

Paper Submission to NOP Aquaculture Symposium
By Urvashi Rangan, Ph.D.
Consumers Union, non-profit publisher of *Consumer Reports*
October 1, 2007

Consumer Expectations of Organic Fish

Abstract

A *Consumer Reports*, June 2007, food labeling poll indicates that consumers have strong expectations of the "organic" fish they buy. Ninety-one percent of consumers agree that "organic" fish should be produced without environmental pollution, bringing up the question of whether the current use of open-net pens is truly appropriate for "organic" farmed fish. The same 91% also want "organic" fish to be free-of or low-in contaminants like mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls. Therefore, a feed or product contaminant monitoring system should be established in the standards where fish meal is used for fish feed or for fish caught in the wild. Currently, consumers who look for seafood bearing an "organic" label are being misled to believe that it satisfies the same requirements applied to other "organic" food products. While the USDA is still working on developing standards for what "organic" fish will mean, erroneous "organic" claims on fish can still be made. California has already instituted a ban on this deceptive business practice and Consumers Union believes that the ban should be nationwide until the USDA has issued standards.

Introduction

There has been much confusion as to what consumers expect from the "organic" fish that they buy. Since meeting consumer expectations is key to the success and viability of a USDA certified "organic" label on fish, Consumers Union conducted a nationwide food labeling poll that queried consumers about their expectations surrounding controversial issues in the development of "organic" fish standards. Specifically, we asked about potential contaminants like mercury and polychlorinated biphenyl and about potential environmental pollution from fish farming in open systems.

Methods

The Consumer Reports National Research Center conducted a telephone survey using a nationally representative probability sample of telephone households. 1,004 interviews were completed among adults aged 18+. Interviewing took place over June 7-10, 2007.

As part of this survey, consumers were asked specific questions about their expectations of "organic" fish.

1. Consumers were asked about their concern regarding ocean pollution caused by fish farms advertised as "organic."
2. Consumers were asked about their agreement regarding fish labeled "organic" being produced without environmental pollution and being free or low in contaminants such as mercury or PCBs.

Results

The results of this survey are nationally representative and specific sampling error is +/- 3.2% at a 95% confidence level.

1. 74% of respondents are concerned about ocean pollution caused by fish farms advertised as "organic."
2. 91% of respondents agree that fish labeled "organic" should be produced without environmental pollution; and be free or low in contaminants such as mercury or PCBs.

Conclusion

It is exceptionally clear that consumers are concerned about environmental pollution from fish farming. Where pollution cannot easily be documented or tested reproducibly, it is clear that these systems do not meet consumer expectations for "organic" fish. More than nine out of ten consumers agree that the "organic" fish they buy should be free or low in contaminants. Therefore, using wild fish meal, that is often laden with contaminants such as mercury and PCBs, should not be used in farmed "organic" fish production. If fishmeal is used, contaminant levels must be addressed in order to ensure consumers that the "organic" fish sold does meet their expectations. If these expectations are not met, a weak USDA "organic" fish standard will undermine consumer confidence in "organic" fish and will lead consumers to question their trust in "organic" food in general.