

## Farmed salmon can't beat wild

By Nick Jans

"Want some fresh kings? Two bucks a pound!" the commercial fisherman calls out to me as I head down the dock in Hoonah, Alaska. He holds up a beautiful 20-pound salmon. The price he's asking, though absurdly low, is 75 cents over what he's being offered by the local fish buyer - and less than half the wholesale price 10 years ago.

During this summer, the peak of salmon season in the fish-rich waters of southeast Alaska, many commercial fishermen in Hoonah and across the state didn't bother to go out. The worldwide market for Alaska wild salmon has crashed in such dramatic fashion that Glen Reed, president of the Pacific Seafood Processors Association, has stated that Alaskan salmon fishermen "should be listed under the Endangered Species Act." In August, President Bush approved a massive aid package for the ailing industry.

The overall problem isn't dwindling numbers of fish - 320,000 tons of salmon were harvested in Alaska last year, a one-third increase from 20 years ago - but falling prices and decreased demand.

World and domestic U.S. markets are being flooded with inexpensive salmon produced in foreign fish-farm operations. Multibillion-dollar corporations based in Norway, the Netherlands and Chile dominate the salmon-farming industry, which has risen from virtually zero production in 1980 to control the world market, producing roughly 1 million tons last year. In our supermarkets and restaurants, these farmed Atlantic salmon have all but replaced fish from Alaska.

OK, so thousands of fishermen are going broke, and another U.S. industry is on the verge of collapse because of cheap imports. But why should the consumer care? The farmed fillets look and taste fine, are available year-round and are noticeably less expensive. Industry representatives are quick to point out that farmed fish are a pure and healthful food, rich in heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids. "Think of us as the provider of the pure and natural taste of products from the blue pastures," invites the Web page for Norwegian salmon-farming giant Pan Fish.

But studies suggest farmed salmon may be far from pure. A recent pilot study by Canadian scientist Michael Easton, an expert in ecotoxicology, found that a four-fish sample of farmed salmon when compared with wild-caught salmon contained elevated levels of chemical contaminants, including PCBs - known carcinogens. Easton's research, which was published in the peer-reviewed international science journal, *Chemosphere*, showed 10 times more PCBs in farmed salmon than in wild fish - levels that he believes pose a health risk for regular consumers.

Levels of pesticides in farmed fish were also significantly higher, Easton's study showed, while mercury levels were roughly the same. "This is a preliminary study that raises significant questions," Easton says. He stresses the possibility of damage to anyone who consumes farmed salmon directly or indirectly from combined, low-level toxins. Easton also points out the elevated risk of mental retardation and brain damage to nursing babies and unborn fetuses.

Other new studies in the United Kingdom (source of many farmed salmon that supply U.S. markets) have cast further doubts on the safety of these fish, enough to fan an outcry in the British media.

A recent feature in the *Daily Mail* outlines a "chemical cocktail" of substances found in trace amounts in these fish, including canthaxanthin, a dietary additive that gives farmed salmon its appealing color; various pesticides such as cypermethrin, dichlorvos and azamethiphos, associated with cancer and reproductive problems in humans; copper and zinc-based paints; and malachite green, a fungicide. The latter was banned in June by the Scottish government, and a European government-sanctioned science commission has recently called for a two-thirds reduction in

Site Web  
By LYCOS



canthaxanthin, which has long been banned by the European Union for direct human consumption, due to its potential for vision damage.

The contaminants' source is linked to the farming process. PCBs and other toxins are concentrated in the oil-rich, pelletized fish meal, which farmed salmon are fed. The fish are treated with pesticides to control parasites, fed canthaxanthin and subjected to pen disinfectants. Antibiotics are administered to treat disease in crowded pens. In addition, there is mounting evidence farmed salmon contain fewer of the beneficial omega-3 fatty acids for which wild salmon are so highly touted.

A number of respected sources, including U.S. nutritionist Andrew Weil and *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, state that farmed salmon have two to three times fewer omega-3's than their wild counterparts. Meanwhile, the fat content of farmed fish ranges between 11% and 20% vs. 7% for wild.

There are serious environmental issues associated with salmon farming as well. The spread of highly infectious, mutating salmon diseases, large-scale environmental pollution and the escape of millions of non-native fish from salmon-farm operations are all ongoing problems that alarm scientists. They worry about the potential impact on wild salmon stocks.

Industry representative Odd Grydeland, who is president of the British Columbia Salmon Farmers Association, allows that there are concerns, but states that they "have been blown out of proportion. You'd have to eat a horrendous amount of farmed salmon to reach the levels high enough to cause damage."

Current U.S. Department of Agriculture standards, more lax than the World Health Organization's, back up his claims. "These issues need to be dealt with professionally and scientifically," Grydeland says. "I feel very proud of our industry and the improvements that have taken place." Like Easton, he calls for more research and careful stewardship of natural resources.

Meanwhile, the salmon-farming industry continues to expand, notably in British Columbia, literally on the doorstep of Alaska, home to our last huge runs of wild salmon. Alaskan fishermen continue to go bankrupt, processing plants close and workers go on welfare.

Wild Alaska salmon remains one of the last abundant, relatively pure and wild foods available. Why on earth should we weaken our economy and threaten a precious natural resource - all so we can eat an imported, inferior substitute?

*Alaskan writer Nick Jans is a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors.*

---

[Front Page News](#) [Money](#) [Sports](#) [Life](#) [Tech](#) [Weather](#) [Marketplace](#)

[USA TODAY Travel](#) [USA TODAY Careers Network](#)

[Terms of service](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [About us](#)

© Copyright 2002 USA TODAY, a division of [Gannett Co. Inc.](#)