

Fish Factor: FDA-approved Frankenfish fight continues

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Fishing groups, consumers and health organizations are launching a final push to prevent genetically modified fish from getting the nod for American dinner plates.

During the holidays, the Food and Drug Administration issued its environmental assessment concluding that the fish, tweaked to grow at least three times faster than normal, will not have any significant impacts on the human environment and is unlikely to harm wild stocks. The FDA's environmental green light is the last step before AquaBounty, the creators of so called Frankenfish, can send the mutant to markets. The public has until February 26 to send comments to the FDA.

Alaska Senators Begich and Murkowski have written to the FDA asking for a 60 day extension to the comment deadline, citing the holiday timing and new transitions in Congress. Senators from Washington, Oregon and Maryland also signed on to the comment extension request. No word yet on if the request has been granted.

Meanwhile, Senator Begich said the agency is moving "full steam ahead with fine-tuning its Frankenfish regulations," and he is not optimistic that public opinion will sway the federal OK.

Indeed. Late last year the federal government

awarded a coveted \$500,000 research grant from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture to

AquaBounty when the company disclosed it could run out of cash early this year. Over the past 16 years, Aqua Bounty has spent \$67 million to genetically tweak its "AquaAdvantage" Atlantic salmon and navigate the permitting processes.

Senator Begich called the FDA's support of the mutant fish "totally misguided."

"I think the FDA is not equipped to understand the impacts this genetically engineered fish will have on the environment and ecosystem," he said in a recent teleconference.

That echoed earlier comments by Rep. Don Young and Senator Murkowski who called the FDA's actions "especially troubling since the agency is ignoring the opposition of fishing groups as well as more than 3,000 consumers and health organizations."

As of Friday there were 3,209 comments posted on the FDA regulation page - of the 15 pages of comments posted, not a single one spoke in support of the GM fish. The Alaska legislature and state fishing groups have come out strongly against Frankenfish as has the National Humane Society, Center for Food Safety, among others.

"Can they move forward even with so much opposition by so many diverse groups? The sad answer to this is probably," said Begich.

"Still I encourage more people to make comments. I think the more comments the agency gets on the official record may slow them down or prevent them from moving forward," he added.

According to AquaBounty documents, the company plans to grow the modified Atlantic salmon eggs at a lab in Prince Edward Island, fly them to Panama where they will be raised at inland fish farms, and then

shipped back for sale in the U.S. Prospective fish farmers are lined up

in South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Ohio.

Meanwhile, Alaska's Congressional delegation intends to keep pressure on the FDA.

"We intend to reintroduce legislation that will deal with not allowing this product to come to market," Senator Begich said. "We will also deal with the labeling issue and some others. So if they think we are just going to roll over because they think they are a regulatory agency that just gives a check off and that's good enough, they are mistaken."

The Guardian newspaper in the UK quipped: If approved, the fish would be the world's first modified animal "to make its way into the food chain, clearing the way for an entire menagerie of redesigns, from fast-growing trout and tilapia to the "enviro-pig", genetically altered to produce less polluting poo."

Comments on Frankenfish can be sent to www.regulations.gov

Docket No. FDA-2011-N-0899.

Money for "Made in America"

Federal grants are available for Alaska companies that are getting pinched by competing imports.

"We look to assist firms that produce products or services made in America and in doing so, save and create as many U.S. jobs as possible," said Gary Kuhar, director of the nonprofit Northwest Trade Adjustment Assistance Center, an arm of the U.S. Dept. of Commerce Economic Development Administration.

If Alaska companies have lost sales or production to foreign competitors, they are eligible for up to \$75,000 in matching grants for projects of their choice. Smaller companies, for example, can get up to \$30,000 with a 25 percent match of \$7,500 for the company and the grant covers the rest. Large companies have a 50/50 split with a maximum grant of \$150,000.

The money can't be used to buy equipment or pay salaries, but it can cover consulting, training, website development and marketing.

"We do a lot in the marketing field," Kuhar said. "We help develop a marketing strategy and then help produce the tools needed to implement the strategy."

The TAA grants can help producers in manufacturing, agriculture, seafood and service firms such as fish brokerage companies. Co-ops and trade groups also may apply. Kuhar said his staff assists from the get go, from submitting applications and preparing and implementing projects through completion.

He added that the trade grants also are a tool for Alaska legislators.

"In some states we have very good success where the legislators refer clients to us. We are a tool to help their

constituents," Kuhar said. Learn more at www.nwtaac.org

Fish switch

Arni Thomson, one of Alaska's best known fishery advocates and policy wonk has joined the new Alaska Salmon Alliance as its first executive director. The ASA was formed in late 2011 to promote policies that protect fish and ensure long term fishing benefits at Cook Inlet. Its

membership includes Inlet fishing organizations, fishermen, and the region's four major processors.

Thomson is well known for his decade's long work at state and federal levels with Bering Sea crab fisheries and as recent president of United Fishermen of Alaska.

Thomson says the ASA will not focus on salmon fishing disputes between Cook Inlet user groups. Another focus is the loss of salmon habitat due to encroaching development and land uses.

"We want to stay out of allocative issues as much as possible. The objective is public education, communication and outreach to all user groups in the Cook Inlet salmon fisheries," he said in an interview.

The Alliance aims to make sure that the commercial fishing sector retains access to the resource. Both sport charters and Inlet setnetters were completely shut down last summer to protect king salmon returns, along with closures in the Mat Su drainage.

Thomson said at a recent meeting of a new Board of Fisheries task force "there was a serious effort by all the parties to start exchanging real proposals" and that "some interim solutions could be tested this summer."

Fish watch

The nation's largest fishery opens on January 20 - Alaska pollock. This year's total catch from the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska is 1,387,146 metric tons or more than 3 billion pounds. Alaska pollock accounts for 30 percent of all U.S. seafood landings.

Fish bucks

American Seafoods Company is accepting applications for its Alaska community grant program. A total of \$30,000 will be given out by the company's Community Advisory Board for projects addressing issues such as hunger, housing, safety, education, research, natural resources and cultural activities. Deadline to apply is Feb. 6; recipients will be selected on Feb. 14th.

Request forms are available at www.americanseafoods.com, by contacting kim.lynch@americanseafoods.com or call 206-256-2659.

