Maybe it was the heat of August. Whatever was to blame, it seemed that those who have set themselves up as the arbiters of which fish stocks are “sustainable” and which are not, or what are the best choices of seafood as well as what to avoid, were running amok.

First came word that the giant retailer Walmart would no longer sell Alaskan salmon in their stores since Alaska was no longer using the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) as its certifier. That angered Alaskans and caught the ire of their Congressional delegation.

The decision by the world’s largest food retailer was, in reality, more of a blow to Alaskan pride than a hit in the pocketbook. There is a limited supply of wild salmon in the marketplace and demand has never been higher. Fishing for wild salmon in most parts of the world is tightly controlled and most of it, particularly in Alaska, is considered sustainable. It is a real seller’s market.

In fact, for most of the world’s salmon fisheries sustainability problems are most likely not from fishing, but the result of destructive land practices, such as logging, mining and, now, marijuana cultivation, or water uses ranging from hydropower to excessive diversions for agribusiness and arid land development.

Seafood lists and certifications are useless in trying to change the behavior of those engaged in destroying salmon habitat or stealing the fish’s water. Thus, in the marketplace the consumers concerned with sustainable wild salmon are not going to affect change by their salmon buying alone, but rather by their purchase of agricultural or timber products, jewelry selection, even scoring that weed for medicinal or recreational purposes.

Never mind the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s “Seafood Watch” card or MSC certification – consumers need to look instead for a “salmon friendly” practices label when they buy, if it’s sustaining salmon runs they really care about.

As for Walmart: this is a company that sells cheap goods, mostly manufactured in China. When fishing associations up and down the coast are working to get a fair price for their members, does it make sense to be selling to a company notorious for beating down prices it pays its vendors? Walmart’s rebuke of Alaskan salmon may have hurt some pride, but it probably did a favor to every salmon fisherman proud of what they produce.

The real problem in August arose when Sodexo, a large multi-national food service corporation that supplies many institutional buyers, decided to follow the recommendations of the Seafood Choice’s card (which now includes a recommendation for MSC-certified fish) and stop serving Alaskan salmon to US troops. If they weren’t going to serve Alaskan salmon (wild salmon from California, Oregon, and Washington, even British Columbia, is not produced in sufficient quantities to meet large institutional demands), what would they serve? Stop selling salmon altogether? Sell Russian salmon, which is certified by the MSC? Or, switch over to farmed salmon from places like Chile?

Sodexo’s refusal to sell Alaskan salmon or other Alaskan seafood products that are not MSC certification probably will not have much of an impact given current demand for wild salmon or even crab, but was troubling on principle. After all, should not US troops – men and women who are put in harm’s way to carry out US policy – be entitled to the best foods America produces? Are we going to be serving our service men and women Russian wild salmon or Chilean farmed salmon, when – but for a snit between Alaska and MSC – there is an ample supply of high quality, sustainably produced American salmon to serve them?

Making matters worse, the National Park Service (NPS) also said it would stop selling Alaskan salmon at its facilities after the MSC certification process was dropped. The Park Service does not actually have many upscale operations selling salmon and other fish, but they sell Coke and Pepsi and who knows what other products made with high fructose...
syrup (most likely from genetically-engineered corn). Are they now going to get on their high horse about the “sustainability of Alaskan salmon”?

At the time of this writing, due to pressure from Senator Mark Begich and other members of the Alaskan delegation, it appears that Walmart, Sodexo and NPS will relent. Nevertheless it has raised the issue of just how all this happened to begin with.

Is MSC to have a monopoly on certifying all wild fisheries – which it appears that it wants, given the pressure put on Alaska to renew MSC certification and pressure on buyers not to purchase Alaskan salmon without a MSC sticker?

If MSC considers itself a kind of public utility in the fish certification world – allowing it a monopoly – then where is the public oversight and regulation?

That brings us to the other player that has a near monopoly – the list-maker of the best and worst choices in seafood, the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s Seafood Watch program. True, there are other lists (even cards) available, but most are copycats and nowhere as comprehensive or extensive as the 15-year old Seafood Watch list.

The current Seafood Watch card does list Alaskan salmon as a best choice. It is in the “green” in this traffic light inspired list. California, Oregon and Washington salmon fisheries are listed in the “yellow” as good alternatives, although fishing has had nothing to do with the less than optimum population sizes of these stocks – their declines had everything to do with habitat loss and egregious water policy. The problem is, the Seafood Watch list can be in conflict with what MSC chooses to certify.

Adding to the August angst, Seafood Watch announced they were now recommending farmed salmon. This was the first time they’ve made such a recommendation – always before, this aquaculture product was red listed. For whatever reason – most likely staff have gotten too close to seafood buyers demanding approval for farmed salmon – Seafood Watch announced in August it was putting Verlasso-brand Chilean farmed salmon on their “Best Alternatives” (yellow) list, right there with wild salmon from California, Oregon and Washington. MSC does not engage in certifying aquaculture products.

