance of Ecosystem

The extensive and long-term change of structure to a biotic community caused by changes in the surrounding environment stemming from natural and/or artificial phenomena.

8. Endangered Species

Species listed in Act on Conservation of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora by Ministry of Environment.

1. Requirements for Fisheries Management System

(The unit of certification shall be operated under an established and effective management system.)

1.1 Existence of established and proper fisheries management system

1.1.1 The unit of certification shall be operated legally in accordance with national legislation, such as acquiring fishery license and permission necessary for operating the fisheries from the competent authority (i.e. national or prefectural governments).

1.1.2 An organization and system shall be established to manage the fishery of which the unit of certification is a part.

1.1.3 Information of the current state of the fishery of which the unit of certification is a part shall be collected, including the following items:

i) Outline of the fishery of which the unit of certification is a part,
ii) Fishing gears and fishing methods,
iii) Catch volume and fishing effort.

1.1.4 Workers shall be secured proper working conditions and there shall be no violations of workers' human rights.

1.2 Compliance with regulations and arrangements concerning the unit of certification and the relevant fishery

1.2.1 The unit of certification shall be operated in compliance with the relevant regulations and arrangements by national and local governments under the effective and appropriate monitoring, control and surveillance.

1.2.2 Decision-making process regarding the management of the fishery shall be transparent and ensure the participation of stakeholders including relevant fishers, researchers and the government.

1.2.3 A regional or wide-area resource management system for utilizing the stock under consideration shall be established. If the stock under consideration is internationally managed (such as transboundary fish stocks, straddling fish stocks or highly migratory fish stocks), the fishery

shall be operated in compliance with the resource management measures set by the relevant management authorities.

1.2.4 Fishery management shall be carried out in a precautioinary manner, considering various uncertainties associated with fishery resources, ecosystems and resource management. Furthermore, a mechanism shall be available to adaptively modify and improve management measures, in response to the state of the stock under consideration and the ecosystems.

1.2.5 In case that activities other than fishery production are carried out in the fishing operation areas of the unit of certification, continuous discussions among the parties involved regarding the effectiveness of management measures are held, and the contents of these discussions should be maintained.

1.2.6 Information on management rules and fishing activities shall be available to the public.

2. Requirements on the stock under consideration

(Stock under consideration is maintained at a level that allows its sustainable utilization.)

2.1 Biological information of the stock under consideration shall be collected, including the following items:

i) Distribution and migration,
ii) Age, growth and life span,
iii) Maturity and spawning.

2.2 Scientific evidence for determining the status and trends of the stock under consideration shall be collected and maintained.

2.3 The resource assessment shall also take into account the total fishing mortality caused by other fisheries utilizing the stock under consideration within its distribution area, as well as the resilience of the stock.

2.4 Assessment of the current status and trends of the stock under consideration shall be conducted based on the collected information, and the assessment results shall be incorporated into the decision-making process for management. The assessment methodology and results shall be made publicly available in a timely manner.

2.5 There shall be publicly-defined target reference point and limit reference point, or proxies for the stock under consideration set on the basis of the best scientific evidence available, in order to maintain or recover the stock at levels consistent with achieving Maximum Sustainable Yields (MSY) or a suitable proxy.

2.6 If a Total Allowable Catch (TAC) system is implemented for the stock under consideration, it shall be complied with by the fishery of which the unit of certification is a part.

2.7 The stock under consideration is not overfished. Necessary measures are taken in a timely manner to avoid recruitment overfishing if the stock is below the reference point where stock recovery measures are required to be taken.

3. Requirements on Consideration for Ecosystem

(Appropriate measures are implemented for the conservation of the ecosystem.)

3.1 Establishment of ecosystem-conscious management system

3.1.1. Scientific information shall be collected and maintained on the following items to assess the impact of the fishery by the unit of certification on non-target species and the ecosystem.

i) Catch and discard of non-target stocks
ii) Bycatch of endangered species[3] by the target fishery and efforts for conservation
iii) Essential habitats for the stock under consideration (e.g. spawning and nursery sites)
iv) Impact of the fishing gears used and also lost on the ecosystem (including the marine environment such as seabed)
v) Predator-prey interaction in the food-web regarding the stock under consideration
vi) Balance of whole ecosystem (i.e. whether the ecosystem is not severely disturbed)

3.1.2. The target fishery shall be operated with consideration for minimizing adverse impact on the non-target species and the ecosystems, based on the results of items 3.1.1 i) – vi).

3.1.3. The unit of certification shall contribute to the conservation of the fishing ground environment and the habitat of the stock under consideration.

[3] Endangered species are specified in the Act on Conservation of Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

3.2 Consideration for the ecosystem in the associated culture/enhancement fisheries

3.2.1 Production and release of artificial seedlings shall be conducted with due consideration given to maintaining the biological characteristics and genetic diversity of the species.

3.2.2 Management objectives shall be developed to maintain the natural reproductive stock components of the stock under consideration at a sustainable level, and management measures shall be implemented that are consistent with achieving these management objectives.

3.2.3 Monitoring is conducted on the stock under consideration and its habitat, and measures are taken to avoid the adverse impacts of the seedling release on the natural reproduction of the stock under consideration and the ecosystem.

End

Notes

Revision History:

Date of enactment (Version 2.0): October 3, 2017
Date of effectuation (Version 2.0): February 1, 2018
Date of effectuation (Version 3.0, this document): June 25, 2025

Transition period:

MEL certified entities with FMS Version 2.0 shall undergo an assessment to be certified with MEL FMS Version 3.0 during the transition period of three years after the effectuation of this standard.

Any discrepancy between translations shall be resolved by reference to the definitive Japanese version.