

Remain Calm and Keep Eating

Cooke Aquaculture gets provincial millions in expansion money.
But do you want what they're selling?

by MILES HOWE



ISA-infected salmon steaks anyone? [Photo: Miles Howe]

K'ijipuktuk (Halifax) - On June 21st, the provincial government of Nova Scotia announced that Cooke Aquaculture, the New Brunswick-based seafood conglomerate, would be receiving an infusion of \$25 million to aid in a massive eight-figure expansion program into Nova Scotia's coastal waters. This, despite the announcement on June 19th that a suspected case of infectious salmon anemia (ISA) had been found at an as-yet-unannounced salmon pen belonging to Cooke Aquaculture.

ISA, an influenza virus, does exist in wild salmon. But given the cramped quarters of open-net pen salmon farms, a situation described by [Dr. Alexandra Morton](#), British Columbia-based authority on salmon, as resembling a "feedlot", ISA is allowed to mutate and increase in virulence at an extremely rapid rate. Epidemics in salmon feedlots spread rapidly, and can and do infect migrating wild salmon populations.

But what of the risks to people?

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) has made it very clear that ISA-infected salmon pose no health risks to humans. Indeed, while reports of ISA outbreaks in Atlantic and Pacific farmed salmon have seen trade doors close in Asian and European markets, the CFIA does in fact allow for ISA-infected salmon to be sold over the counter in grocery stores across Canada.

The singular reason that ISA-infected salmon from Cooke Aquaculture's last outbreak, confirmed on March 7th, 2012, were not in fact sold to Canadian market, was that the infected fish were too small to sell when they were found to be infected. It was not a matter of Canadian consumer health, but a matter of not being able to find a market for the infected fish. As the CFIA states:

"Since infectious salmon anemia [ISA] poses no human health or food safety risk, the facility may explore processing options where available."

So while ISA-infected fish are not all right for trade to certain countries, according to the CFIA they are fine for Canadian palates.

Dr. Morton doesn't necessarily agree.

"I do a lot of lecturing, and I speak a lot about ISA," says Dr. Morton. "And virtually every lecture I do, a nurse or a doctor will take me aside and say 'Because ISA is an influenza virus, it concerns us that people are eating it.'

"I would say [to CFIA] 'Show me the research'. There is a paper from a while back saying that the virus cannot replicate in our body temperature. Okay, and how up to date are we on that? Because if you look into this virus there are a lot of mutations out there. [Viruses] are incredibly successful organisms, and they kill things. We absolutely know this. We know that moving them around is a bad idea. We know that letting them mutate is a bad, bad idea. That's how we ended up with the avian flu scare, and the swine flu.

"And they're feeding a lot of warm-blooded animal products to these fish. Blood flour is a huge ingredient. Chicken feathers is another big ingredient. So they're mixing up the food chain, which is also bad for these viruses. You want them to stay in their own little pocket and not really jump around."

When Dr. Morton shops at the grocery store in British Columbia, and tests salmon samples from the market, she finds fluctuating percentages of ISA-infected product.

This adds but one more concern to the Nova Scotia government [today announcing](#) that Cooke Aquaculture's multi-million dollar expansion will provide more than 400 jobs to rural Nova Scotia, where high seasonal unemployment swings and a dwindling population have the coastal communities looking for good news.

Despite the real economic pressures, [over 100 interest groups](#), a number of them coming from communities already negatively effected by Cooke Aquaculture's salmon farming ventures, [recently demanded a moratorium](#) on open-net pen fin fish farming. Cooke Aquaculture chief operating officer Kris Nicholl recently called these the actions of "very well-funded groups that like to promote controversy".

Today Glenn Cooke, CEO of Cooke Aquaculture, noted that this new expansion into Nova Scotia was part of the family business' commitment to meet world demand for "healthy fish." The majority of the fish will most likely head to the eastern seaboard markets of the United States, where markets are wide-open for Atlantic salmon, ISA-infected or otherwise.

Where ISA-infected salmon can pass for healthy fish at the market, and coastal communities come to rely on jobs that pollute the very coastlines upon which they have traditionally depended.

Welcome to Nova Scotia?