

Hidden Pressures in the Case of Bringing Genetically Modified Salmon Closer to Markets by Ken Rubin
Hill Times, January 30, 2017 p. 23 Opinion Column

Access records obtained and used by CBC's The National call into question the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's conflicting dual mandate.

On one hand, CFIA helps companies get international market access by ways such as issuing export safety certificates. On the other hand, they are responsible in Canada for assuring that import and domestic food products here are safe.

Records show that even before AquaBounty's genetically modified (GM) salmon were approved in May, 2016 as fit for human and animal marketplace consumption, CFIA in early 2016, under persistent calls and representations from AquaBounty to quickly do testing and move forward to issue export certificates shipped AquaBounty GM salmon eggs for commercial fish production exploitation to Panama and to Brazil.

In the House Agriculture Committee in hearings last fall on the acceptance of the first-ever GM animal product into the Canadian marketplace, there was no discussion about CFIA's earlier issuance of export certificates.

The committee's December report was fairly vague and mild calling for a system of more transparent regulatory evaluation and independent study. It stopped short of a system of mandatory labeling for such GM products, with the NDP member issuing a minority report criticizing this.

The GM salmon eggs provided for export were developed and originated with AquaBounty's Prince Edward Island land-based hatchery facilities. AquaBounty is part of an American biotech company owned by Intrexon.

In Panama, GM salmon were grown for AquaBounty in the last few years on a research experimental basis at a land-based facility. But in early 2016, after some internal debate, records show that the export certificate was changed from a research to a commercial export certificate, a change Panama requested, to which CFIA agreed.

In Brazil, AquaBounty pressed for early 2016 export certification to send GM salmon cultured eggs there. Documents indicate that those inside the CFIA agency had to scramble to first get the fish laboratory testing work for diseases and viruses done and then the paperwork for issuing the export certificate.

This was done as “a trade issue priority for AquaBounty” with Canadian Embassy personnel helping along the way to arrange meetings with Brazilian government and agriculture officials. Records noted some export health certificate requirements were dropped, like having a disease-free import risk analysis report done and not imposing an initial 21 day isolation period for the shipped eggs. One Canadian embassy official offered their “lobbying” services to get Brazilian authorities to dialogue with CFIA officials.

The same documents showed CFIA scientific lab and inspection personnel feeling “tremendous pressure” knowing the “very large commercial impact” this could have for AquaBounty. Testing of GM salmon cultured eggs provided from AquaBounty became a higher priority “jump[ing] the queue”. As one veterinarian CFIA employee in PEI stated, “there is pressure to get testing done for export purposes for this operator on a very short time-line”.

Further, records obtained show that AquaBounty had already been inquiring in early 2016 about its marketing of GM salmon carcasses as fish bait for lobster catches or as feed for mink. CFIA is the agency who gave the green light in May, 2016 for GM salmon carcasses to be sold as safe feed for animal livestock

consumption.

Perhaps AquaBounty may believe there is potentially less opposition in Canada for the initial use of experimentally grown GM salmon as commercially sold fish feed. Moving quickly on retail GM salmon sales could prove to be even more difficult. But CFIA records note that lobster fishers may be uneasy with the precedent of using GM salmon flesh as bait and be unsure how consumers will react.

Internally, the issue of infectious diseases being spread by such fish-derived feed was briefly raised as was the possibility such feed may be mixed with other animal carcasses like poultry and porcine.

United States Food and Drug Agency (FDA) authorities, who in November 2015 approved Aquabounty's GM salmon as a safe food for the US commercial market indicated in January, 2016 that they would not allow import of GM salmon into the US from other countries until labeling requirements were finalized.

The temporary US import ban still applies as no labeling arrangement has been reached. The FDA approval of GM salmon is under challenge in US courts by US public interest groups and one Canadian environmental group, the Halifax-based Ecology Action Center.

In late October, 2016, the Ecology Action Center and BC's Living Oceans Society lost a challenge at the Appeal Court level. It had argued that there was real environmental risks that GM salmon spawned could escape and cause problems for wild salmon and other marine wildlife. Back in 2013, when Environment Canada had given its approval that the GM salmon land-based PEI hatchery was a safe and secure place to do the research cultivation work.

Access to information records indicate countries where these modified salmon reputedly engineered to consistently grow faster for market could be raised also include Argentina, Chile, even China and others. In the end, CFIA negotiating and agreeing to issue commercial export certificates in other countries for GM fish egg cultivation and production may be the back door entry to Canada's domestic retail sale market.

Without mandatory labeling in place it would be very hard to know where GM salmon imports come from or to consider imposing a ban on such imports. Records note that authorities are saying that such labeling is not needed in Canada as there is no allergy connection or significant alteration of nutritional content involved.

CFIA went to some length, speeding up tests and dropping some of the safety steps to get initial export certificates in place without then questioning and doing adequate safety related testing and reviews on the home front. This puts CFIA's food safety role into question and exposes the conflicting roles it has.

Will Canadians in the end be eating foreign unlabeled GM salmon and will GM fish feed impact human and environmental health and safety? Will there now be other GM animal applicants and products? Canada's less than adequate and none too transparent captive regulatory system does not help.

Ken Rubin is a consumer and right-to-know advocate