

Imported seafood goes untested

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European countries this year seized dozens of tons of farmed salmon from Chile found to be contaminated with malachite green, a fabric dye banned in the United States since 1991 and suspected of causing cancer.

But the United States imports thousands of tons of salmon from Chile without testing for malachite green, which also acts as a fungicide, and other chemicals used at foreign fish farms.

It is unclear whether salmon tainted with such compounds is entering U.S. markets.

Earlier this year, however, Canadian inspectors found malachite green in smoked salmon they believe was first imported to the United States and packaged here. And Northwest-based Costco, which annually sells more than 30 million pounds of mostly Chilean farmed salmon, said Friday that it will soon begin screening for the fungicide.

"We're going to make sure there's a full-court press on this," said Jeff Lyons, vice president for fresh foods at the wholesale giant. "We're going to make sure our suppliers are on notice this is absolutely prohibited."

Federal officials Friday said they fear that Americans are being exposed to harmful drugs in farmed fish and plan to expand testing later this year. One official who spoke on the condition of anonymity acknowledged that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is swamped by the more than 4 billion pounds of seafood entering the country annually from more than 160 countries.

Americans show an insatiable and growing appetite for cheap farmed seafood. The number of FDA inspectors assigned to screen the nearly 10 billion pounds of imported and domestic fish each year -- fewer than 200 -- has not kept pace.

The deficiencies in the U.S. system became evident when health authorities in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom repeatedly blocked salmon from Chilean farms tainted with malachite green. The dye kills fungus on farmed fish but may have toxic effects and breaks down into a potential carcinogen that collects in fish tissue. European scientists consider the chemical a toxin that also poses risk of reproductive harm.

Scientists at the FDA, which oversees seafood imports, have suspected since 1996 the chemical may cause cancer, according to the agency's budget records.

Antibiotics, fungicides, other drugs Roughly half of the fresh and frozen salmon consumed in the United States comes from Chilean farms.

But the FDA tests no incoming salmon for the fungicide.

And other drugs, some of them antibiotics familiar for their human application, may be slipping through.

The FDA does not test salmon for oxytetracycline, an antibiotic, although authorities in Japan recently seized Chilean salmon with excessively high levels of it.

And it conducts no testing for ivermectin, a pesticide designed for terrestrial livestock but detected in 2001 in salmon farmed in the United Kingdom. Thousands of tons of U.K. salmon enter the United States each year.

Though FDA staff is stretched thin, the agency sometimes warns inspectors to check for problems in certain imports. It has not done so for salmon.

FDA officials say U.S. consumers have no cause for concern because the FDA responds to problems "in relatively short order" and is developing new tests as quickly as possible.

But overall, enforcement lags.

Seafood imports have nearly doubled in the past 20 years, much of it owing to a surge in cheap, farmed salmon and shrimp that has shouldered U.S.-caught wild fish out of the market. More than 75 percent of seafood eaten nationwide is imported, much of it farmed.

Marine farms combat disease among crowded fish with antibiotics, fungicides and other drugs. The FDA has identified more than 30 drugs used in foreign aquaculture, according to a report by a deputy director in the FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine.

Federal law bars seafood containing the drugs from entering the country.

But the FDA tests for only five of them, some in only certain products. Salmon is tested for one drug, shrimp for four.

By contrast, the U.S. Department of Agriculture tests imported meat and poultry for more than 50 drugs. Its 170 import inspectors examined 16 percent of incoming meat and poultry last year.

Inspectors spread "pretty thin" Congress and watchdog groups have blasted the FDA for checking less than 2 percent of seafood imports for obvious failings such as decay or false labeling.

That limited review led FDA inspectors this year to reject more than 200 loads of salmon from Canada, Chile, the United Kingdom and other countries because they were filthy, putrid or infected with harmful bacteria such as listeria.

Drugs can be detected only with more involved laboratory tests. But the FDA tests less than one half of 1 percent of all imported foods for the few drugs it looks for, its records show.

Example: More than 177,000 tons of seafood, 40 percent of it salmon, entered the United States through Seattle-area ports last year. That would fill almost 10,000 tractor-trailer rigs. But the FDA has 31 inspectors handling all imports, from lipstick to microwaves. They test fewer than 400 samples -- only some of them seafood -- for drugs.

