

Organic Needs Assessment Kelp Mariculture in Alaska

- Executive Summary -

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TRANSITION TO ORGANIC
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Executive Summary

The Alaska seaweed mariculture industry is both growing rapidly and in the process of identifying and securing markets. The best-fit markets appear to be in high value sectors that typically require organic product, however uncertainty exists with regard to the rate and scale of growth in different markets, and to what degree emerging high volume commodity markets will require organic certification. Further, other uncertainties and concerns are paramount for many farmers, including insufficient seaweed processing capacity, cost of operations, and the timing, scope and price point for buyer demand. For those interested in organic certification, further barriers include cost, logistics and lack of knowledge about the process.

Still, uptake of organic certification within the Alaska seaweed mariculture industry is well underway, and based on market trends and Alaska's specific context, most indications are that a significant transition to organic production in the sector will occur in the relative near-term. A successful national scale review and development of consistent guidelines for organic certification specific to kelp mariculture will further support a smooth transition to organic certification in Alaska. Several existing organizations are well positioned to provide technical assistance, education and training related to organic certification of seaweed farms in Alaska.

Project Background

The *Organic Certification Needs Assessment for Kelp Mariculture in Alaska* (Alaska Needs Assessment) is intended to provide an understanding the current and anticipated market demand for organic certified farmed kelp from the state, and depending on demand, to identify specific support mechanisms and infrastructure to support and advance a transition to organic kelp production. The project aims to inform people and organizations involved in both organic certification and seaweed mariculture. The Alaska Needs Assessment was prepared by Regeneration North for the [USDA Transition to Organic Partnership Program \(TOPP\)](#), within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Organic Transition Initiative and administered by the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) National Organic Program (NOP).

Key Findings

1. Seaweed production in Alaska and globally continues to expand, however, market analysts and industry leaders indicate much uncertainty around emerging markets, and Alaska seaweed farmers currently report difficulty finding and securing markets. Further, there are other significant uncertainties within the nascent industry, including the near- and long-term availability of processing capability in the state.
2. Due to current market conditions, the majority of those interviewed in the mariculture industry believe Alaska needs to target markets for high-value products that appeal to “the target seaweed consumer”, whose profile closely matches that of an organic products consumer. Further, industry experts interviewed indicated those markets

include not only human foods, nutraceuticals and cosmetics, but also animal feed supplements for organically produced meat and dairy markets, as well as bioplastics and textile markets that are “virtue-signaling” with organic certification.

3. Others in the Alaska mariculture industry indicated the economic necessity of a shift toward larger scale farms and larger scale commodity markets, that might or might not require organic certification. Additionally, some industry leaders question the need for organic certification, stating that people already trust Alaska seaweed and shellfish as clean, healthy products.
4. At least three of the largest volume current wholesale buyers of Alaska-grown kelp require certified organic product. Some, but not all buyers requiring organic certification indicate a willingness to pay a premium for certified product.
5. All seaweed farmers interviewed who have or are in the process of obtaining organic certification reported their primary motivation is expanding markets, either through an existing buyer that requires certification, or due to strong indications from potential buyers that would purchase kelp from the farm if and when it was certified organic.
6. Farmers interviewed whose operations are not currently certified organic initially indicated that certification is a low priority relative to other needs, especially the need for a greater number of buyers and more processing capacity. However, several of these same farmers began to pursue organic certification within several months of our initial interviews, citing greater awareness gained from participation in this Needs Assessment.
7. Barriers to obtaining organic certification include: Overall costs; logistics, especially in remote regions; demand, including understanding existing, evolving and shifting markets; and lack of knowledge about the organic certification process.
8. Several existing organizations that support mariculture in Alaska are gearing up and are well positioned to provide technical assistance, education and training related to organic certification of seaweed farms, if and as demand warrants.
9. Many in the mariculture community expressed confusion and concern about the interpretation of the NOP terrestrial farm standard for application to seaweed mariculture, and the lack of a unified protocol or approach for certifying kelp farms. They expressed concern about the long-term integrity and durability of the organic label for kelp based on the current use and application of the NOP terrestrial standard. (Note this concern is now being addressed through a separate process, the *National Review and Alignment of Farmed Seaweed Certification Protocols and Guidelines*, a 2024-2025 partnership between TOPP and Regeneration North.)

Recommendation next steps under the TOPP

1. Develop partnerships to establish training and support programs/initiatives

Several existing organizations are well positioned to provide training and technical support for organic certification in the state. In particular, the Alaska Mariculture Resource Training Center has the aligned mission, structure and interest to partner with TOPP, and GreenWave would be a logical collaborator for technical assistance, education and training at both the state and national levels. Several suggestions from the mariculture community are especially well-aligned for a TOPP investment, including:

- Developing farmer-oriented education programs and opportunities focused on the costs, benefits and process of obtaining organic certification.
- Proactive outreach to get across the threshold to action – making it easy for farmers to get started.
- Establishing mechanisms for peer-to-peer learning and/or mentoring.
- In state certifier and inspector training.

2. Support organic marketing and promotion partnerships

Support collaborations with the broader Alaska mariculture industry to further develop marketing efforts and help build awareness and demand for certified organic Alaska grown seaweed. In particular, two current initiatives, the Alaska Mariculture Cluster's investments in market development, and the Kelp Values Project offer unique potential opportunity for leveraged collaboration.

3. Continued investment in the *National Review and Alignment of Farmed Seaweed Certification Protocols and Guidelines*

The development of a national, unified set of guidelines and protocols based on the principals of the NOP's terrestrial standard for application to seaweed mariculture will help provide a clearer certification process for seaweed mariculture. It will also help build confidence within the industry in the integrity and durability of the organic label for farmed seaweed.