

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

The **Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)** plays a globally influential role in fish names policy—aiming to standardise fish species nomenclature for international trade, sustainability, and consumer protection.

FAO's Approach to Fish Names

FAO's primary objective is to ensure clarity, consistency, and traceability in the names applied to fish and seafood species in commerce. Its policy recommendations are built around these key points:

- **Standardization:** The FAO assists in creating globally recognised lists of common and scientific names for thousands of commercial fish species. These are published in resources such as the FAO Species Catalogue and regional advisory notes.^{[1][2]}
- **Labeling and Trade:** FAO encourages countries to adopt legal or voluntary requirements that seafood products be labelled with their scientific name and, where applicable, a nationally recognized common name. This is essential for accurate trade descriptions, food safety, and preventing consumer deception.
- **Sustainability and Management:** Standardised fish names are crucial for effective fisheries management, stock assessment, and conservation—enabling governments and the industry to monitor catches, comply with international trade agreements, and ensure sustainable exploitation.^{[3][4]}

Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries

FAO's **Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries** (1995) provides the guiding framework. It calls on member states to use scientifically accurate and internationally recognized names in their fisheries management, marketing, and consumer communication. The Code emphasizes that traceability and transparency in fish naming underpin responsible and sustainable fisheries.^{[6][3]}

Ecolabelling and Traceability

FAO's guidelines for ecolabelling rely on correct identification and naming to support claims of sustainability. Only fisheries managing stocks at sustainable levels—and with verified traceability through accurate naming—can qualify for certification schemes under FAO's standards.^[5]

Regional and National Implementation

Many countries implement FAO policy through their own fish names standards. For example, Australia's **Australian Fish Names Standard (AFNS)** is explicitly built on FAO naming principles. The AFNS provides a prescribed official name for nearly 5,000 seafood species—ensuring the same name is used throughout supply chains, facilitating trade, traceability, and food safety. The Australian standard is regularly updated as new species or trade requirements arise and is used voluntarily with moves towards mandatory use in some jurisdictions.^{[6][4]}

Challenges

Despite FAO's influential role, challenges remain:

- Local, regional, and colloquial names persist, causing confusion.
- Changes in taxonomy can lead to updates in names.
- Species sold under “umbrella” terms (e.g., “white fish”) may be misleading unless scientific names accompany trade names.

Summary

FAO's fish names policy is centered on promoting standardisation, traceability, consumer protection, and sustainability. FAO nomenclature guidance is now integral to national seafood labeling and management systems, helping prevent fraud, improve transparency, and support sustainable fishing worldwide.

References

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