

Fishery Basics – Seafood Markets

Where Are Fish Sold?

Fisheries not only provide a vital source of food to the global population, but also contribute between \$225-240 billion annually to the worldwide economy. Much of this economic stimulus comes from the sale and trade of fishery products. The sale of fishery products has evolved from being restricted to seaside towns into a worldwide market where **buyers** can choose from fish caught all over the globe. Like many other commodities, fisheries markets are fluctuating constantly. In recent decades, seafood imports into the United States have increased due to growing demands for cheap seafood products. This has increased the amount of fish supplied by foreign countries, expanded efforts in **aquaculture**, and increased the pursuit of previously untapped resources.

In 2008, the [National Marine Fisheries Service \(NMFS\) reported \(pdf\)](#) that the U.S. imported close to 2.4 million t (5.3 billion lbs) of edible fishery products valued at \$14.2 billion dollars. **Finfish** in all forms (fresh, **frozen**, and **processed**) accounted for 48% of the imports and **shellfish** accounted for an additional 36% of the imports. Overall, shrimp were the highest single-species import, accounting for 24% of the total fishery products imported into the United States. Tuna and Salmon were the highest imported finfish accounting for 18% and 10% of the total imports respectively. The majority of fishery products imported came from China, Thailand, Canada, Indonesia, Vietnam, Ecuador, and Chile.

The U.S. exported close to 1.2 million t (2.6 billion lbs) valued at \$3.99 billion in 2008. In fact, of all the imports into the U.S., 40,233 t (88.7 million lbs) were re-exported after being further processed in the U.S.. Finfish accounted for 75% of the exports, whereas shellfish only accounted for 11% of the exports. Salmon and various **groundfish** species were the top finfish exports at 12% and 10 % of total exports. Additionally, lobster accounted for 2% of the total exports. The U.S. primarily exports fishery products to China, Japan, Canada, South Korea, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Although selling their catch directly to the public might bring a fisherman a better price, it is difficult because their schedules are often incompatible with shore-based market hours. Therefore, most fishermen sell their catch to a **dockside buyer** or a **primary processor**, who in turn makes these products available to retailers or the public. To learn more about the process of fish getting to the markets see [Seafood Markets – How are Fish Processed?](#)

Historically **fishmongers**, people who sell fish, and fish markets were only found in seaside towns, but with the advent of refrigeration and rapid transportation, fish can be bought in almost all regions of the world. Today there are many markets where fishery products are auctioned, the largest being the [Tsukiji market](#) in Japan, which functions as both a **wholesale** and **retail**



Fishery Basics – Seafood Markets

market. At the Tsukiji market fish are auctioned off, which often provides buyers with high-quality products and top prices for the fishermen. Similar “fish auction” markets exist in Honolulu, HI, Portland, ME, as well as New Bedford and Gloucester, MA.

In the U.S., specialty fish markets exist in most major coastal cities as well as some inland cities. Along the east coast, both the [Fulton Fish Market](#) in New York and the [Maine Avenue Fish Market](#) in Washington, D.C. have been in operation since the early 1800s. While the Maine Avenue Fish Market is the oldest continuously operating fish market in the U.S., the Fulton Fish Market has been considered the most important wholesale market along the east coast. The [Pike Place Fish Market](#) in Seattle, WA is one of the best-known fish markets along the west coast. This retail market has been operating since 1930 and is popular not only because of the high-quality seafood that is sold, but the tradition of [“fish throwing” \(video\)](#), where the fishmongers throw fish across the shopping area after a customer makes a purchase.

Fishery products also are sold in retail chain grocery stores, from websites, at local farmers markets, and of course restaurants. In some California ports, like Half Moon Bay, fishermen often sell [directly from their boats](#) to the public. To sell directly to the public, a fisherman is required to purchase a [fisherman’s retail license](#), which is a specialty license that is issued by the [California Department of Fish and Game](#). Additionally, **consumers** interested in eating locally caught seafood are beginning to participate in [Community Supported Fishery \(CSF\)](#) programs. In such programs, fish are delivered to consumers each week if they buy a “share” of the season’s catch at the beginning of the **fishing season**. This results in a nearly continuous supply of fish for the participating consumers and a higher price paid to the fishermen for the product, as the middlemen in the distribution channel have been removed. The Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary is in [strong support \(pdf\)](#) of the potential for a CSF, which is being discussed for the Monterey Bay area.

Additionally, locally caught fish are available at farmers markets and dockside fish markets that purchase the fish directly from the fishing boats or dockside buyers. These products typically are fresh or minimally processed. The selections vary depending on what was caught and **what fish are in season** (See When are Different Fish at the Market?). In California, the [Institute for Fisheries Resources \(IFR\)](#) has established a [local and seasonal seafood program](#), which is a collaborative effort between commercial fishermen, seafood restaurants, and farmers markets. This program not only provides charts highlighting which fish are in season, but also a listing of local farmers markets and restaurants that sell locally harvested seafood and information on which boats are licensed to sell directly to the public in the major California fishing ports.

There are multiple buyers for fishery products that are intended for non-human consumption or non-food uses. For example, **Pacific Sardines** (See California Fisheries) harvested in California are sold to South African Tuna fleets that use the Sardines as bait for **long line** (See Fishing Gear



Fishery Basics – Seafood Markets

– Hook & Line) operations. Other non-food products like **fishmeal** may be sold to aquaculture or livestock operations or, **fish emulsion** may be sold as an organic fertilizer for agriculture and horticulture operations.

References

Ababouch L. Distribution channels. Topics Fact Sheets. In: Fisheries and Aquaculture [Internet]. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; c2005-2011 [updated 2005 May 27; cited 2011 May 19]. Available from: <http://www.fao.org/fishery/topic/13287/en>

California Department of Fish and Game. 2011 commercial fish business licenses [Internet]. Sacramento (CA): Department of Fish and Game; c2011 [cited 2011 May 19]. Available from: http://www.dfg.ca.gov/licensing/commfishbus/cfb_fees.html

Fering A. Fishing for compliments [Internet]. 2010 Oct 10 [cited 2011 May 19]. Available from: <http://magazine.wsj.com/gatherer/fishing-for-compliments/>

Institute for fisheries resources [Internet]. San Francisco (CA): The Institute for Fisheries Resources; c2008 [cited 2011 May 19]. Available from: <http://www.ifrfish.org/>

Leschin-Hoar C. Taking stock in fish [Internet]. 2009 Jun 17 [cited 2011 May 19]. Available from: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124421534407589317.html>

Kropp F, Zolin R. **Identification and Feasibility of Sustainable Fishing and Marketing Practices for Coastal Pelagic Species Harvested at Moss Landing Commercial Harbor.** Monterey (CA): The Coastal Conservancy and Moss Landing Marine Laboratories; 2008 Jun 30.

National Marine Fisheries Service. **Imports and Exports of Fishery Products Annual Summary 2008.** Report. Washington (DC): Department of Commerce; 2008.

Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission. **Description of the U.S. West Coast Commercial Fishing Fleet and Seafood Processors.** Report. Corvallis (OR): Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission; 2000.

Pomeroy C, Dalton M. **Market Channels and Value Added to Fish Landed at Monterey Bay Area Ports.** Report. San Diego (CA): California Sea Grant College Program; 2007 Mar 1.

Wright A. Neptune's table: a view of America's ocean fisheries. Silver Spring (MD): National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service; 2002.