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U.S. Senate committee okays GE salmon labeling

Alaska senator makes distinction between GE salmon and GE crops: 'corn does not swim'

by Sustainable Food News
July 17, 2015



The U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee Thursday approved legislation that would require the labeling of genetically engineered (GE) salmon, if regulators approve the product for sale to consumers.

The committee passed the \$20.5 billion FY2016 Agriculture, Rural Development, and Food and Drug Administration spending bill, which contained the GE salmon labeling amendment pushed by U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska).

Murkowski has long been a vocal opponent of GE salmon, which she calls "Frankenfish," due to serious concerns surrounding the science behind gene splicing of two distinct species for human consumption.

The GE salmon, branded as AquaAdvantage Salmon by its developer AquaBounty Technologies, is genetically engineered with a Chinook salmon growth gene and an antifreeze gene from an eel-like fish called the ocean pout, which makes the fish grow almost twice as fast as its non-GM cousins.

Maynard, Mass.-based AquaBounty began seeking approval from the FDA to commercialize the technology in 1995, but the agency has yet to make a decision. If approved, AquaAdvantage Salmon would be the first GE animal to enter the global food supply chain.

The salmon's production cycle would include growing GE salmon eggs in containment facilities in the Canadian Maritimes, then shipping them to its facilities in Central America for grow-out and processing. End-user fillets would then be exported to the United States and other markets that allow the importation of GE food.

Murkowski is also worried about the risks of GE salmon disrupting and potentially breeding with wild Alaska salmon, which would jeopardize Alaska's multi-billion dollar commercial fishing industry.

However, the senator made the distinction between being against GE salmon, while favoring GE food crops, including soy and corn.

"I've heard from my friends in the agriculture sector that they're concerned that this move might overlay on top of the labeling requirement for crops," Murkowski said. "I would just remind you - corn does not swim from one field to another and propagate with other corn in another state."

Opponents of GE crops, however, point that non-GE crops can become contaminated due to cross pollination due to wind, insects and other pollinators.

The bill, including the GE salmon labeling amendment, heads to the Senate floor for a final vote.

"If the FDA moves forward, as it currently is, there would not be a requirement to ensure that people know what it is that they are eating," Murkowski said. "People need to know whether they are eating a genetically-engineered fish or they are eating a wild Alaskan salmon that we promote so strongly in our state."

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