
EU wants more organic salmon in stores

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Organic salmon can be difficult to find in European shops, and people do not know much about organic fish in general. Now, new research highlights the need for updating EU regulations.

Notwithstanding the growth in popularity of organic foods over the last few years, grocery stores in Europe still only offer a relatively small selection of organic fish in comparison to organic meat and vegetables. Organically produced fish is almost non-existent.

There is relatively little knowledge about organic fish in the EU and a notably varied range of stock. And few consumers are familiar with the EU's own organic label – the Euro Leaf. There is a substantial need for regulations to be updated in order to make the organic fish products more competitive in the market.

Think it's the same as wild salmon

"The EU has a strong desire to see organic aquaculture grow. This will require regulations that are conducive to this growth. And consumers must be made more aware of what organic farming entails. Many consumers think organic fish is the same thing as wild fish," says Åsa Maria O. Espmark, Senior Researcher at Nofima.

Espmark coordinated the EU project OrAqua, in which researchers from several European nations collaborated to formulate new scientific recommendations for updating current regulations for organic aquaculture in Europe.

As a part of the project, the researchers also conducted a survey on consumer perception and understanding of organic aquaculture.

"Results and processes throughout the project are discussed with stakeholders from numerous groups on an annual basis to provide feedback to the project," explains Espmark and continues:

"This constitutes scientifically-backed advice based on current science from biology and health, to consumer research and economics. If the consumption of organic fish and seafood is to increase, it is essential for consumers to feel confident that production adheres to regulations in line with organic values, as well as laws on animal welfare and health."

Considerable variation

European consumers also have difficulty in understanding what constitutes organic fish. In the survey, consumers from the UK, France, Germany and Italy were asked how they would define organic aquaculture. According to Espmark, an overwhelming majority believed 'organic' to be the same as 'natural', which is not in line with regulations.

Furthermore, the consumer survey also shows considerable variation between the different EU countries.

"For instance, German consumers have the most positive view of organic farming and is most environmentally conscious. There is greater focus on animal welfare in Germany than there is in, for example, the UK, Italy or France. Some focus on packaging materials. But in countries that consume a lot of carp – a fish that is produced in an environment very similar to the carp's natural habitat – consumers attach great importance to what is 'natural'. But in the regulation, 'natural' equates to the comparability between natural habitats and the environmental conditions at the fish farm. It can never be identical to nature," asserts Espmark.

According to the researcher, Norway has significant potential for improvement. Despite Norway's large aquaculture industry, there only a few organic producers. This is partly due to higher production costs – organic fish production is around 30 % more expensive than conventional production. And although the product fetches a higher price, the varied and complex regulations currently in place have discouraged investment.

What is organic fish?

So, what exactly is organic aquaculture?

"Organic production essentially means maintaining full control of production, no use of synthetic drugs or pesticides, and strict regulation of production conditions and water quality. In other words, an organic fish is also considered a domesticated animal, and is not the same as a wild fish. Knowledge of this nature shows how important it is to have broad awareness of what constitutes organic aquaculture," says the senior researcher.

In OrAqua, researchers focused on the farming of all commercial European species of fish, molluscs, crustaceans and seaweed/kelp. Farmed fish species included salmon, trout and sea bream. Espmark reveals that major disparity exists with regard to applicable rules for the different species in terms of breeding, genetics, slaughtering, etc. For example, there is a regulation which applies solely to prawn and shrimp.

She says it was important to incorporate organic principles in the recommendations, but stresses that some exceptions are completely unavoidable.

"We need to acknowledge that some things are just not possible. For example, it is important that organic production contains nothing artificial, while in fish farming the use of nutritional supplements – such as amino acids produced by fermentation – is absolutely necessary. The health and welfare of the fish must come first," says Espmark.

Water oxygenation is not permitted in organic aquaculture, which limits fish density and results in lower production. Water recycling is likewise not permitted based on the regulations.

Espmark explains that there are demands for organic production to be based solely on fish stock and biological materials with an organic origin. But this is being met with opposition from several parts of the industry as it will result in substantial changes for many of those involved.

"We recommend dispensation in this area," says the researcher, explaining that "since the goal is to increase the proportion of organic farming, a proscription of this sort is counteractive."

The report from Nofima was submitted to the EU earlier this year. The project is funded by the European Framework Programme 7 (FP7).

 [Caption: Åsa Maria O. Espmark, Senior Researcher at Nofima in Norway, points out that organic salmon is not the same as wild salmon. \(Photo: Terje Aamodt@Nofima\)](#)

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