"We're spread pretty thin," a local FDA official said. The FDA allowed him to speak to The Oregonian only on the condition he not be named.

Fish farming took off during "a cowboy era of globalization and free market, and that has helped it escape regulation," said Mike Skladany of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, a critic of salmon farming. "The stuff has just come flooding in without any inspection to speak of."

Origin of fish hard to discern Limited controls on seafood allow its trade around the world, from one country to the next, before it ever goes on sale. That was underscored when officials in Canada screened imports for malachite green late last year and found smoked salmon from the United States with traces of the chemical.

The salmon was probably farmed in another country, shipped to the United States without testing, smoked and sent to Canada, said Glenn McGregor, manager of seafood product inspection for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

A West Coast processor smoked the salmon, he said. He would not identify the company.

No Canadian farmed salmon contained malachite green, he said. About 40 percent of farmed salmon entering the United States last year came from Canada.

But consumers often cannot tell where farmed salmon comes from. Stores must label it as farmed because it contains artificial color. They do not have to disclose its country of origin, although they will starting next year.

All Chilean salmon is farmed and is widely sold at retail chains.

Chile's roughly 400 farms ship more salmon to the United States than to any other country besides Japan and view U.S. consumers as their largest growth market. The United States imports about five times as much Chilean salmon as European countries, and is likely to bring in more under a free trade agreement President Bush signed with Chile on Sept. 3.

A suspected carcinogen Testing is far more aggressive in Europe.

Health officials in the United Kingdom halted five incoming containers of Chilean salmon in March because they contained malachite green. U.K. officials also found malachite green and related compounds in seven samples of salmon farmed in the United Kingdom this year.

The U.K. findings prompted officials in the Netherlands to test 10 shipments of salmon from Chile. Of the eight tested so far, half contained malachite green and will be destroyed, said Dick Groothuis of the Dutch Inspectorate for Health Protection.

At least two of the Chilean companies that had tainted salmon seized in Europe also export to the United States, federal records show.

Malachite green breaks down into another compound called leucomalachite green, which collects in fish tissue. The FDA commissioned studies of the compounds in 1996 because they resemble others known to cause cancer, said John Bucher, deputy director of the environmental toxicology program at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences in Research Triangle Park, N.C.

The results are not available yet, but will be presented to a scientific board in November.

The FDA would not allow The Oregonian to speak with scientists conducting the research, and required the newspaper to submit questions in writing. Without the studies, FDA officials said they do not know whether malachite green or leucomalachite green presents a public health risk.

Earlier studies, however, found toxic effects and genetic damage in rats and rabbits. A European Commission science panel in January recommended classifying malachite green as a toxin that poses a risk of birth defects and harm to public health.

Rodrigo Infante of the Chile Salmon Producers Association questioned the accuracy of the Dutch and U.K. identification of malachite green.

"It may be that it's a mistake," he said.

However, Dutch officials said the widely accepted tests are very reliable. A delegation of Chilean officials who visited Holland did not question the results.

Chilean industry like "Wild West" The Chilean fisheries service has since required testing of salmon destined for Europe and Japan before it leaves Chile. That has detected malachite green in additional shipments.

A Chilean court last year fined two salmon farming companies in Chile for using malachite green, which is also illegal in Chile. They included Marine Harvest Chile, a subsidiary of the Dutch agricultural conglomerate Nutreco, the largest producer of farmed salmon and feed in the world.

Malachite green is cheaper than approved fungicides.

Salmon farming in Chile is "like the Wild West without a sheriff," said Juan Carlos Cardenas, director of the Chilean environmental group Ecoceanos. "They need to clean up their act, to protect the environment and the public."

FDA officials said they expect to begin testing seafood for more drugs, including malachite green and ivermectin, later this year. They are also trying to determine safe levels for other drugs.

In the meantime, consumers are protected by a system called Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point, where U.S. and foreign seafood producers must identify and address food safety hazards, FDA officials said.

But the U.S. General Accounting Office has found the system weak and full of holes.

"It's a smokescreen," said Caroline Smith DeWaal, food safety director at Center for Science in the Public Interest, a nonprofit FDA watchdog. "If the FDA doesn't check for substances, you can be sure no one else is."