



# **Responsible Fishing Vessel Standard Frequently Asked Questions**

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## 1- What is the Best Seafood Practice’s (BSP) Responsible Fishing Vessel Standard (RFVS) Program?

The Best Seafood Practices RFVS is a voluntary vessel based third party certification program demonstrating that a vessel and its owner or a fleet of vessels are operating to best practice in the following 2 core areas:

### Core Principle 1 - Vessel Management and Safety Systems

Section 1 – Management Policies and Procedures (*including Vessel Safety*);

Section 2 – Environmental Impact Management;

Section 3 - Catch Traceability Management;

Section 4 – Vessel License to Operate; and

Section 5 – Catch Safety and Food Hygiene

### Core Principle 2 – Crew Rights, Safety and Wellbeing

Section 1 – Crew Rights and Integrity

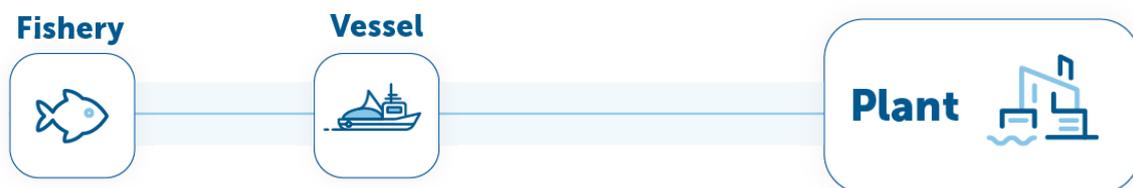
Section 2 – Crew Health and Safety

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 17065 will be used to underpin the certification model used to assess all applicants to the RFVS. This standard was developed using criteria published by a range of international industry and labor experts, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Labor Organization (ILO), and International Maritime Organization (IMO). For a complete list of all protocols that the RFVS is based on, please reference the standard document at <https://bspcertification.org/Standards>.

Successful vessel applicants will be awarded certification as **Responsible Fishing Vessel Operators**. Certification will provide assurance to markets, stakeholders, and consumers that seafood captured by these operators has been harvested, by vessels and crews to industry agreed best practice standards.

## 2- How Does the RFVS Fit into the BSP Program?

The BSP program is intended to certify a wild-caught seafood product from the point of capture through processing:



The vessel sector of the wild capture supply chain is covered by the RFVS. The onshore processing sector is covered by GSA’s Seafood Processing Standard (SPS). For the fishery, GSA requires the stock and method of capture to be benchmarked to the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI). MSC certification is the most common example of a certification program that has been recognised by this benchmark. Other examples include AKRFM, IRFM, G.U.L.F and MEL Japan.

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### 3- How does the RFVS Program do this?

The key objective of the RFVS program is as follows:

***“The Responsible Fishing Vessel Standard enables fishing operations and support to provide assurance of decent working conditions and operational best practice from the catch to the shore.”***

To verify this the RFVS program has 2 core principles have been developed that cover the following core intents.

#### **Core Principle 1 Vessel Management and Safety Systems:**

**Core Principle 1 Main Intent-** The vessel operations shall be managed by a set of policies, processes and procedures that are required for the planning and execution (catching/storage) of its core business areas (i.e., areas that can impact the vessel’s ability to meet its legal obligations and fulfil its customer requirements). The vessel can evidence this by having a documented management system to demonstrate that the vessel operates in a manner capable of meeting the requirements of this Standard.

The vessel shall be maintained in a safe and seaworthy condition to demonstrate that the crew are provided with a safe working environment that is free from high-risk hazards that could cause injury or endanger life. The vessel can demonstrate this by having evidence that the vessel meets, at a minimum, the requirements of the nominal references that underpin this Standard.

#### **Core Principle 2 – Crew Rights, Safety and Wellbeing:**

**Core Principle 2 Main Intent -** The organization and skipper(s) responsible for operating the vessel shall promote a culture of respect and safety to demonstrate that all crew are provided with decent working conditions and fair remuneration for their work. This can be demonstrated by having management systems and other forms of evidence related to crew treatment.

