

# Alaska Salmon



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**DATE CERTIFIED** 3 September 2000; recertified November 2007

**SPECIES** Salmon – sockeye (*Oncorhynchus nerka*), chum (*Oncorhynchus keta*), Chinook (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*), coho (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*) and pink (*Oncorhynchus gorbuscha*)

**FISHING METHOD** Nets (drift gillnet, set gillnet, purse seine), trolling (pulling a baited line or lure behind a boat) and fishwheel (similar to a water-powered mill wheel, with baskets in which fish are captured before transfer to tanks)

**COUNTRY** United States



U.S. territorial waters adjacent to the State of Alaska

**FISHERY TONNAGE** 287,000 tonnes

“IT’S LIKE A modern-day gold rush,” says Warren ‘Buck’ Gibbons, describing the salmon harvest in western Alaska, where he not only fishes but sits on the board of the Bristol Bay Regional Seafood Development Association. “On the 1st of June it is highly likely that, if you put a net in the water, you will catch nothing. Around the 20th of June, here come 40 million salmon! By the 20th of July, there is nothing again. It’s an amazing display of what Mother Nature can provide.”

## The largest sockeye fishery in the world

All along 400kms of Bristol Bay shoreline in the crook of the Alaska Peninsula, salmon rush up rivers with evocative names such as Cinder, Kvichak, Nushagak, Togiak and Ugashik. Waiting for their return at the river mouths are the 1,800 small vessels of the Bristol Bay gillnet fleet – each one just 10m long, but together comprising the largest sockeye fishery in the world, with a harvest worth \$190m in 2008.

And Bristol Bay is only one part of an Alaska-wide salmon fishery that includes five species of salmon and hundreds of millions of fish, all participating in this annual migration as the fish return from thousands of miles out in the North Pacific to spawn in the rivers and lakes where they were born.

## Harvest and conservation

Throughout the vast state of Alaska, in remote fishing areas scattered throughout a rugged landscape, the fishery is carefully managed by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) to ensure its sustainability. ADF&G begins by setting overall conservation objectives and then controlling the harvest to make sure these objectives are met. “Harvests are set based on the resource that is surplus to the conservation needs” according to David Bedford, deputy commissioner of the ADF&G. Alaska managers monitor the fishery harvests and keep careful count of each of the various species of salmon to make sure sufficient numbers have escaped the fishers and are able to swim upriver and spawn.

“ADF&G uses spotter planes on river systems that are shallower and clearer, so they can see the fish from the air,” says Jon Sarheim – who, with Gibbons, runs the seafood company Wildcatch. “You can also see fish jumping, and monitor activity from counting towers.” This, together with strict regulation, enforcement, and ongoing research has made Alaska “a global leader in fisheries management and a working

model of what happens when you do it right,” Gibbons says.

## Beyond canned salmon

In Bristol Bay, the sheer abundance of fish forged the area’s reputation for canned salmon. “There was such a stampede of protein, you had to can it because, next day, you’d be overwhelmed by another wave,” says Gibbons. “Now, as the fish has become more valuable internationally, there are huge investments going on in Bristol Bay to fillet, portion and add value,” continues Gibbons. “Part of this change in outlook has come from the commitment to MSC by big retailers in the US and Europe.”

In September 2008, Findus France launched a new value-added product – Alaska salmon fingers – which was immediately listed by all major French retailers because of its MSC label, boosting Findus’s market share from 38 to 45 percent.

## Sustaining communities

“For all those efforts of filleting, chilling and value-adding, everyone along the supply chain picks up a little bit more revenue,” Gibbons explains. “In our communities, there are very few jobs and opportunities – and salmon is often the thing that creates the cash to sustain them through the year. The more value you place on fish, the more you return to these Alaskan communities.”

## A long history with MSC

The Alaska salmon fishery, a model for sustainable management practices since statehood in 1959, was one of the first fisheries to enter the MSC programme, as a way to demonstrate its sustainability to global markets through independent verification. In 2007, the fishery, through the continued leadership and efforts of ADF&G, successfully completed its second five-year certification to the MSC standard. As one of the pioneering fisheries in the MSC programme, ADF&G has been a key partner and has played an important role as the MSC programme has evolved and improved the consistency and quality of the criteria and guidelines by which a fishery’s sustainability is measured against the MSC standard.

According to Bedford: “MSC recommendations for increased research into hatchery/wild salmon interactions in Prince William Sound and southeast Alaska have been beneficial to the agency in moving this work up the priority list.”

However, it has not all been smooth sailing. Bedford points out how “ADF&G has shared some of the growing pains of the [MSC] programme.” An experience Bedford acknowledges as probably being “somewhat unique among MSC clients due to our relatively long history with the programme,” as well as the complexity and size of the fishery. ADF&G’s work with MSC has paid off for the Alaska seafood economy. Wild Alaska salmon products, popular worldwide, currently include nearly 900 MSC labelled products in more than 30 countries.



“ The MSC label helped to get the strongest listings for our new Alaska salmon finger product: it was immediately listed by all major French retailers. Proposing more and more MSC products in their ranges is an effective way for retailers to prove their commitment to sustainability ”

Sophie Allemand, fish group brand manager, Findus France