

Q&A: President & CEO - Robert Reiersen talks about Genetically Modified Salmon

Q: What was your first reaction when you heard about AquaBounty Technologies' genetically modified Salmon intended to be used for food?

A: When I first heard about the concept of GM Salmon I was amazed that a technology had been developed to grow fish to market size in half the amount of time. However, as an avid seafood consumer myself, I immediately wondered about public safety implications. Now, even though the FDA's preliminary findings are that GM Salmon is safe for consumption – I am still a bit skeptical.

Q: Other types of food products – such as corn and soybeans - are genetically modified. Are you skeptical about these products?

A: (Laughs) That's a tough question. Genetically modified plant products have been around for so long that I don't remember what my reaction was when they came out – or if I was even aware of that milestone. I guess the fact that GM Salmon is new and that it is the first GM animal food that may be approved for consumption is what has me wondering about food safety. I also wonder that if when GM plants were approved for human consumption, those industries reacted as ours is today.

Q: And how would you say our industry is "reacting"?

Well, I think that there are a lot of stakeholders with different interests at heart. NGOs worry about environmental issues, fishermen worry about the economic implications, and consumer advocate groups are obviously concerned about food safety issues. And then of course the biotechnology industry is looking at it from the standpoint that approval could potentially open up an incredible number of opportunities. I figure that until a decision is made - these groups will continue to try to get their perspectives into the media in order to build public support and influence the decision as much as possible. Fortunately, the FDA is an objective Agency.

Q: That's right, the FDA is meant to be objective. But what do you think about members of Congress trying to interfere with the approval process?

A: Well, again – that is an example of stakeholders with different best interests at heart. I think that we need to trust the FDA to make the right decisions – and I think it is in everyone's best interests for the FDA to remain objective.

Q: Do you think that GM Salmon – if approved by the FDA – should have special labeling requirements

A: Absolutely. I think that consumers have a right to know what they are putting into their bodies. Especially because many consumers may not be unaware that GM Salmon even exists – let alone whether they are eating it. If the label isn't clearly marked and if a consumer doesn't hear about GM Salmon in the news, then how will they make educated purchasing decisions.

Q: So, are you saying that an "educated" seafood consumer wouldn't purchase GM Salmon?

A: Not necessarily, what I am saying is that consumers need to know what's out there – if they choose to purchase GM Salmon then that's a personal choice. But they need to have the right information to make those decisions. It's similar to the challenge facing sustainable seafood right now – there is a need to provide accurate information to consumers at the point-of-sale so that they can make their own decisions.



Q: Would you purchase GM Salmon?

A: Personally, I don't think I would. Regardless of whether it is approved or not – the thought of eating a genetically engineered fish is just hard for me to wrap my head around. That being said, I remember when farmed fish was the new thing - I was a little unsure about it. And now - today - I support the aquaculture industry and have no qualms about purchasing it for myself and my family.

Q: Do you think GM Salmon could be the future 'norm'?

A: Who knows? I think the seafood industry is changing so much every day that it's impossible to tell what is going to happen tomorrow, let alone 10 years from now. There is so much talk about rising prices and the ability to meet rising demand. I think it is definitely foreseeable that some type of technology will alter aquaculture methods – whether it is genetically engineered fish or not – we will just have to wait and see.

