

FDA says OK to salmon with genes modified to make it grow faster

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.09.15

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Frankie Ragusa, general manager of Seattle distribution for Ocean Beauty Seafoods, carries a 40-pound Copper River salmon after its arrival at the Sea-Tac Airport outside Seattle, Washington, May 17, 2013. It was part of the first shipment of the season of Copper River salmon from Cordova, Alaska. Photo: AP/Ted S. Warren, File

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Before too long there may be a very odd thing on Americans' dinner plates. It looks exactly like salmon, and it is, but it is salmon that has been genetically modified. The salmon is the first altered animal cleared for humans to eat in the United States.

Scientists are altering the genes of salmon to make them grow faster. Genes are passed down by parents. Genes decide what someone looks like and how their body works. They make a person have wavy or straight hair, or blue or brown eyes, or even smile a certain way. Plants, animals and people all have genes. With new genes, now the salmon can grow faster.

Critics call it "Frankenfish," after the Frankenstein monster, but the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) granted its approval on Thursday, saying the faster-growing salmon is safe to eat. It could be available in grocery stores in a couple of years.

The new fish is called AquAdvantage Salmon. Nutritionally speaking, it is no different than other farm-raised Atlantic salmon, the FDA said.

Government Approval Took 5 Years

The FDA hesitated in approving the salmon for more than five years because of concerns about genetically modified foods. The fish grows twice as fast as regular salmon, reaching the size it needs to be when sold more quickly than regular salmon.

A company named AquaBounty makes the engineered salmon. The fish is a "game changer" said Ron Stotish, the company's CEO. It "brings healthy and nutritious food to consumers in an environmentally responsible manner without damaging the ocean," he said.

It takes the salmon about two years to grow. It should be available in grocery stores in that time, AquaBounty said.

Once the salmon reaches stores, consumers may not even know they are eating it. AquaBounty says that genetically modified salmon has the same flavor, feel, color and smell as typical salmon. The FDA says the law does not require the fish to be labeled as engineered.

Stores Have Option To Label Fish

If stores that sell the fish want customers to know it has been genetically modified, the stores can label it using a description recommended by the FDA.

Some stores have said they will not sell the modified fish at all. So far, those retailers include Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, Target and Kroger.

Critics of genetically altered fish have put pressure on retailers to not sell the salmon. They worry it could cause allergies. They also fear that if the salmon escapes into the wild, and mixes with natural salmon, it could wipe them out.

"There's no place on our dinner plates for genetically engineered fish," Lisa Archer said. She works for Friends of the Earth, a group that supports the environment. She said that "the majority of consumers" don't want to eat "this poorly studied, unlabeled genetically engineered fish."

The Center for Food Safety is another group that disagrees with allowing the new fish. Just hours after the announcement, it announced that it would sue the FDA to block the approval.

Alaska Senator Is "Spitting Mad"

Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski has said the engineered salmon could harm her state's wild salmon fishing industry. She went to the Senate floor to criticize the FDA shortly after the announcement, saying she was "spitting mad." She and other Alaska and Pacific Northwest lawmakers said they will swiftly push for a law to require labeling of the modified fish.

The FDA said there are only two places in Canada and Panama where the salmon can be raised in large aquariums, called hatchery tanks.

There are plans in place to keep the fish from escaping, the agency said. First, there would be barriers to block the fish from escaping. Also, the fish would be raised to be female and would not have the ability to have babies, so if any did escape, they should not be able to multiply.

Growth Hormone Active All Year

Scientists have added growth hormone to the salmon from the Pacific Chinook salmon, because that type of salmon can make growth hormone all year long. Engineers have been able to keep the hormone active by using another gene from a fish similar to an eel. The gene acts like an "on" switch. Typical Atlantic salmon make growth hormone for only part of the year.

The FDA said it examined the information AquaBounty submitted about the new salmon thoroughly. When deciding whether an engineered animal is safe for people to eat, the FDA reviews the company's information and checks that the engineering is safe for the fish. The FDA also must make sure that anything the company claims is accurate.

Stotish from AquaBounty said he is hopeful that as people learn more, they will accept the fish.

"We think time and education and information may allow many of these folks to change their mind," he said of critics.

Quiz

1 Which conclusion about the AquAdvantage Salmon can be made based on the section "Government Approval Took 5 Years"?

- (A) If the government had not approved the salmon, the fish could not be sold in stores.
- (B) If the government had approved the salmon more quickly, the fish would have been more nutritious.
- (C) If the government had not hesitated in approving the salmon, the fish would be more plentiful in the ocean.
- (D) If the government had required labeling for the salmon, the fish would be more attractive to people.

2 Whose perspective is MOST emphasized in the section "Stores Have Option To Label Fish"?

- (A) people who have worked to confirm the safety of genetically modified fish
- (B) people who do not think genetically modified fish should be sold in stores
- (C) people who will likely make money off the sale of genetically modified fish
- (D) people who are undecided about the costs and benefits of genetically modified fish

3 Read the sentence from the section "Government Approval Took 5 Years".

The FDA says the law does not require the fish to be labeled as engineered.

What does the word "engineered" mean in the sentence?

- (A) planned
- (B) modified
- (C) raised in the ocean
- (D) developed to be healthy

4 Read the sentence from the section "Alaska Senator Is Spitting Mad".

She went to the Senate floor to criticize the FDA shortly after the announcement, saying she was "spitting mad."

The phrase "spitting mad" is used to convey that the senator is....

- (A) taking immediate action
- (B) feeling extremely upset
- (C) speaking in a rapid manner
- (D) being aggressive toward others

Answer Key

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