



Organic Salmon: Hot Topic, Haute Cuisine

U.S. TASK FORCE ISSUES RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANIC FARMED FISH

In February, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) proposed two options for use of wild-caught fish as fishmeal and fish oil in aquaculture feeds as part of its work to develop organic aquaculture standards.

The interim final report prepared by the Aquatic Animal Task Force of the agency's National Organic Program (NOP) includes two options with regard to fishmeal and oil used in feeds.

Option A—For fishmeal and fish oil produced from wild-caught fish to be labeled “organic,” it would have to come from a wild fishery that is certified sustainable using principles and criteria established by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), or a similar internationally recognized fisheries certification organization. While the fishmeal and fish oil from these wild fish could be labeled “organic,” the fish themselves could not be certified or labeled organic for human consumption.

Option B—Wild-caught fish could not be certified organic, but wild fish would be allowed to be used for fishmeal or fish oil under supplemental feed rules. Additionally, this option also provides for the current practice of organically raising one fish to feed other farmed fish, which are then sold for human consumption.

“Alternative A would allow the certification of wild fish, under certain conditions, for producing fishmeal and oil for use as ingredients in aquaculture feeds,” the report said. “Alternative B would not provide for the use of fishmeal and oil from wild fish. In this case, limited amounts of fishmeal and oil could be included in aquaculture feeds as additives and as supplements.”

The report goes on to state that, “This dual approach considers that organic certification of wild fish, while allowed under the act, has yet to be accepted by the organic community. Should the USDA establish that wild fish are an appropriate source, then the working group proposes that Alternative A be adopted in the final rule. Should wild fish not be an acceptable source at this time, the adoption of Alternative B is proposed.”

Organic Standards for Fish Unique Compared to Other Livestock

The report has drawn fire from many environmental and organic food advocates, as the proposals for organically farmed fish seem to fly in the face of U.S. organic standards for other livestock. In particular:

- Option A represents a fundamental divergence from all other U.S. guidelines regarding feeding of organic animals. Specifically, it substitutes a requirement for, essentially, chain of custody (organic feeds) for a requirement of sustainability.
- The proposals seem to disregard the generally accepted organic principle of recycling/reusing wastes by allowing for open systems that discharge wastes directly into the environment.
- No attempt is made to define what “adequate measures” would be for escapes of farmed fish. It is widely accepted by conservation organizations that escapes are inevitable in open systems (nets and cages like those used to farm salmon). By allowing the continued use of these systems, the USDA's proposed guidelines therefore do not eliminate escapes and related consequences (e.g., disease transmission, genetic interbreeding, and competition).

- The proposal calls for “practical measures” to prevent transmission of disease to wild fish but fails to define what these would be. Many believe the use of open systems is nearly impossible to prevent transmission of diseases, since any wild fish swimming nearby could potentially be exposed.
- The proposal to wait to bring the fish under organic guidelines until it has reached 5% of its market weight means that only the growout systems have to be organic; hatcheries are exempted. This differs from other livestock standards that require chickens, for example, to be organic from the day after they hatch.

Persistent Organic Pollutants Permissible

Both options acknowledge fishmeal and fish oil used in organic feeds may have “levels of unavoidable residual environmental contaminants,” including persistent bioaccumulative toxins (PBTs), mercury, cadmium, lead, arsenic, and tin. Those levels, the report said, “must be comparable to the lowest levels found in commercially available fish meal and fish oil.” The proposed rule would allow contaminants to be removed from fish oil with activated carbon or with any process using water as a solvent.

The task force said it recognized unavoidable residual environmental contamination is a significant concern among organic consumers, including those who purchase and eat seafood.

“Consumers of organic products have reasonable expectations that contaminant levels in organic products are lower than with conventionally produced products,” the report said. “Considerable progress has been made recently, and continues to be made, in the reduction of unavoidable residual environmental contamination in aquaculture products.”

According to the task force chairman, the Aquatic Animal Task Force will recommend that USDA tackle the issue of PBTs on a greater scale than just aquaculture to address persistent organic pollutants across the board, since the issue also affects agriculture operations.

Another provision of the proposed interim rule is that aquatic animals removed from an organic production system and subsequently managed on a non-organic facility may not be sold, labeled or represented as organically produced. And broodstock that has not been under continuous organic management may not be sold, labeled or represented as organic slaughter stock.

The task force worked to achieve consensus on each issue it addressed—no easy task given the diversity of the membership of the task force. Among others, the task force members include Sebastian Belle, executive director of the Maine Aquaculture Association; Robert Bullis, director of animal health and regulatory affairs for Advanced Bionutrition Corp.; and Rebecca Goldberg, senior scientist for Environmental Defense.

The NOSB is seeking public comment on the aquaculture working group’s interim final report, until April 10. The Alliance encourages any of its members interested in the future of organic seafood to lend your voice to the debate. Comments can be sent via e-mail to NOSB.Livestock@usda.gov, or by fax to 202/205 7808.

European Standards

The Soil Association, which sets organic rules in Britain, has approved interim standards for farmed salmon, and the agency is working to come up with a more permanent regime that addresses the concerns of environmental groups. The organic body’s ruling council is due to consider the issue later this year.

“It is a hotly contested debate [within the Soil Association]. I personally think it is appropriate to call them organic,” said Hugh Raven, the Soil Association’s director of aquaculture, adding that standards need to be improved.

According to a recent Reuters report, the organic salmon market has been growing at a fast pace, accounting for about 3-4% of total production, a market share similar to that of other organic foods. Look for this segment of the market to continue expanding with interest from across the supply chain. ●