Each module has a set of conformance criteria based on the international and national standards, against which a vessel and the skipper must be able to demonstrate compliance with if they are to be certified to the RFVS.

Under pinning each RFVS conformance criteria is a Compliance Guidance that is designed to assist the vessel applicants in understanding the key areas that will need to be complied with if they are to be successfully certified to the RFVS.

### 4- Who Owns the RFVS?

The RFVS is part of Best Seafood Practices Program and GSA owns this program and the Standard.

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## 5- Who Sets the Standard Criteria?

The RFVS program setting process has a robust Governance structure designed to ensure that the standard created is fit for purpose and meets the Key Objectives of the program. Overall, the Global Seafood Alliance maintains a strict governance structure for decision-making, which includes approval from an external Standard Oversight Committee and an internal Board of Directors, as well as additional multi-stakeholder input from standing Technical Committees and mandatory public comment periods. The following diagram indicates flow of industry input, review of program content and the structure of approval for the Standards.



For more information, please see our Standards Development Process document at <https://bspcertification.org/Resources>.

## 6- What is the Geographical Scope?

The RFVS program is globally applicable and has been designed to be accessible for any type of commercially registered and licenced fishing vessels or fleet of fishing vessels. internationally.

## 7- Is the RFVS Equivalent to Other Standards?

To ensure the co-existence and mutual recognition of existing accredited national and international programs for the assurance of seafood captured on fishing vessels, the RFVS Program will recognise certification programmes that have demonstrated equivalency through either the RFVS Recognition process or through the At Sea Operations benchmark operated by the Sustainable Supply Chain Initiative (SSCI).

## 8- When an Applicant Complies with a Separate Program or Regulation, Can this be Recognized by GSA?

GSA understands that commercial fishing vessels often comply with other standards or a variety of governmental regulations. When an applicant applies to the RFVS and believes they comply to any parts of the standard through another program or regulation, they may request for GSA Program Integrity

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staff to examine these criteria to determine if it can be benchmarked against the RFVS. In cases where this occurs, applicants can potentially gain efficiency and cost savings by a reduced audit burden.

## 9- What Types of Vessels Can Participate in the RFVS Program?

The RFVS is open to any commercially licensed fishing vessel or group of vessels that can meet the requirements of this standard. To accommodate the broad range of activities and worker risks at sea, six distinct vessel classes have been defined:

- Single-person operated vessels exclusively worked by an owner;
- Crewed vessel at sea for less than 24 hours;
- Crewed vessels at sea for 24-71 hours;
- Crewed vessels at sea for 72 hours up to 30 days;
- Crewed vessels at sea for 30 days or more;
- Crewed Support/Tender vessels that directly service/assist a commercial fishing vessel or fleet  
(NOTE: this class of vessel can only apply when as part of a Group application)

Every clause in the RFVS is defined as being applicable or non-applicable to each vessel class listed above. Applicants are required to state which class their vessel(s) belongs to at the time of initial application. This will determine the scope of the audit, which affects preparation, time requirements, and cost.

## 10- Can a Group of Vessels Apply to the RFVS Together?

Yes, the RFVS has been designed to accommodate both single vessel and group applicants. An addendum Group Policy has been developed to allow multiple commercial fishing vessels to apply under the same certificate. This policy reduces the number of mandatory external audits, providing increased efficiency for all parties and possible cost savings to the applicant.

In addition to meeting the requirements of the RFVS, a group applicant must also be audited against an additional standard measuring the group’s Central Management System, which demonstrates the ability to exert control over all member vessels. Group applicants must form a legal Group Entity before applying that demonstrates control over member vessels and must use this ability to conduct internal vessel audits against all member vessels to give assurance that they can comply with the requirements of the RFVS Criteria. There is no requirement around the relationship between all member vessels in a group, as long as they are all legally bound to the same agreements and can meet the requirements of the RFVS.

