

Standards for organic seafood coming this year, USDA says

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EU certified organic farm-raised shrimp are for sale on at the Wegmans, Friday, April 10, 2015 in Fairfax, Va. Organic fish is certified in the EU and Canada because the US doesn't have any standard. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

After more than a decade of delays, the government is moving toward allowing the sale of U.S.-raised organic fish and shellfish. But don't expect it in the grocery store anytime soon.

The Agriculture Department says it will propose standards for the farmed organic fish this year. That means the seafood could be available in as few as two years—but only if USDA moves quickly to complete the rules and seafood companies decide to embrace them.

Organic seafood would be welcome news for the increasing number of organic shoppers—and for retailers that have profited from their higher prices. It also could help the U.S. farmed fish industry find a premium as it struggles to compete against cheaper imports.

Among the seafood that is commonly farm-raised in the United States and would be covered:

salmon, tilapia, catfish, shrimp and mollusks such as mussels, oysters and clams.

The United States is "trying to play catch-up on organic aquaculture," says Miles McEvoy, who heads up USDA's organic program. The European Union and Canada, along with other countries, have been exporting their own organic products to the United States.

Retailer Wegmans already is selling organic seafood imported from Norway and elsewhere. Organic shoppers "skew to higher income and education which makes them extremely desirable," says Dave Wagner, the company's vice president of seafood merchandising.

Other retailers, such as Whole Foods, say they will wait for the U.S. rules before they sell seafood labeled organic.

It's still unclear if U.S. standards can be successful. Many in the farmed fish industry say they expect that the requirements for [fish feed](#) may be so strict as to be financially prohibitive.

"The challenge is, will consumers will be willing to pay for it?" says Sebastian Belle, head of the Maine Aquaculture Association, who has advised the USDA on the organic rules. "The markets will decide that."

In turn, some consumer and environmental groups have said they are concerned the standards won't be strict enough.



EU certified organic farm-raised easy peel shrimp are for sale on a tray at the Wegmans, Friday, April 10, 2015 in Fairfax, Va. Organic fish is certified in the EU and Canada because the US doesn't have any standard. After more than a decade of delays, the government is moving toward allowing the sale of U.S.-raised organic fish and shellfish. But don't expect it in the grocery store anytime soon. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

The discussions have been marked by tensions over what organic fish should eat and whether some of them can be raised in ocean cages called net pens. USDA's McEvoy says the new rules will be based on a series of recommendations from the government's National Organic Standards Board over the last decade.

Some environmental groups criticize the recommendations for suggesting that at first a quarter of the fish feed could be from sustainably wild-caught—but not organic—fish. A fish can't be organic, they argue, if it doesn't eat 100 percent organic feed.

Wild fish would not be eligible for the organic label—that would be too difficult to monitor.

The environmental groups also are concerned that fish in ocean pens would be able to escape and contaminate their surroundings. They also worry about ocean contaminants.

"What we're saying is this isn't organic," says Lisa Bunin of the Center for Food Safety.

The recommendations suggest several safeguards: Ocean-farmed fish should be strains of local species, and no net pens could be placed on migratory routes. Producers would have to closely monitor water quality and the impact on the area ecosystem.

For producers, the main concern would be the availability of organic feed.

Breeding organic fish to feed the organic fish could be prohibitively expensive, and organic grains such as soybeans and canola that can make up fish feed also are also costly. Some fish feed includes poultry or other land animal byproducts, but that would likely be prohibited, as would most synthetic ingredients.



Canadian certified organic mussels are for sale at the Wegmans, Friday, April 10, 2015 in Fairfax, Va. Organic fish is certified in the EU and Canada because the US doesn't have any standard. After more than a decade of delays, the government is moving toward allowing the sale of U.S.-raised organic fish and shellfish. But don't expect it in the grocery store anytime soon. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Neil Sims, a longtime fish farmer based in Hawaii, says that if the rules have such strict limitations on feed, it could be unworkable for many companies.

"You can't magically wave a wand and expect an organic supply chain to appear," he says.

Such concerns are familiar in the organic industry, which is facing widespread ingredient shortages.

"It continues to raise the challenge that organic producers and suppliers are now confronting—whether there is going to be an adequate supply of feed," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said of organic aquaculture after addressing an organic industry conference this week.

Even if some companies do take steps to grow organic fish, the process could potentially stretch beyond two years. The National Organic Standards Board, which advises USDA's National Organic Program, is still reviewing some vaccines, vitamins and other substances considered essential to aquaculture.

Linda ODierno of the National Aquaculture Association says that despite some of the challenges, the industry is hoping that organics could help consumers feel more confident in U.S. product that is often already more expensive than seafood produced cheaply abroad.

"It could be good for industry and good for consumers," she said.

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