

# Seafood LAB

## Exploring shared infrastructure to strengthen labor systems across seafood supply chains

### Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, seafood supply chains have made significant progress in strengthening environmental sustainability. Certification programs, fishery improvement projects, and shared transparency tools have helped establish common frameworks for improving both fisheries and aquaculture management and aligning incentives across global supply chains.

At the same time, expectations around responsible sourcing have expanded. Buyers, suppliers, and employers increasingly recognize that responsible seafood production must also address how workers are recruited, paid, supervised, and supported throughout the supply chain.

Across the sector, companies and partners are working in a variety of ways to strengthen labor practices. Some employers have invested in stronger recruitment, payroll, and workforce-management systems. Others work with organizations that specialize in worker engagement, responsible recruitment, or labor-system improvement. In some contexts, companies and partners have developed approaches that represent emerging best practice, while audits, risk assessments, and pilot initiatives are also widely used to identify challenges and test new solutions.

These efforts reflect growing momentum, but they remain fragmented. Unlike environmental sustainability, where shared systems exist to track improvement across contexts, the sector has not yet developed comparable infrastructure for strengthening labor-management systems across seafood supply chains.

Seafood LAB is being explored as a potential way to address that gap.

Rather than functioning as another certification program or audit tool, Seafood LAB is envisioned as shared supply-chain infrastructure that enables buyers, suppliers, and employers to engage in structured processes for assessing and strengthening labor-management systems. Participation in these processes would become visible within commercial relationships, allowing companies to signal their engagement in improving workplace systems across supply chains.

The concept draws on lessons from the LAB architecture developed by the Equitable Food Initiative and implemented in produce supply chains through [ECIP LAB](#) (the Ethical Charter Implementation Program's model). That system created a way for growers, suppliers, and buyers to engage in strengthening workplace systems even when operations were not yet

participating in certification programs or other labor initiatives. In this context, LAB refers to a process of Learn, Assess, and Benchmark. Companies assess current systems and practices; access tools, templates and resources through the Learning Channel; and benchmark their engagement in strengthening those systems over time. The architecture is designed to support an ongoing process of improvement rather than a one-time evaluation.

Seafood LAB explores whether a similar form of infrastructure could help expand engagement in strengthening labor-management systems across seafood supply chains.

The platform does not yet exist. The current phase is a consultation process with companies, industry groups, and partners to determine whether the sector sees value in developing this type of infrastructure and, if so, how it should be designed.

## **The next frontier for responsible seafood**

Over the past two decades, the seafood sector has made significant progress in improving environmental sustainability. Certification systems, fishery improvement projects, and shared transparency tools have helped create mechanisms for tracking progress and aligning incentives across global supply chains. These systems have made environmental performance more visible and have helped coordinate improvement across complex fisheries and markets.

Today, expectations around responsible seafood production are expanding. Increasingly, companies, governments, and civil society recognize that sustainability must also include how workers are recruited, paid, supervised, and supported throughout seafood supply chains.

Across the sector, a wide range of initiatives are working to strengthen labor practices. Some companies have integrated labor-management tools directly into their operations. Others partner with organizations that provide worker engagement, advisory support, or independent monitoring. In many regions, locally led initiatives are testing new approaches to responsible recruitment, worker engagement, and grievance mechanisms. These efforts show that meaningful improvement is possible and already taking place across parts of the sector.

At the same time, labor conditions are shaped primarily by how individual employers manage their labor systems. Recruitment channels, wage systems, supervision practices, and grievance mechanisms all influence what workers experience in practice. These systems sit at the level of vessels, farms, fleets, and processing facilities, and improvements in labor conditions therefore occur largely within companies themselves.

The seafood sector currently lacks shared infrastructure that allows engagement in strengthening these systems to become visible across supply chains. Buyers may set expectations, suppliers may invest in improvement, and employers may make operational changes, yet there is often no common mechanism for making that progress visible within commercial relationships.

