Cooke: Anemia-infected fish can be sold like other farmed salmon

A salmon is checked for lice at a salmon farm in the Bay of Fundy near Meteghan last year. (ADRIEN VECZAN / Staff)

Cooke Aquaculture is being cagey about what will become of 240,000 diseased fish farmed in Nova Scotia that are being processed in New Brunswick.

"These fish pose no food safety issue and can be marketed the same as fish from any of our sites," company spokesman Chuck Brown said in an email Sunday.

In January, the New Brunswick aquaculture giant began transporting fish diagnosed with infectious salmon anemia from a farm off Coffin Island, near Liverpool, to a processing plant in Blacks Harbour, N.B.

Cooke is the first company to process salmon infected with the virus under new protocols the Canadian Food Inspection Agency established.

The federal agency has said infectious salmon anemia isn't a risk to human health and the infected fish are safe for human consumption.

The agency held a technical briefing last week after media reports that it had changed its approach to handling the disease from eradication to containment.

The agency denied that was the case.

"The CFIA's approach remains focused on containing ISA," it said in the briefing.

"Our response actions are guided by science, and are consistent with recommendations from the World Organisation for Animal Health."

The inspection agency said its decision to allow the diseased fish to be processed followed a quarantine of the Coffin Island facility last June.

"At that time, the company also made a responsible business decision to pre-emptively euthanize fish from two pens in which illness had been observed," the agency said. "This action was taken to minimize the potential spread of disease.

"The CFIA closely examined the health of the remaining fish at the facility and, in general, observed very few clinical signs of illness among those fish.

"Based on those observations and an assessment of other risk factors, such as the proximity to other aquaculture facilities and the known occurrence of ISA in Nova Scotia waters, it was determined that it was not necessary to order the destruction of the remaining fish."

The agency said it allowed the fish to be processed under licence.

"This policy is not new."

The agency said the diseased fish could be exported to the United States.

"The CFIA has received no indication from its U.S. counterparts that processed fish will not be eligible for export.

"This product meets all requirements for export to the U.S., as there are no food safety issues associated with it."

Brown wouldn't say where the infected fish may be marketed or if they would be exported.

He deferred to the agency briefing when asked to comment on media reports that the fish wouldn't be allowed into the U.S.

"The fish from the Liverpool site are approved for market by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

"ISA is not a food safety issue. It is a fish health issue."

Theresa Eisenman, a spokeswoman with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, said Monday that "salmon with the ISA virus should not be entered into interstate commerce in the United States."

Eisenman cited Section 402 (a) (5) of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. It said, "A food shall be deemed to be adulterated — if it is, in whole or in part, the product of a diseased animal or of an animal which has died otherwise than by slaughter."

Eisenman said "therefore entering a fish with ISA into interstate commerce would be considered a violation of the act."

Canadian agency spokeswoman Lisa Murphy reiterated her organization's position that the processed Coffin Island salmon would meet all U.S. import requirements as there are no food safety issues associated with it.

"The CFIA, like the U.S. FDA, equally would not accept that an animal with clinical signs of disease be entered into the human food supply," Murphy said in an email Monday.

"Fish inspection ensures that fish that are not fit for human consumption do not enter the food supply."

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