

Consumer groups push for label for modified salmon

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This undated handout photo provided by AquaBounty Technologies shows two same-age salmon, a genetically modified salmon, rear, and a non-genetically modified salmon, foreground. The Food and Drug Administration pondered Monday whether to say, for the first time, that it's OK to market a genetically engineered animal as safe for people to eat. (AP Photo/AquaBounty Technologies)

(AP) -- Consumer advocates urged the Food and Drug Administration on Tuesday to ensure that salmon engineered to grow twice as fast as the conventional variety are labeled in the grocery store as genetically modified.

The FDA conducted a hearing on how the salmon, if approved for sale by the agency, should be labeled. According to federal rules, the fish would not be labeled as genetically modified if the agency decides it has the same material makeup as conventional salmon.

Consumer advocates say it is the public's right to know that [genetic modification](#) has occurred. AquaBounty, the company that has developed the fish and is applying to the FDA to market it, says that genetically modified salmon have the same flavor, texture, color and odor as the conventional fish.

Dr. Michael Hansen, senior scientist at Consumers Union, the publisher of Consumer Reports, testified that his organization disagrees with the FDA that genetic engineering itself does not constitute a material difference in the two fish. He added that the agency does have the authority to demand the labels, citing previous rules that allowed foods to be labeled so people with religious or cultural sensitivities could avoid them.

Labeling is also a safeguard for the safety of the fish, Hansen said.

"You need this labeling so if there's a problem down the road, you can trace it back," he said.

The [Atlantic salmon](#) engineered by AquaBounty has an added a growth hormone from a Chinook salmon that allows the fish to produce growth hormone all year long. The engineers were able to keep the hormone active by using another gene from an eel-like fish, an ocean pout, that acts like an "on switch" for the hormone, which conventional salmon produce only some of the time.

In his testimony, Ron Stotish, the CEO of AquaBounty, told the FDA, "This fish is an Atlantic salmon."

In documents released ahead of the hearing, the FDA agreed with the company, saying there were no biologically relevant differences between the engineered salmon and conventional salmon, and there is a reasonable certainty that no harm will come from its consumption.

On Monday, during a hearing on the science of the fish, FDA scientists said there are very few differences between the modified and conventional fish. An advisory panel that heard the evidence was more cautious, saying more study is needed to be sure.

Two experts speaking at the labeling meeting Tuesday agreed with the FDA that there are no obvious material differences between the two fish.

Alison L. Van Eenennaam of the University of California Davis and Gregory Jaffe of the Center for Science in the Public Interest said there was no evidence from the data provided that the two fish were different enough to be labeled as such, though Jaffe urged the FDA to ensure the fish is somehow branded so consumers know what they are eating.

"The reality is there are consumers out there who want to know if their salmon has been genetically engineered," he said.

If the FDA approves the sale of the salmon, it will be the first time the government has allowed such modified animals to be marketed for human consumption. AquaBounty submitted its first application for FDA approval in 1995, but the agency did not decide until two years ago to consider applications for genetically engineered animals.

Genetically engineered animals are not clones, which the FDA has already said are safe to eat. Clones are copies of an animal. In GE animals, the DNA has been altered to produce a desirable characteristic.

Critics have two main concerns about the modified fish: The safety of the food to humans and the salmon's effect on the environment.

Because the altered fish has never been eaten before, they say, it could include dangerous allergens, especially because seafood is highly

allergenic. They also worry that the fish will escape and intermingle with the wild salmon population, which is already endangered. They would grow fast and consume more food to the detriment of the conventional wild salmon, the critics fear.

The company says it has several safeguards in place to quell concerns. The fish would be bred female and sterile, though a small percentage might be able to breed. They would be bred in confined pools where the potential for escape would be low.

The FDA has said the fish shouldn't cause any allergies not already found in conventional [salmon](#) and there is little chance they could escape. But its advisory panel, which was formed to give input to the agency, cast some doubt on whether there was enough evidence to back up those assertions.

It is still unclear whether the public will have an appetite for the fish if it is approved. [Genetic engineering](#) is already widely used for crops, but the government until now has not considered allowing the consumption of modified animals. Although the potential benefits - and profits - are huge, many people have qualms about manipulating the genetic code of other living creatures.

If approved, the fish could be in grocery stores in two years, the company estimates.

More information: Background on FDA meeting:
<http://tinyurl.com/ylp5ccv>

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