Seafood LAB (Learn, Assess, Benchmark) explores whether such infrastructure should exist.

## **The moment the seafood sector is in**

Expectations around responsible seafood production are evolving rapidly. Companies are increasingly asked not only to understand where labor risks may exist in their supply chains, but also to demonstrate how those risks are being addressed in practice.

Across the industry, many actors are already working to strengthen labor practices. Employers are improving how they recruit workers, structure employment relationships, and manage payroll systems. Suppliers are coordinating responsible sourcing expectations across networks of producers. Buyers are incorporating labor considerations into procurement policies and due-diligence processes. In some contexts, companies are also partnering with organizations that specialize in worker engagement, responsible recruitment, or labor-system improvement.

These developments reflect a broader shift in how responsible sourcing is understood. Sustainable seafood production depends not only on healthy marine ecosystems, but also on workplaces where the people who harvest, farm, process, and move seafood through global supply chains are treated fairly.

Yet as this agenda has expanded, the sector has begun to encounter a practical challenge: how improvement in labor practices becomes visible and scalable across supply chains.

Environmental sustainability in seafood has benefited from shared frameworks that allow companies to track progress and align incentives around better fisheries management. Labor conditions, however, are shaped primarily by how individual employers manage their workforce—through the systems that govern how companies recruit, employ, and manage their workforce.

These systems exist at the level of vessels, farms, fleets, and processing facilities. As a result, meaningful improvements often occur within companies themselves. However, there are currently few mechanisms that allow these efforts to be seen clearly across the supply chains that connect employers, suppliers, and buyers.

The challenge the sector now faces is how to build the infrastructure needed to support improvement in these systems at scale.

Seafood LAB is being explored as one possible way to help address that challenge.

## **The infrastructure gap**

Over the past two decades, the seafood sector has developed shared infrastructure to support environmental responsibility. Certification programs such as MSC and the widespread use of

Fishery Improvement Projects have created common frameworks for improving fisheries management and tracking environmental performance across supply chains. These mechanisms have helped align market incentives with improvements in fish stock management, traceability, and governance.

Labor conditions present a different kind of practical challenge.

Unlike fisheries management, which is largely addressed at the level of ecosystems and regulatory frameworks, labor conditions are shaped primarily by how individual companies manage their workforce. The systems through which companies recruit, employ, pay, and manage workers ultimately shape what workers experience in practice.

These labor-management systems sit at the level of employers operating throughout the supply chain. Improvements in working conditions therefore depend not only on identifying risks, but also on strengthening the systems through which companies manage their workforce.

Many companies are already working to improve these systems. However, their efforts often remain difficult to see across supply chains. Employers who invest in stronger recruitment practices or payroll systems may have limited ways to demonstrate those efforts to their customers. Suppliers coordinating networks of producers may struggle to communicate progress happening across their operations. Buyers seeking to support responsible practices often lack structured visibility into how labor-management systems are evolving across the companies they source from.

The result is not a lack of activity. Rather, it is the absence of infrastructure that connects these efforts and allows improvement to become visible and scalable across supply chains. Without such infrastructure, improvements occurring within individual companies can easily remain largely invisible across supply chains, limiting the ability of buyers, suppliers, and employers to align incentives around stronger labor-management systems.

Environmental improvement in seafood accelerated once the sector built shared infrastructure that made progress across fisheries visible. Seafood LAB explores whether similar infrastructure could support improvement in the labor systems that shape working conditions across supply chains.

## **What Seafood LAB is**

Seafood LAB is being explored as shared supply-chain infrastructure designed to support labor and human-rights due diligence across seafood supply chains.

Rather than functioning as another certification program, audit tool, or standalone labor initiative, Seafood LAB is intended to create structured visibility around how companies are strengthening the systems that govern labor practices within their operations. These systems include recruitment processes, employment arrangements, wage and remittance practices,

supervision structures, and mechanisms through which workers can raise concerns and resolve problems.

