

Cooke Aquaculture reaches 'huge milestone' with Seafood Watch rating

Firm is first in North America with 'good alternative' rating for ocean-raised Atlantic salmon.

Kim Tran/Intrafish

Published: 03.02.2016 18:49

A recent Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch report offered its most recent assessment of Atlantic North American salmon raised in marine net pens, and Cooke Aquaculture walked away as a big winner from the decision.

Ocean-raised Atlantic salmon in Maine improved from a red, or 'avoid,' rating to a yellow, or 'good alternative,' rating. The one criteria in the red is for chemicals and no criteria are currently classified as critical.

In 2013, about 18,600 metric tons of salmon worth \$105 million was produced out of Maine marine net pens. This accounts for 40 percent of Atlantic North America's total. New Brunswick-based Cooke Aquaculture is the only company with Atlantic salmon raised in marine net pens in Maine and no other ocean-raised Atlantic salmon farmer in North America has achieved the yellow rating from Seafood Watch until now, said Nell Halse, Cooke communications director.

"It's a huge milestone for us," she told IntraFish. The salmon is sold under Cooke's True North Salmon brand.

Some in the industry are loyal to the Seafood Watch ratings and being upgraded to yellow, "opens the door for us" to those customers.

"We're hopeful that in the near future we will see the same move for our Atlantic Canadian salmon," she said, adding that Cooke's current focus is to improve the Seafood Watch rating for its Canadian salmon.

While Seafood Watch put Atlantic Canadian salmon in the yellow range on some criteria, three other criteria were in the red, which dropped the entire species.

The three criteria in the red are chemicals, escapes and disease, but no criteria are currently classified as critical.

"We have an open and cooperative relationship with Monterey Bay," Halse said. She added the data used in Seafood Watch's report comes from up-to-date information Cooke supplies the agency but also "a lot of older data," which negatively impacts the final rating.

"The industry has changed dramatically and there are constant improvements, even in the last few months, some of the work and innovations we implemented would change the assessment," she said. "We're optimistic we can work with Monterey to improve our rating."

One recent improvement is Cooke's phasing out of antifoulant biocides used in its net pens. "We've invested tens of millions in nets and containment over the last few years." Another issue Cooke is tackling is chemicals.

The Seafood Watch report says of Atlantic Canada farmed salmon, "the use of antibiotics ... is markedly high and antibiotics deemed Highly- and Critically Important to Human Health, as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO), are used."

"We have provided them with antibiotic numbers for 2015 and [Seafood Watch] acknowledged the numbers have gone down," Halse told IntraFish. She added the number of returns in the report is also not correct and up to date.

All of Cooke's North American operations are 4-star certified under the Global Aquaculture Alliance (GAA) Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP).