

U.S. seafood industry positive about aquaculture

Opinion leaders in the U.S. seafood industry see Canada's aquaculture products in a positive light but often lack knowledge of fish farming practices, says a study commissioned by the federal fisheries department.

"U.S. seafood buyers generally expressed a readiness to deal with Canadian suppliers, but their lack of information on Canadian products and their procurement requirements need to be addressed," said the study.

The study's authors talked with presidents, owners and managers of large and small seafood wholesalers and importers, agents and brokers, retailers and grocery chain representatives and seafood restaurants, mostly in New York and other northeastern states and most of whom buy salmon.

Overall, the Americans gave Canadian farm-raised salmon mixed reviews.

Most could not say how it compared with product from other countries, while others said it had a better reputation for consistent and fresh quality, while yet others said Scotland, Norway and Chile had more advanced industries.

The study was undertaken to discover how opinion leaders in the U.S. had been affected by well-publicized criticisms environmental groups had raised about farmed salmon. Fisheries officials also wanted to know how aware the Americans were of the Canadian industry's actual standards and practices.

Many participants in the study said they did not know anything about Canadian aquaculture.

That said, many said they assumed only positive things about the industry because they hold the country itself in high regard and because the product they'd bought had always been high quality.

Yet others held less than favourable views about fish farming and reported a increasing demand for wild salmon because of perceived health benefits and negative media attention about salmon farming methods and impacts.

The U.S. is Canada's main export market for seafood, where it competes with Chile as the leading supplier of farmed Atlantic salmon and with China and Thailand overall for other products.

Canadian suppliers' potential to gain market share in the U.S. will depend on educating buyers and consumers about sustainability of fish farming practices, ensuring a consistent supply and adjusting to changing needs for value add-ons in their product line.

The study identified 10 major market trends, including a decreasing supply of fish overall, the increased popularity of seafood as a protein source, more positive media attention on the health and weight-loss benefits of eating seafood and a higher demand for over-ready, single-serving portions.

They also mentioned a perceived media focus on negative aspects of farmed fish.

The leading obstacle to more consumption of seafood was customers' unfamiliarity with it.

"Participants explained people are 'intimidated' by the prospect of cooking and preparing seafood because they don't know how," said the study.

Dwindling availability of seafood and higher prices were also cited.

One other key finding bodes well for the salmon farming industry: "U.S. seafood dealers in this study confirmed the popularity of salmon as a current and future best-seller."

Salmon farming in New Brunswick generates sales of more than \$225 million a year, making it the largest agricultural product in the province.

Three-quarters of the production is sold in the U.S.

The industry provides roughly one-quarter of the jobs in Charlotte County.