In practical terms, the platform would allow buyers, suppliers, and employers to engage in a structured process of assessing and improving these labor-management systems while making that engagement visible across commercial relationships.

The concept draws on the LAB architecture originally developed by the Equitable Food Initiative and implemented in produce supply chains through ECIP LAB. In that context, the platform created a way for growers, suppliers, and buyers to begin strengthening workplace systems even when operations were not yet participating in certification programs or other labor initiatives. The architecture allowed companies to signal engagement in improvement processes across supply chains while connecting them to programs that provided deeper forms of support.

Seafood LAB explores whether a similar form of infrastructure could support labor-system improvement across seafood supply chains.

Importantly, the concept is not intended to replace the many initiatives already working to strengthen labor practices in the sector. Certification programs, worker-engagement initiatives, NGO partnerships, company or third party-led monitoring systems, and targeted interventions all play important roles in improving conditions for workers. Where these efforts exist, they provide valuable expertise, accountability, and support for strengthening workplace systems.

Seafood LAB would operate differently. Rather than acting as another intervention, the platform is intended to function as connective infrastructure that allows companies to engage in strengthening labor-management systems and signal that engagement across supply chains.

In doing so, it could help create structured pathways for improvement across a much broader portion of the sector while connecting companies to the growing ecosystem of programs, tools, and partnerships already working to strengthen labor practices.

Seafood LAB is therefore not envisioned as a certification program, a public transparency platform, a consumer-facing label, or a compliance enforcement mechanism. Instead, it is being explored as infrastructure that supports continuous improvement in the systems that shape workplace conditions across seafood supply chains.

The current consultation process is focused on determining whether the sector sees value in such infrastructure and, if so, how it should be designed.

## **Why focus on labor-management systems**

Improving labor conditions across seafood supply chains ultimately depends on how workplaces are managed.

Every day, employers make decisions that shape the experience of workers within their operations. These decisions influence how workers are recruited, how contracts are structured, how wages are paid and transferred, how work is supervised, and whether workers have safe and credible channels for raising concerns.

Taken together, these practices form the labor-management systems through which a workplace actually functions.

Two companies operating in the same geography, employing similar workers, and participating in the same supply chains can produce very different outcomes depending on how these systems are designed and managed. Recruitment processes may be transparent or opaque. Wage payments may be consistent and traceable or informal and irregular. Workers may have clear channels for raising concerns, or they may have few practical options for resolving problems when they arise.

Over time, the strength of these systems plays a significant role in determining whether risks are reduced, problems are identified early, and workers experience fair and stable working conditions.

This perspective complements the way the sector currently understands labor risk. Many responsible sourcing efforts focus on contextual indicators such as geography, vessel characteristics, or the use of migrant labor. These indicators are useful because they help identify environments where risks may be more likely to arise. However, they do not necessarily reveal how individual companies are managing those risks in practice.

A focus on labor-management systems adds an important layer of visibility. It shifts attention from risk alone to how companies respond to the environments in which they operate.

Strengthening these systems often requires support. Partnerships with worker organizations, NGOs, certification programs, and technical advisors can play an important role in helping companies improve recruitment practices, build effective grievance mechanisms, or strengthen worker engagement processes. At the same time, these improvements ultimately occur within companies themselves. Employers are responsible for how their workplaces operate, and responsible sourcing depends on creating conditions that encourage companies to invest in stronger systems over time.

Seafood LAB is being explored as infrastructure that supports and makes visible this process of improvement.

Rather than attempting to measure worker outcomes directly in its early stages, the platform would focus on structured engagement with labor-management systems—helping companies assess how those systems function, identify areas for improvement, and demonstrate progress within supply chains.

Over time, this approach could help create clearer pathways for strengthening workplace systems across a much broader portion of the sector.

## How Seafood LAB would work

Seafood LAB is designed to function as shared supply-chain infrastructure that connects buyers, suppliers, and employers through a structured process of engagement around labor-management systems.