To apply and learn more, please visit our application page at <http://www.bspcertification.org/apply>

## 11- Who is the Applicant?

A Single Applicant is the fishing vessel plus the owner of a legally registered fishing vessel.

A Group Applicant is central organization that oversees and has a legal contract/agreement a group of legally registered fishing vessels. All types of applicants must meet the RFVS eligibility criteria before they will be accepted as an applicant for the RFVS program. Any commercial fishing support/tender vessels seeking RFVS must apply as part of a Group application.

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## 12-What does the RFVS Assessment involve?

The scope of an RFVS assessment depends on whether the applicant is representing a single vessel or Group Entity. The BSP program has developed a series of “flow documents” to help outline the expected process, timing, and costs of an RFVS assessment. Both the single vessel and group flow documents can be found at <http://www.bspcertification.org/resources>

Overall, there are two components that make up the potential requirements of an RFVS assessment:

### The Central Management System Audit Content

For all Group applicants, a Central Management System (CMS) audit is required prior to any on-vessel RFVS audits. This CMS audit reviews all policies and procedures related to the Group structure and assesses the internal vessel audits conducted by the Group Entity.

### On-Vessel Audit Content

All single vessel and Group applicants are subject to on-vessel RFVS audits, though only a sub-sample of vessels in a Group will be audited by an external third party. A proportion of the audit time will be spent on reviewing the vessel operations, management systems and documentation of its practical implementation. Much of this document review can be shared with an auditor ahead of time to increase efficiency.

For crewed vessels, the auditor shall need to allocate time to conduct a series of interviews with selected crew members to determine if the crew welfare meets the requirements of the RFVS. **All social audits shall be conducted in alignment with APSCA guidelines, and all crew selected for interview shall be chosen by the approved auditor and not the applicant.**

The on-vessel audit schedule consists of seven elements:

- An opening meeting;
- A review of the on-board RFVS evidence or equivalent documentation;
- A review of other records/certificates which are relevant as evidence to support RFVS compliance;
- A vessel inspection, to review practical implementation of the vessel operations, particularly with regards to safety and cleanliness;
- Conducting Crew and Management interviews;
- Final review of findings, and preparation for the closing meeting;
- A closing meeting to discuss non-conformances with the RFVS Standard

### Audit Reporting and Non-conformance Rating

During the audit, detailed notes shall be made by the auditor of the applicant’s ability to comply with the RFVS Criteria. These shall be used as the basis for the audit report. If a RFVS criterion is not met, the auditor assesses the nature and significance of any non-conformance against the intent of the RFVS criterion.

A raised non-conformance shall be recorded by the auditor as one of the following depending on the severity. Critical, Major, or Minor.

At the closing meeting, the auditor shall present their findings and discuss and agree any non-conformances that have been identified. The auditor shall ensure timescales to close out the non-conformances is made clear, as well as where all evidence should be sent.

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### 13-What is the Frequency of the Audits?

Upon successful completion of a single vessel of Group RFVS assessment by a third-party Certification Body, an applicant is awarded an RFVS certificate that is valid for 36 months (3 years).

To maintain a certificate throughout the 3-year cycle all single-vessel and Group certificate holders will be subject to surveillance audits undertaken annually to ensure compliance to the RFVS. This surveillance assessment shall be based on a risk rating so that a low-risk applicant shall be allowed remote surveillance audits while a high-risk applicant shall need to have on vessel assessment to maintain their certification. It should be noted that if the vessel or group does badly at the annual surveillance audit their risk assessment rating will be amended accordingly.