What brought about this sudden change? As late as June, Whole Foods, which does offer farmed salmon along with wild, was refusing to carry Verlasso fish, because of its use of genetically engineered feeds. Whole Foods is moving away from products containing GMOs (genetically modified organisms).

However, Verlasso, a joint venture between US chemical giant Dupont and AquaChile (Dupont makes the genetically-engineered yeast feed and AquaChile raises the fish) has recently engaged the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) to promote its products.

WWF and EDF are well-heeled NGOs that have garnered a great deal of disdain among other environmental groups and many in the fishing community as “corporate greenwashers.” EDF is particularly close to Walmart and has offices in Bentonville, Arkansas where the giant retailer is headquartered. WWF was one of the founders of the MSC.

Siding with WWF and EDF, and not Whole Foods, Seafood Watch’s stated reason for taking Verlasso out of red, separating it from other farmed salmon, was ostensibly because Verlasso switched from feed manufactured from wild fish, and there was less density of fish in their netpens, as compared to their competition.

Yet even with an improvement over their competition, one that Seafood Watch roundly criticized in a 2004 report (www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr/cr_seafoodwatch/content/media/MBA_SeafoodWatch_FarmedSalmonReport.pdf), Verlasso, however, can hardly be considered “sustainable.”

Verlasso raises its salmon in open ocean net pens, not in onshore facilities containing recirculating tanks now considered the future for farmed salmon and other finfish aquaculture, so as to prevent damage to the marine environment. Lower concentration of fish in Verlasso’s operations notwithstanding, this means there is still effluent being spread from these pens into the wild. Moreover, open water net pen finfish operations are still potential sources for the spread of disease or parasites from farmed fish into the wild.

While eschewing fish oils for feed (fish oils can be manufactured from fish oil and need not require the dedicated harvest of whole forage species such as anchovy, herring, krill, or menhaden for creating the feed), Verlasso’s feed is still problematic. There is significant concern with the use of soy as a substitute for fish oil in aquaculture operations, since most soy is now genetically engineered (GE) – mostly to allow heavier pesticide applications. Sorry Charlie, but that’s just not sustainable.

There has also been no evidence provided that Dupont’s GE yeast is any improvement over Monsanto’s GE soy. Using Seafood Watch’s rationale, can AquaBounty’s genetically engineered super-salmon be far behind in the list maker’s green or yellow columns?

The Verlasso incident is also not the first salmon screw-up by Seafood Watch. A few years ago it placed nearly all Pacific salmon (CA, OR, WA) on its “red list” as species to avoid because of widespread ocean salmon season closures put in place at that time by the Pacific Council.

But that decline in West Coast salmon populations was due almost entirely to environmental factors, not to fishing. That fact was never explained by Seafood Watch, nor was it explained that the few salmon fisheries that were still open along the West Coast were tightly regulated so consumers could safely purchase those fish without in any way affecting their sustainability. Despite the extensive closures along the coast, Seafood Watch’s action had a negative impact on the few fisheries that were open, and left a mistaken impression among consumers that salmon were actually overfished.

Our complaint here is not about providing consumers good information about the fish they’re buying. After all, in 1981 PCFFA sponsored state legislation to require labeling of fish by species, origin, and method of catch; for more than 30 years since it has continued to champion the right of consumers to accurate and transparent information on their seafood. Our members seek to produce the very best product possible in a sus-
tainable manner and we want people to know about it.

We have worked over the years with the Seafood Watch program and were the first to urge it to establish standards and scientific criteria for making its recommendations. For the most part, we’ve felt they’ve done a fairly good job, but the Verlasso recommendation in August has nevertheless cast some doubts about the direction the program is headed.

PCFFA has also worked with the MSC, although we were initially uneasy about two of its founders – WWF and the giant European food outlet, Unilever – and the influence they might have on this wild fish certification program. There is also a great deal of ambivalence in the fleet about MSC and other certification programs generally – called extortion or shake-down systems by some, while others view them favorably as giving the “good fishermen” a leg up over those whose fisheries are truly not sustainable.

What happened in August, however, points out the magnitude of the impacts of both certification programs and seafood lists, particularly when the field is dominated by a single entity – MSC for certification, and Seafood Watch for recommendations. We don’t have an answer to this dilemma.

For fish certification, an independent body outside of government is probably best. At the same time, there is a real danger where a few large corporations (Walmart, Unilever) or corporately-aligned NGOs (WWF, EDF) hold sway. There has to be better oversight, some real accountability so that, in fact, we don’t have these private certifiers, list makers and their institutional followers running amok as happened in August.

The issue here for us is not about certification or lists of recommended choices, but how to ensure that they are governed by strict scientific standards, and are accurate, responsible and accountable. 

Zeke Grader is the Executive Director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations (PCFFA), and can be reached in PCFFA’s San Francisco office at (415) 561-5080 x 224, or by email to: zgrader@ifrfish.org.