



Fish farming: European quality can help conquer consumers

Fish farming can help to meet growing demand for fish products without harming the environment, but to succeed, it has to guarantee quality and also win political support, MEPs and guest speakers agreed at a public hearing on Tuesday. Fish farmers need political determination, clear rules, a level playing field, and a trustworthy labelling system, urged their representatives.

Europe consumes over five million tonnes of fish farm ("aquaculture") products a year, yet its production does not reach even one million tonnes, said Parliament's rapporteur on building a sustainable future for European aquaculture Guido Milana (S&D, IT). But he was optimistic about aquaculture's potential. Even though Europe faces an aggressive international market, it can win over reluctant consumers by ensuring that its produce is of high quality, he explained.

Input from this hearing on how Europe can promote aquaculture will inform Mr Milana's own-initiative report, which in turn should help clarify what kind of legislation could help the sector, he said.

"Green" aquaculture is possible

Aquaculture suffers from an often-justified negative image, but also from ignorance of fish farming, a relatively new economic activity. One of the key concerns is its environmental sustainability. Director of the Galician Turbot Producers Association Fernando Otero Lourido argued that fish farms can be fully sustainable, as is the case in Galicia, where one of the world's largest aquaculture sites is located right next to the Lira marine reserve.

What the producers need is clear rules, a level playing field and political determination, argued Mr Otero, also noting that a trustworthy labelling system would help the sector.

Transparent labelling

"There seems to be a proliferation of different marks" on labelling, observed Marco Greco of the Italian Association for Organic Agriculture. "Sustainable" and "eco-compatible" production has to be distinguished from "organic" products, as is done in agriculture, he said.

Educating consumers

Commenting on a remark by Mr Milana on Europe's imports of Asian pangasius, which consumers know only in the form of filets, and have no clue as to its origins, Struan Stevenson (ECR, UK), regretted the World Trade Organisation does not recognise the importance of animal welfare. "The only way we can deal with it, is to educate consumers", he said.

Sustainable fish feed

MEPs also raised questions about the sustainability of the amounts of fish killed to feed farmed fish. Replying to Isabella Lövin (Greens/EFA, SE), about the possibility of using "vegetarian" fish, such as carp or tilapia, Dawn Purchase of the Marine Conservation Society said retailers find it hard to convince consumers to eat that fish, at least in the UK. However, inciting celebrity chefs to prepare it could stimulate demand, she added.

Press release

Lessons from the North

Norway sells 97% of its aquaculture production abroad, unlike the EU, whose imports greatly exceed exports. Norwegian fish farmers also enjoy strong political support and an excellent geographical situation, said Petter Arnesen (Feed & Environment, Marine Harvest ASA, Norway).

Norway has strict rules to ensure sustainability, and does its utmost to prevent infections, fish parasites and escapes and thus contamination of wild fish by farmed salmon. Its use of antibiotics has been reduced almost to zero, although they remain useful to fight parasites, he added.

Mrs Lövin asked whether aquaculture can be associated with sustainability if high-quality fish such as mackerel or overfished species like blue whiting are turned into fishmeal for salmon. Icelandic mackerel has indeed been turned into fish feed, but it proved inadequate for salmon and ended up in chicken feed instead, replied Mr Arnesen, adding that "we do not want to be associated with hoovering the seas".

Carbon footprint

Alain CADEC (EPP, FR) asked about salmon farming's carbon footprint of and sustainability of exporting Norwegian salmon to China and re-importing it to Europe as processed fish. Mr Arnesen replied that the CO2 impact of this practice was not very great, if the fish were frozen and transported in large quantities.

Turning research into opportunity

Most speakers stressed the need to use existing R&D funding more efficiently, so that research translates into action.

Dr Peter Heffernan (Marine Institute, Galway) suggested that research topics under existing European programmes need to be better targeted. Mrs Purchase noted that much high-quality research is already available, but said it needed to be put to more use.

Next steps

Mr Milana suggested that an "umbrella regulation" would ensure clarity and consistency, and also called for a single, specific, aquaculture fund to support the sector. However, "we are not yet at the point where we can draw up regulations", he stressed.

The Milana report is to be put to a Fisheries Committee vote on 3 or 4 April and a plenary one at the June session.

Committee on Fisheries

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