In practice, participation would begin with buyers inviting suppliers into the platform. Suppliers would then map the employers within their sourcing networks—such as vessels, farms, or processing facilities. Participating employers would engage with a structured process for assessing and strengthening the systems that govern recruitment, payment, supervision, and worker engagement within their operations.

Engagement in this process would generate visibility across the supply chain. Buyers would gain insight into which suppliers and employers are actively engaging in strengthening their labor-management systems, while suppliers and employers would have a clear mechanism for demonstrating improvement efforts within commercial relationships.

The platform would also serve as connective infrastructure linking companies to improvement resources, technical partners, and credible labor initiatives already operating in the seafood sector.

Participating companies would engage in a structured process of assessing how their labor-management systems currently function. This may include systems governing recruitment practices, employment arrangements, wage and remittance processes, supervision structures, and mechanisms through which workers can raise concerns or resolve disputes—these are design questions that the sector must align on.

The platform would not function as an audit or certification system. Instead, it would support an ongoing process of reflection, improvement, and engagement around these systems.

Through this process, companies would receive an engagement score reflecting the extent to which they are participating in strengthening their labor-management systems over time. This score would not be a measure of compliance or an assertion that risks are absent. Rather, it would signal whether a company is actively engaging in structured improvement processes and investing in the systems that shape worker outcomes.

Because the platform operates within commercial relationships, this engagement becomes visible across supply chains. Buyers gain greater visibility into how suppliers and employers are approaching labor-system improvement. Suppliers gain a structured way to demonstrate engagement across their networks of producers. Employers investing in stronger workplace systems gain a way to signal those efforts across multiple customer relationships.

Seafood LAB is also designed to connect companies to the broader ecosystem of programs and partners working on labor improvement. As companies identify areas where their

labor-management systems need strengthening, the platform could help connect them to tools, technical assistance, and programs that support improvement in those areas.

In this way, the platform functions not only as a visibility mechanism but also as a gateway into deeper forms of support. Companies that begin engaging with labor-management systems through the platform may choose over time to participate in certification programs, worker-engagement initiatives, or other partnerships that provide more intensive forms of support and verification.

Because Seafood LAB would operate as software-based infrastructure, it is designed to function at scale. Programs that provide deep support — such as certification systems or worker-engagement initiatives — are essential, but they are not designed to reach every vessel, farm, or facility globally. Infrastructure systems serve a different purpose: enabling structured engagement and visibility across a much broader portion of the supply chain.

As participation grows, expectations within the platform can evolve. The criteria used to generate engagement scores can gradually reflect stronger practices and more sophisticated labor-management systems. In this way, the platform supports not only participation but also a gradual raising of the baseline for labor practices across the sector.

## **Theory of Change**

Seafood LAB is grounded in a simple theory of change: when supply chains create structured incentives for companies to assess and strengthen the systems that govern recruitment, payment, supervision, and worker engagement, participation in improvement processes expands. As participation expands, companies that are actively working to strengthen their labor-management systems become more visible within supply chains. This visibility allows buyers and suppliers to distinguish between actors engaging in improvement and those showing little engagement, helping direct attention and support where it is most needed.

In many sectors, improvement at scale begins with visibility. Before outcomes can be measured across complex industries, supply chains need ways to understand who is engaging in improvement processes, how companies are approaching those processes, and where additional support may be needed. Establishing this baseline of engagement allows sectors to begin distinguishing between actors that are actively working to improve their practices and those that are not yet participating in improvement processes.

Seafood LAB applies this logic to labor-management systems.

Rather than attempting to measure worker outcomes directly through the platform in its early stages, the system focuses first on creating structured incentives for companies to assess and strengthen the systems that shape workplace conditions. These systems form the operational foundation through which labor conditions are experienced by workers.

By encouraging companies to examine and improve these systems, Seafood LAB seeks to support incremental improvement across a much broader portion of the sector than more intensive interventions can reach on their own.

