

FDA POISED TO EVADE LAW AND APPROVE GENETICALLY ALTERED SALMON¹

Leah Zerbe[©]

With a new survey showing that the majority of the American public do not want to eat genetically engineered (GE) food, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is poised to potentially approve GE salmon as early as next Tuesday, after an extended public comment period ends. If the highly criticized, industry-funded study the FDA is relying on to make a decision is in fact enough to push this fast-growing, ravenous, genetically manipulated fish through the approval process, there's more bad news for the 65 percent of Americans who do not want to eat it. The FDA has said it will not allow labeling of GE salmon if approved, meaning consumers will have no idea what they're eating.

So why is the first genetically engineered animal for human consumption being considered if there's no American demand for it? A new analysis from the national consumer advocacy group Food & Water Watch points to the tidal wave of money the biotech industry throws at the U.S. government in hopes of support for approval of genetically engineered produce and animals. According to the report, biotechnology firms spent more than a half a billion dollars—\$547 million, to be exact—during the last decade. "The public needs to know that despite their concerns with eating genetically engineered foods, there's a powerful industry spending hundreds of millions to promote products like GE salmon," says Wenonah Hauter, executive director of Food & Water Watch. "Over the last few months, our coalition has collected approximately 200,000 petitions from consumers who oppose FDA approval of genetically engineered salmon. Yet sadly, each of these consumers would have to pay nearly \$3,000 to match the biotech industry's lobbying influence."

THE DETAILS: Apparently, biotech isn't throwing a lot of money to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), because scientists with that federal bureau are freaked out over the potential stamp of approval from the FDA. A Freedom of Information Act request by Food & Water Watch turned up internal documents and emails between FWS high-level employees. "Nice work Greg," Denise Hawkins, PhD, FWS Regional Geneticist wrote to a coworker in September. "Especially pointing out that there is no data to support the claims of low survival in the event of escape, which I agree with you all is a big concern. I also agree...that using triploid fish [which AquaBounty claim have undergone a sterilization process] is not foolproof. Maybe they [the FDA] should watch *Jurassic Park*."

Gregory Moyer, PhD, a regional geneticist with FWS, sent a letter to FDA last month highlighting major problems with the information provided for the approval process by Aqua Bounty, the Massachusetts company that has \$50 million invested in this genetic experiment. Mainly, he points out that company claims, such as the GE salmon are "unlikely to survive if exposed to high salinity and low temperature," have never even been tested, and no actual risk assessment was provided. He recommends a third-party study be conducted by the American Fisheries Society and National Academy of Sciences. After all, once these fish escape into the natural environment, they could wipe out native fish populations, which would greatly pose a risk to domestic food security.

¹ Rodale News, November 18, 2010

How could the GE fish threaten wild populations? AquaBounty advertises that it will only produce sterile salmon, but has quietly admitted that up to 5 percent of its salmon's eggs could be fertile. And although these fish are supposed to only be raised in closed containment tanks, FWS employees learned of a proposal to grow the fish in a facility that would discharge into the ocean off the coast of Maine. "No matter what precautions you take, fish escape, and once they do, there is no closing that door. So, that being said, I think it is very bad precedent to set," wrote one FWS program supervisor.

All of this regulatory hoopla may transcend that fact that a recent NPR/Reuters survey of 3,000 people found that 64 percent of people are unsure if genetically engineered foods are safe, with 93 percent of people saying GE foods should be labeled. Just 35 percent of the population would eat genetically engineered fish, which is perhaps why the FDA has resisted consumer pressure to make GE food labeling mandatory.

WHAT IT MEANS: In a sense, FDA is breaking federal law. Under the National Environmental Policy Act, the agency must conduct an environmental impact statement for any regulations that could harm the environment. The Center for Food Safety has also accused the FDA of withholding an important study highlighting the problems of genetically engineered fish from the approval discussion.

Beyond that, we have no idea how this genetically manipulated meat could affect human health. Genetically engineered corn and soy have been on the market in many processed foods for more than a decade now, and have been linked to precancerous growths, infertility, and high infant mortality rates in lab animals. These GE foods are also implicated in skyrocketing allergy rates in humans.