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Infected salmon declared fit for human consumption by Canadian Food Inspection Agency

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has approved a quarter million Nova Scotia salmon infected with the ISA virus for human consumption, but the U.S. won't take the fish.

By: Marco Chown Oved

For the first time, Canada's food safety regulator is allowing Nova Scotia salmon infected with a flu-like virus to be processed for supermarkets and restaurants.

Last week the Canadian Food Inspection Agency declared fit for human consumption 240,000 Atlantic salmon with infectious salmon anemia — a disease it says poses no risk to human health. The ruling is the first time the CFIA has opted not to destroy fish carrying the virus since it started regulating the fish farming industry in 2005.

Because the U.S. won't import fish with the virus, the fresh whole salmon, fillets and steaks will have to find dinner plates to land on somewhere in Canada.

At least one supermarket chain here says it will not stock the infected fish.

Alexandra Morton, a marine biologist, says infectious salmon anemia is an influenza-type virus and can mutate in unpredictable ways, especially if it comes into contact with another flu virus in a human being.

"I don't think it's a good idea for people to be eating it," said Morton, who has worked as a government fisheries scientist and was a visiting lecturer at Dalhousie University last year. "We know that pathogens are becoming more virulent all the time and it's events like this that I believe really risk human health safety."

On its website, the CFIA describes how [the virus can kill up to 90 per cent of infected salmon](#), causing them to slow their swimming, lose their appetite and gasp at the surface. Infected fish may have grey gills, a swollen abdomen and areas of bleeding along their belly and sides.

"Infectious salmon anemia poses no human health or food safety risk, and there is strong scientific proof of this," the agency wrote in an email to the Star.

In 2010, a team from the Center for Food Security and Public Health at Iowa State University published [a study on the virus](#) and concluded it poses no threat to humans because it is deactivated at our body temperature.

The centre's director, James Roth, said it is common practice in land-based agriculture to slaughter livestock that has survived and recuperated from a disease and bring it to market.

Cooke Aquaculture, the New Brunswick-based company that has been holding the infected salmon under quarantine since February, says they've been managing infectious salmon anemia outbreaks since the 1990s.

"When farms are confirmed positive with ISA, whether in Canada, or anywhere else, necessary measures are taken to minimize the spread of the virus to protect fish health," company spokesman Chuck Brown wrote in an email. "When the spread of the disease is neutralized, the remaining fish are frequently grown out to market size and harvested."

Because the provinces regulated the fish farming industry before 2005, the CFIA could not confirm when fish infected with the virus were last available on the Canadian market. All discoveries of the virus must be reported to the World Organisation for Animal Health. According to [the organization's records](#), the CFIA reported four outbreaks of infectious salmon anemia last year.

According to reports filed by CFIA's Chief Food Safety Officer Brian Evans, one affected farm in Newfoundland remains under quarantine. Another in Nova Scotia carried out a partial cull and quarantined the remaining salmon. All the fish from a third farm in Newfoundland were culled and "disposed of through a rendering process that eliminated the risk of spread of the infection."

Evans reported that the Cooke farm near Liverpool, N.S., contained a new mutated strain of the virus. At least 140,000 salmon were destroyed before the quarantine was lifted last week.

The remaining fish are being transported to a processing plant in Blacks Harbour, N.B. From there, they would normally be shipped across the eastern U.S. and Canada, Brown said.

Statistics Canada reports that more than 33,000 tonnes of salmon, worth more than \$200 million, were shipped to the U.S. from the Atlantic provinces in 2012. But Morgan Lascinsky of the U.S. Food & Drug Administration said salmon with the virus would not be allowed across the border because American law prohibits the importation of any diseased animal.

One Canadian retailer, Sobeys, which normally stocks salmon from Cooke, said it won't take the batch with the virus.

"Based on our customer's expectations, ISA-infected salmon is not something we want to see in our supply chain," said spokesperson Cynthia Thompson.

Loblaws, which also sources salmon from Cooke, said it cannot differentiate between fish with and without the virus.

"Cooke has been clear in their communication to all of their partners that all retailers who source from them receive CFIA approved salmon and that Cooke does not segregate fish as ISA or non ISA for any of their partners," said spokesperson Julija Hunter.

Infectious salmon anaemia is a problem that has been exacerbated by industrial-scale fish farming, says Professor Jeff Hutchings, a marine biologist at Dalhousie who studies wild and farmed salmon interactions.

"It's the process of keeping salmon together at unnaturally-high densities ... that creates conditions that are perfect for producing this highly lethal and infectious virus," he said.

An outbreak of the virus in Chile in 2007 led to a mass cull that devastated the salmon farming industry, leading to more than \$2 billion in losses and putting more than 20,000 people out of work.

British Columbia remains the only major salmon fishing region where a discovery of the virus has not been confirmed, though some scientists claim [the government is attempting to discredit](#) positive test results.

Fish culls are costly. When fish farmers are ordered to cull infected salmon, they are eligible for government compensation.

The government has paid out an estimated \$100 million in compensation since the virus first surfaced in the Maritimes in 1996, according to a tally of government documents done by the Atlantic Salmon Federation.

Cooke Aquaculture would not say how much money it had received for culls in the past.