Participation in the platform creates visibility around engagement. Companies that actively assess and strengthen their labor-management systems become distinguishable from those that show little engagement. This distinction does not imply that risks are absent among participating companies, nor that non-participation necessarily signals poor practices. However, it provides supply chains with a clearer understanding of where improvement efforts are occurring and where additional attention may be needed.

This visibility creates several important dynamics within supply chains.

First, it allows buyers and suppliers to recognize and encourage companies that are investing in stronger labor-management systems. Responsible sourcing expectations can reinforce these efforts through purchasing relationships and commercial incentives, helping align market signals with improvements in workplace practices.

Second, the platform creates structured pathways for companies to access support. Through connections to technical partners, labor programs, and advisory organizations already operating in seafood and related sectors, companies can move from initial engagement toward deeper forms of improvement.

Third, the platform helps create a pipeline into higher-bar initiatives. As companies strengthen their labor-management systems and formalize their operations, some may choose to participate in certification programs, worker-engagement partnerships, or other initiatives that provide more intensive forms of support and verification.

Over time, these dynamics can help raise expectations across the sector. Engagement criteria within the platform are not static; they can evolve as participation grows and as industry capacity to strengthen labor-management systems improves. In this way, Seafood LAB is designed to support a gradual increase in the baseline expectations for how companies manage labor practices across seafood supply chains.

Importantly, the platform does not attempt to replace other forms of accountability or intervention. Certification programs, worker-engagement initiatives, audits, and targeted partnerships remain essential components of improving labor conditions. Seafood LAB instead seeks to complement these approaches by providing infrastructure that encourages participation in improvement processes at a much larger scale.

## **Lessons from ECIP LAB**

The concept for Seafood LAB draws inspiration from the LAB architecture developed by the Equitable Food Initiative and implemented in produce supply chains through ECIP LAB. In

produce, the sector invested heavily in high-bar certification programs such as Fair Trade USA and EFI certification, both of which emphasize strong labor-management systems and worker participation. These programs provide deep engagement and capacity building for participating farms, but they were never designed to reach every operation in the sector.

At the same time, the produce sector recognized that many operations were not yet ready to engage with high-bar certification programs. Operational maturity varied widely. Some farms operated with sophisticated management systems and digital records, while others managed payroll, scheduling, and workforce information through handwritten notebooks. In some cases, employers had limited visibility into who was working in their fields on a given day.

Certification programs proved highly effective at supporting strong operators and recognizing leading practices. However, they did not necessarily provide accessible entry points for the many farms that were earlier in their development.

ECIP LAB emerged as one response to this challenge.

Rather than functioning as another certification or audit system, the LAB architecture created a structured way for growers, suppliers, and buyers to begin engaging in strengthening labor-management systems even before farms were ready for higher-bar initiatives. Participation focused on assessing existing systems, identifying improvement opportunities, and connecting farms with tools and support that could help them strengthen their operations over time.

A key insight from the development of ECIP LAB was that large-scale change often begins by establishing participation and engagement rather than attempting to measure outcomes immediately. In many sectors—including climate governance—early initiatives focused on building systems that allowed organizations to understand who was participating in improvement processes and how engagement was evolving over time.

ECIP LAB followed a similar logic. The initial focus was on creating visibility around participation in strengthening workplace systems rather than attempting to measure worker outcomes directly through the platform itself.

This approach allowed the system to expand participation across supply chains while supporting connections to deeper initiatives that provide more intensive forms of support and verification.

Seafood begins from a different starting point. While the produce sector developed several well-established programs focused on labor systems, seafood currently has far fewer comparable initiatives operating at scale. At the same time, seafood supply chains exhibit a similarly wide range of operational maturity—from companies with highly formalized management systems to production contexts that remain far more informal.

