The seafood industry has the ability to trace the journey of a fish from ocean to dinner plate. But does it have the stomach to make the necessary changes?
A Sustainable Seafood Industry Lab in San Francisco this week explored ways to trace the path of the fish we eat. Hardware and software developers are building traceability tools that make catch and market data accessible, and buyers and sellers accountable in the global seafood supply chain.

Companies such as Salty Girl Seafood, Pelagic Data Systems and Monterey Bay Fisheries Trust gathered to put their head together as part of Sustainable Seafood Week in San Francisco (activity will move to Washington D.C. next week). The three companies also are among 37 finalists in the Fish 2.0 business competition.

“Traceability is a space that will be solved with technology, but also behavioral and structural changes,” said Cheryl Dahle, the host of the event and executive director of Future of Fish, an incubator for business solutions to ocean challenges.

“A major stopping point is that people are making a lot of money off mystery fish,” of unknown origin, quality or even species, said Dahle’s colleague, Keith Flett. “Traceability will force an end to this business, so obviously there will be pushback. How can we find the value proposition to shift the dynamic?”

Data does not populate on its own. “Finding the incentive to change is a challenge, especially when engaging mid-supply chain players,” such as processors and distributors,” said Mariah Boyle of FishWise in Santa Cruz. “Trustworthy data – and a lot of it — is one key to unlocking this problem and so is collaboration.”

Future of Fish is engaging the industry, hosting so called “pod” conversations with players in the seafood industry to foster collaboration around integration and interoperability between up-and-coming traceability tools. (Follow this link to register your interest in the Washington D.C. Industry Lab September 25th.)
Some fishermen welcome the emerging transparency. Rob Seitz, who trawls for groundfish on the Pacific Coast, told the gathering, “For a long time people thought I was a dirty fisherman. But you see me differently. All the little things we’re doing are making a difference. The fact that all these people are coming together to make fishing better is touching.”

Sign up for ImpactAlpha’s Financing Fish newsletter here.

Photo: Cheryl Dahle, Future of Fish

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