

GENETICALLY ENGINEERED SALMON ARE SWIMMING TOWARD YOUR PLATE¹

Leah Zerbe[©]

In just a few days, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) will decide whether or not to approve the first genetically engineered (GE) animal for industrial production and human consumption. And the transgenic animal—a genetically engineered salmon—likely won't be labeled as such, making it hard for consumers to avoid the Frankenfish. (Just as most of us are already eating GE corn, soy, and canola without knowing it.) The biotech company creating the fish inserted genes from Chinook salmon and ocean pout, and the resulting fish reportedly grows twice as fast, which, of course, will benefit the biotech developers and ocean factory-farm owner. "This is a terrible precedent, the first genetically engineered animal. And there's more to come," says Patty Lovera, assistant director at the consumer watchdog group Food & Water Watch, a consumer watchdog group. "Genetically engineered pig is right behind salmon in the approval pipeline. It's a bad can of worms to open up."

THE DETAILS: The whole approval process of genetically engineered salmon has been a shady deal, to say the least. For starters, it's not going through the more stringent and transparent approval process that food would endure. Instead, it's being pushed through as a "veterinary drug." Furthermore, the FDA does not conduct its own studies on safety, but rather relies on data provided by the company producing and selling the AquaAdvantage salmon. Conflict of interest, anyone?

There are *no* long-term studies on the effects of genetically engineered foods on people, but preliminary independent research is already finding problems. (More on that shortly.) A meeting is slated for next Tuesday to discuss labeling the fish, should it be fully approved. Indications are that, like GE food already in the food web, the salmon likely won't be labeled as such, leaving consumers in the dark so a biotech company can rake in the bucks.

WHAT IT MEANS: Farmed salmon, in general, is already decimating wild salmon populations. And the genetically engineered AquaAdvantage salmon is set to be factory-farmed the same way, in the ocean. These types of industrial salmon farming operations in the water use drugs to try to keep the fish healthy in unhealthy conditions, and those chemicals can seep into the surrounding ocean. Farmed salmon are also fed large amounts of the wild fish that native fish rely on. "That's somebody else's dinner you've taken out of the ocean," Lovera says.

Beyond that, factory-farmed salmon are held in place by nets, and the farmed salmon often escape and compete with the fish that are naturally meant to be in those waters. With genetically engineered fish the mix, the threat to the wild population could be even greater. Besides competition, Lovera expresses concern over the transgenic fish reproducing with native salmon. The biotech company says the fish they've created are sterile, but there is actually a 5 percent fertility rate.

¹ Rodale Daily News, September 16, 2010

Studies looking at other types of genetically engineered food have found connections between GE foods and allergies, skin and lung damage, and even premature deaths in animal studies. But because the companies developing these transgenic food sources are not required to perform studies looking at long-term health implications, we're all involved in a gigantic science experiment.

Another point? This is an inefficient way to produce fish. Lovera says this operation, if approved, would involve producing the genetically engineered salmon eggs in Prince Edward Island in Canada and then flying them to Panama, where they will be factory-farmed in the ocean. (And where laws are likely more lax.)

Here's how you can take action to keep this experiment out of our waters—and our food chain.

Alert your Member of Parliament. If all this bothers you, call your MP and have him or her tell Prime Minister Harper's government that you want them to keep our oceans—and our bodies—safe. The potentially catastrophic escape of these fish into the water should not be overlooked through a rushed approval process, and more public comment should be sought. After all, we're messing with wild salmon, one of Canadians' favorite foods! While you're at it, sign on to the Food & Water Watch "Stop Frankenfish" Campaign.

Keep other genetically engineered organisms off of your plate. Buy organic. The use of genetically engineered products is banned in production of certified-organic foods. So if you buy organic milk, you can find comfort in knowing the cows were not fed GMO corn or soy. Be particularly cautious when buying processed foods. Corn and soy ingredients have many different names, and are likely genetically engineered unless the product is labeled GMO-free or organic.