### 14- How Long Does the Assessment Take?

BSP audits shall be defined as either full- or half-day based on the time required to complete all required components of the audit. Certification Bodies shall calculate their expected audit costs in increments no smaller than a half day. The total time of an audit day shall be defined as:

- Full Audit Day – Eight hours (+/- 2 hours)
- Half Audit Day – Four hours (+/- 2 hours)

BSP shall insist upon the accurate assessment and duration of evaluations by CB's. Although audit duration shall vary according to audit type and the accompanying risk assessment, audit duration shall be at a minimum, as follows:

- For a crewed vessel, the audit shall have a duration of up to 6-10 hours, but this shall be dependent on how well organized an applicant is with their evidence and the availability of crew members to be interviewed on the day of the audit;
- For a single-handed operated vessel, the audit duration shall be up to 2-6 hours;
- For the Central Management System (CMS) audit of a Group Entity, the audit shall have a duration of up to 4-10 hours but is dependent on group size and risk complexity;
- For annual surveillance audits of certified vessels, audit duration will vary greatly based on vessel and crew size, risk rating, and the number of non-conformances assessed during the initial vessel audit. With that, surveillance audit duration shall be a minimum of 2 hours but can last up to 10 hours if necessary.

The Auditor shall, in advance of the on-vessel audit, plan to receive documentation for review. This practice should be encouraged as the time of the vessel at port is restricted and is best spent reviewing the condition of the vessel and equipment and conducting verification interviews with the vessel captain and crew members the auditor has selected.

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## 15-What is the Difference Between Essential and Supplementary RFVS Conformity Criteria?

Each RFVS clause has been identified as either an Essential Requirement or Supplementary Requirement. Applicability shall be determined by vessel certification category.

1. **Essential Requirement** - shall need to be met at the time of audit for certification to be achieved by an applicant.
2. **Supplementary Requirement** - shall need to be adhered to within a set period following initial certification. The specified time limit for compliance will be confirmed to the applicant at the time of their certification.

The RFVS clause categorisation, and the timescales within which Supplementary Requirements must be complied with, has been determined by the Technical Working Groups during the development of the RFVS and approved by the RFVS Governance Structure.

The introduction of Supplementary Requirements recognises that some vessels and practices may need additional investment or training. It will therefore allow for applicants to demonstrate their commitment to making improvements, subject to strict timelines.

## 16-What is the RFVS Compliance Guide?

The RFVS Auditor Compliance Guide is an important tool in the audit process to ensure the intent of the RFVS has been met. For each clause in the RFVS, the guide gives examples of specific key evidence requirements of the RFVS and has been designed to reflect good industry practice. This guide is intended to help both applicants and auditors and gives detailed descriptions of the various ways that compliance can be shown during an audit.

## 17- What are the Non-Conformance Ratings?

- **Critical:** A critical failure to comply with a clause that relates to crew safety, vessel safety or legality, or where circumstances observed represent a risk to the integrity of the RFVS. The auditor will immediately inform the CB who in turn will inform the standard owner. Immediate temporary suspension of already certified vessels or groups may follow pending investigation clarification;
- **Major:** A substantial failure to meet the requirements of a statement of intent of any essential clause within the Standard but there is no imminent crew or vessel safety risk or immediate risk to the integrity of the RFVS. The auditor will record this in the Report Form and communicate the details to the CB. Objective evidence verifying what correction action has been taken, including addressing of root cause, shall be submitted to the CB by the applicant within 34 calendar days of the audit taking place.
- **Minor:** Absolute compliance to an essential clause and the statement of intent has not been demonstrated. The auditor will record this in the Report Form and communicate the details to the CB. Objective evidence verifying what correction action has been taken, including addressing of root cause, shall be submitted to the CB by the applicant within calendar 34 days of the audit taking place.

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## 18- What Happens if you get a Non-Conformity?

If a critical non-conformance occurs during any audit, the applicant's certificate may be suspended initially and then the certification will be withheld or withdrawn pending further investigation. **The applicant cannot reapply for the RFVS certification for a minimum period of 12 months or longer depending on the nature of the Critical Non-Conformity.** After this period, they will have to reapply and provide documented evidence that the root cause for this Critical non-conformance has now been effectively managed to ensure that this type of non-conformance cannot occur in the future.