For this reason, Seafood LAB does not attempt to replicate the produce model directly. Instead, it explores whether the underlying architecture—creating visible pathways for companies to

engage in strengthening labor-management systems—could help support improvement across seafood supply chains.

## **Why now**

Expectations around responsible sourcing in seafood have evolved rapidly in recent years. Companies are increasingly asked not only to identify labor risks within their supply chains, but also to demonstrate how those risks are being addressed in practice.

At the same time, the sector has seen growing experimentation with tools, partnerships, and pilot initiatives aimed at strengthening labor practices. Companies are testing new monitoring systems, collaborating with worker-engagement organizations, and exploring approaches to responsible recruitment and labor-management improvement.

These developments reflect an important shift. The conversation is moving beyond risk identification toward the practical challenge of how labor-management systems can be strengthened across complex global supply chains.

Yet many companies continue to face the same structural obstacle: how to operationalize responsible sourcing commitments across large and diverse supplier networks. Targeted programs and partnerships can generate meaningful improvements in specific contexts, but they are not designed to reach every vessel, farm, processor, or intermediary across global seafood supply chains.

This moment therefore presents an opportunity. After decades of building systems that support environmental improvement across seafood supply chains, the sector now has the experience and institutional capacity to explore what similar infrastructure might look like for strengthening labor-management systems.

Seafood LAB is being explored within this context—as one potential pathway for helping companies translate responsible sourcing commitments into practical improvement processes across supply chains.

If developed, Seafood LAB would represent a new form of shared infrastructure for the seafood sector. Rather than introducing another audit system or certification program, it would create a mechanism for making engagement in labor-system improvement visible across supply chains. By doing so, it could help align incentives for employers, suppliers, and buyers to strengthen the systems that shape working conditions.

## **The path forward**

Seafood LAB is currently being explored through a consultation process with industry stakeholders, technical experts, and partner initiatives working across seafood supply chains.

At this stage, the platform itself does not yet exist. The purpose of the consultation is to determine whether the sector sees value in developing this type of shared infrastructure and, if so, how it should be designed to reflect the realities of seafood production and trade.

The LAB architecture provides a flexible framework, but the specific design of a seafood platform would need to be shaped through collaboration with the companies and organizations that would ultimately use it. Key questions include how participation would work across different segments of the supply chain, how engagement with labor-management systems would be structured, and how the platform could most effectively connect companies with the broader ecosystem of programs, tools, and partners already working to strengthen labor practices.

This consultation phase is also an opportunity to ensure that the platform complements existing initiatives rather than competing with them. Many organizations and companies have invested significant effort in improving labor practices within seafood supply chains, and the goal is to build infrastructure that helps those efforts expand and connect over time.

If the consultation demonstrates sufficient interest and alignment, the next phase would focus on securing the resources needed to develop the platform. This would likely involve pursuing funding and convening an advisory group of industry participants and technical partners to help guide the design of the system. Together, these stakeholders would shape how Seafood LAB should be structured and how quickly its use scales.

Throughout this process, the central question remains how the seafood sector can build practical infrastructure that enables companies to strengthen labor-management systems and demonstrate that progress across supply chains.

The experience of environmental improvement efforts in seafood shows that shared frameworks can play a powerful role in aligning incentives and scaling change across complex global industries. As expectations around responsible sourcing continue to evolve, the sector now has an opportunity to explore whether similar infrastructure can support progress on labor and human rights.

Seafood LAB represents one possible path toward that goal.

Whether and how that path moves forward will ultimately depend on the willingness of seafood companies, partners, and stakeholders to shape it together.

If developed, Seafood LAB would not replace the many programs and partnerships already working to strengthen labor practices in seafood. Instead, it could provide the connective infrastructure that allows these efforts to expand and become visible across supply chains.

In doing so, it could help the sector take an important step toward ensuring that responsible seafood production reflects not only healthy marine ecosystems, but also workplaces where the people who harvest and process seafood are treated fairly and where responsible companies are recognized for the systems they build to support their workforce.

