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Infected Atlantic salmon for dinner anyone?

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SHELBURNE — Atlantic salmon ordered destroyed because they're affected by infectious salmon anemia could end up on your plate.

That's because the disposal of infected salmon includes slaughter for human consumption because the virus is not considered a food safety concern for humans, a Canadian Food Inspection Agency spokesman said Friday.

A recent Canadian Press report from Newfoundland says an aquaculture company there wants to process about 450,000 infectious salmon anemia infected fish for the human market. And it is known that when the virus hit New Brunswick hard about 15 years ago, many fish infected by the virus were sold in supermarkets.

On Friday, a spokeswoman for Cooke's Aquaculture said the hundreds of thousands of salmon in pens near Shelburne that were ordered destroyed earlier this year because of the virus could have ended up in supermarkets if they'd been a little bigger.

"Those fish were sort of halfway through their growth cycle so they were rather small for the marketplace," said Nell Halse, Cooke's vice-president of communication.

"Had we had a processing plant (in Nova Scotia) or had the fish been bigger there would have been no reason why we couldn't have marketed those fish."

Instead, the fish were euthanized and composted.

An office manager at Gray Aqua Group Ltd. of Newfoundland declined to comment on their plans for their virus-infected salmon when contacted Friday.

Referring to the New Brunswick outbreak, Halse said "there would have been fish going into the marketplace that would have come from ISA-positive farms."

"But again, you would never know that because those fish are perfectly safe. They look fine. It's a fish health issue. Not a human health issue."

When conducting a cull of fish infected by the virus, "a lot of the fish that you are harvesting are actually not diseased," she said.

However, all harvesting from a quarantine farm is monitored by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and every fish is inspected before leaving the plant, Halse said.

However, she said fish from a quarantined farm would not be labelled as being infected with the virus.

Greg Roach, Nova Scotia's associate deputy minister of fisheries and aquaculture, said Friday that all fish infected with the virus earlier this year were destroyed, but had they been sold for human consumption they would have posed absolutely no risk to people.

"This particular virus that's very problematic for salmon doesn't even hurt other fish let alone warm blooded animals," Roach said.

"The public can be absolutely assured that no unsafe fish would go into the distribution system."