If a major or minor non-conformance is encountered, the Applicant/RFVS member shall be given, from the point of officially been notified of their noncompliance by the CB, a period of up to 35 days to submit evidence that these non-conformances have been addressed. If the member does not comply, they shall not be certified or if already certified they shall be suspended and then removed from the RFVS program.

All non-conformities shall have correction action responses and objective evidence submitted of effective correction and implementation. Such evidence is essential for the audit and CB verify that the applicant has properly closed out the non-conformance and that the Applicant meets the requirements of the Standard.

Verification may take the form of further on-vessel assessment or of objective evidence such as submitted paperwork including updated procedures, records, and photographs etc. The evidence must be assessed by a technically competent member or group within the CB. Note, that statements of intent alone by the applicant to correct a non-conformance do not qualify as objective evidence. For evidence to be acceptable, it must address the root cause of the non-conformity.

Any RFVS member that has their certificate removed, shall be required to remove all reference to their current RFVS certification and the member shall need to agree what the next steps shall be required to regain their certification status with GSA.

## 19- Who Makes the Final Certification Decision?

The Certification Managers from the approved CBs ensures that the final decision to award certification is made by their Certification Committee which is independent of the audit team and incorporates actions taken by the Vessel Applicant as a consequence of corrective action requests or directions, if relevant.

## 20- Is there a Policy to Address Offenses Outside of the RFVS Scope?

Yes, GSA has developed a Zero Tolerance and Remediation Policy specifically designed to handle situations beyond the RFVS. This policy provides additional protocols when an auditor observes any offenses that threaten the safety or legal rights of crewmembers or passengers on a vessel. In addition to this, the policy also requires each applicant to develop a remediation policy, so that any affected individuals are appropriately compensated and rehabilitated following a Zero Tolerance offense. For more information, please refer to the Zero Tolerance Policy document at <https://bspcertification.org/WhatWeDo/ProgramIntegrity>.

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## 21- Can I Add or Remove Vessels from my Group Certificate?

Vessels are free to join the certified group if the central organisation overseeing this group is informed and they have been internally audited to ensure they meet the requirements of the RFVS. The CB and GSA should also both be informed and no more than a 10% increase in vessel numbers of the original certification group can be added to a group's certificate in any one calendar year.

If a vessel leaves the group, the central organization must inform both the CB and GSA so that the group certificate and website can be amended accordingly.

## 22- What Happens if the Skipper/Captain Leaves the Vessel?

The unit of certification for the RFVS is both the vessel and the owner as a partnership. Should the Skipper/Captain own the vessel and choose to sell, then the certification will be suspended and revisited by the independent RFVS approved Certification Body. If the vessel is just replaced by a new skipper/captain and the owner stays the same, then the current certificate will be maintained.

## 23- Can a Certified Vessel or Group Entity be Removed from the RFVS Program?

Yes, there will be several mechanisms in place that will ensure that integrity of the program is maintained.

For example, a vessel applicant will have to sign a terms and conditions for how they use their RFVS certification, which will mean that if they are successfully prosecuted for being in breach with their own country's legislation or any of the RFVS Eligibility Criteria they will be automatically disqualified from the RFVS program. If a vessel applicant is charged but is not prosecuted their certification status may be suspended but this will be dependent on the charge and will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis by the CB and GSA.

Should the annual surveillance assessment identify a vessel as no longer in compliance with the requirements of the RFVS programme certification could be suspended pending further investigation or a vessel-based audit, dependent on the non-conformance found. Aside from the Certification Body's assessments Best Seafood Practices will also investigate any reports of vessels in breach of their terms and conditions of RFVS certification received.

## 24- Where Can You Find Information on the Vessels that Have Been Certificated to the RFVS Program?

An up-to-date list of vessels certified to the RFVS can be found on the BSP website at <https://bspcertification.org/Producers>.

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