

## USDA Panel Approves First Rules For Labeling Farmed Fish 'Organic'



The question of whether farm-raised salmon, like this one, could be labeled organic has confronted scientists and federal regulators for years. (Courtesy Of Cooke Aquaculture)

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For the first time, a federal advisory board has approved criteria that clear the way for farmed fish to be labeled "organic," a move that pleased aquaculture producers even as it angered environmentalists and consumer advocates.

The question of whether farmed fish could be labeled organic -- especially carnivorous species such as salmon that live in open-ocean net pens and consume vast amounts of smaller fish -- has vexed scientists and federal regulators for years. The standards approved yesterday by the National Organic Standards Board would allow organic fish farmers to use wild fish as part of their feed mix provided it did not exceed 25 percent of the total and did not come from forage species, such as menhaden, that have declined sharply as the demand for farmed fish has skyrocketed.

"Finally, maybe there's a light at the end of the tunnel in terms of defining what's organic," said Wally Stevens, executive director of the Global Aquaculture Alliance. "The challenge is to figure out how we can produce a healthy protein product with a proper regard to where the feed comes from."

Environmentalists and consumer advocates blasted the recommendations, which would serve as the basis for regulations to be issued by the Agriculture Department. Activists questioned why up to 25 percent of fish feed could be made up of non-organic material, while all other animals certified as organic must eat 100 percent organic feed. They also noted that open-net pens can harm the environment by allowing fish waste and disease to pollute the ocean.

"What we think is at stake is not just the integrity of a standard for fish but the whole organic standard and consumer confidence in it," said Patty Lovera, assistant director of the advocacy group Food & Water Watch. "A huge part of the growth in organic is driven by people looking for food that comes with assurance. When you start bending the rules, that's a big risk."

George Leonard, a marine ecologist and aquaculture director for the Ocean Conservancy, said the board sought to accomplish the "extraordinarily complicated" task of establishing a sustainable farming practice that does not yet exist. He noted that requiring organic operations to

use feed made of trimmings from sustainable wild-caught fish, such as pollock, or from organically farmed fish would be better than relying on the small, wild fish that farmers currently use.

"This is a good example in which the devil is in the details," Leonard said. "There is a very real risk that the decision could undermine consumers' confidence in the organic label if the goal of sustainable and environmentally friendly fish does not play out in practice."

Federal officials and advisers have devoted enormous time and effort to developing an organic fish standard, reflecting the dramatic growth of the industry in recent years. U.S. sales of organic food and beverages have grown from \$1 billion in 1990 to an estimated \$20 billion in 2007 and are projected to reach nearly \$23.6 billion this year, according to the Organic Trade Association. Fueled at least in part by fears about food safety, sales of organic meat increased tenfold, from \$33 million in 2002 to \$364 million in 2007, according to the market research firm Mintel.

Surveys show that most consumers have little sense of what it would mean to produce organic fish and expect that these animals would come under much stricter environmental controls than those the National Organic Standards Board approved.

Consumers Union released a poll last week in which 93 percent of respondents said fish labeled organic should be produced with 100 percent organic feed; 90 percent said organic fish farms should be required to recover waste and not pollute the environment.

At the Whole Foods Market near 14th and P streets NW this week, most shoppers were largely unaware of the battle over organic fish standards.

Ashley Erickson, a 24-year-old D.C. resident, said that an organic standard for farm-raised fish should include nothing artificial and that the fish should be raised sustainably.

"I think it should be sustainable, though I don't know exactly what that means for fish. I guess that's something I should know more about," Erickson said.

In a conference call with reporters, Lovera, of Food & Water Watch, said the panel was acting as "a promotion board" that "promotes organics at any cost" rather than establishing consistent standards.

The National Organic Program, which will take up the recommendations, is part of the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service.

The marketing service "doesn't deal with nutrition or food safety," said spokeswoman Joan Shaffer. "When you buy a steak that's labeled choice or prime, that's us. Is it healthy? Is it safe? That's dealt with somewhere else."