A Better Diet Helps Put Ocean-Farmed Salmon on the 'Eco-Friendly' Fish List

More omega-3 fatty acids in feed let species thrive

By Elizabeth Weise

For the first time, an ocean-farmed salmon has gotten a coveted nod from an influential "eco-friendly" fish list. On Monday, the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program moved Verlasso farmed salmon from Chile to its "yellow list" as a good alternative.

The Seafood Watch list is one of several that assign seafood a red, yellow or green rating, based on their sustainability and environmental impact. Red is "avoid," yellow is "good alternative" and green is "best choice."

Consumers and wholesale buyers use the lists "to make choices for healthy oceans," says Peter Bridson, Seafood Watch's aquaculture manager.

Ground-up fish for feed

Up until now, none of these lists has included salmon raised in ocean-based fish farms. Farmed salmon has long been disdained by environmentally motivated consumers. One reason was because salmon must be given feed high in omega-3 fatty acids to thrive. Ground-up herring, anchovies and other fatty fish contain those fatty acids and were used to make salmon feed.

Historically it took about 4 pounds of wild fish to produce a pound of salmon. That number has come down to between 21/2 and 31/2 pounds to 1 pound of salmon through better management, Bridson says.

Even so, about 17% of the world's fish catch is rendered for fish meal and oil, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Other concerns are that the salmon are often grown in high-density pens. This can lower water quality and result in infestations of parasites that can spread to wild fish populations. Chemicals used for disease and parasite control also can spread to nearby wild fish.

Salmon farms are beginning to clean up their acts. Verlasso, based in Miami, has changed its practices enough to make it onto Seafood Watch's yellow list. Its salmon is sold in 27 states.

The biggest effect will be on wholesale buyers, says John Sackton, publisher of Seafood.com, an industry news site based in Lexington, Mass. "Companies that want to buy sustainable seafood use these guidelines," Sackton says. That includes "places like Bon Appetit Management Co., which does a lot of sales with tech companies."

The list is also used by many chefs and probably will have an influence there, he says.

Verlasso has made several changes to its growing practices over the past three years, says director Scott Nichols. The biggest has been switching to feed in which omega-3 fatty acids come from a genetically modified yeast rather than from wild-caught fish. Verlasso is a joint venture between AquaChile, which raises the salmon, and DuPont, which produces the feed.

This reduces the amount of wild-caught fish needed to feed the Verlasso salmon and allows the company to achieve a "fish-in, fish-out" ratio of 1.34 to 1.

That means it takes 1.34 pounds of wild fish to produce 1 pound of salmon, Nichols says. Some fish is still necessary in the feed in part because salmon are picky eaters and don't like feed made entirely from corn and soybeans.

Using GMO feed now

Though consumers might be surprised to hear that the fish feed is made from genetically modified ingredients, feed from GMO yeast is little different from the feed from GMO corn and soybeans that has been fed to farmed fish, cattle, pigs and chickens for decades, says Chris Mann, a senior officer with the Pew Charitable Trusts' environment program.
The online grocery FreshDirect has been carrying the Verlasso salmon since it was introduced in 2011. The company sells in the greater New York City metropolitan area and focuses on organic and sustainable foods.

"We were looking for something better than a traditional farmed salmon that we could try to educate and upgrade customers into," says David McInemey, FreshDirect co-founder.

The gamble has paid off. Despite selling for about $2 more a pound, the Verlasso salmon now makes up 30% of FreshDirect's salmon sales, "which is pretty strong considering how hard we push wild salmon in season," McInemey says.

At other stores, Verlasso salmon typically sells for $2 to $5 more a pound.

The entire salmon farming industry is becoming more sustainable and less environmentally damaging overall, says Seafood Watch's Bridson. No other companies have applied to get on its yellow list, "but I think there's definitely the potential for things to change," he says.

Salmon farming has transformed the market for fish in the USA. Salmon has moved from "a luxury you only had on rare occasions to something that's an everyday protein," says Pew's Mann. In 2011, salmon was the third-most-consumed seafood in the USA, the National Fisheries Institute says, after shrimp and tuna fish.