



Fishery Basics – Seafood Markets

How Are Fish Processed?

Fishery products can be sold as fresh whole fish directly at the dock or can be **processed** before they are sold to the public. In general, before **commercial** fishery products reach the **retail market** and are available to the public they pass through a **distribution channel** similar to many other food products. Along the way, there are assorted buyers, brokers, agents, shippers, and inspectors. Upon returning to the docks, fishermen weigh and sort their catches based on the **dockside buyer's** or **primary processor's** needs. Fishermen have long-term relationships with their buyers. In return for a steady supply of good quality seafood, the buyers agree to pay reasonable prices for the seafood. The actual price paid each time a fisherman comes into port is often negotiated by phone or radio as the fishing vessel is returning to port with their catch on board.

Dockside buyers in turn sell the fishery products to **processors**, who process, preserve, and package the products. Processors must abide by the Food and Drug Administration **regulations**. The **processing** of a fish might involve only cleaning and prepping the fish for sale, only **eviscerating** the fish (to remove the internal organs and entrails of the fish), or eviscerating, removing the scales, head, and fins, and freezing the fish. Some **common forms of marketed finfish** after processing are: drawn fish, dressed/pan-dressed, fillets, steaks, and chunks. The more processing that is done to fish, the higher the value/price of the final product.

After processing the seafood, processors sell the products to **wholesale markets** or **distributors**. The wholesale markets or distributors in turn transport, deliver, and sell the products to **retailers** like restaurants or retail markets. Due to the highly perishable nature of seafood, the majority of fishery products are marketed as frozen or canned in developed nations. However in developing countries, where the ability to safely store seafood products are not readily available, the majority of fishery products are marketed fresh.

The distribution channel of fish from the ocean to the consumer sometimes has fewer steps than the distribution channel described above. For example, fishermen who provide fish for **fishmeal** or fish oil operations, e.g., most of **Pacific Sardines** (See California Fisheries) caught in California, often have a close relationship with the fish plants that process the catch. Or, in the **North Pacific Pollock** fishery, much of the fish are caught and processed aboard **factory ships**. In some open-ocean fisheries in **international waters** (See Where do we Fish?), fishermen sell their catch while at sea to large seafood freighters that then bring the catch into markets.



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