

Producing Safe Aquaculture Products in the Asia-Pacific Region

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Safety of aquaculture products is becoming increasingly important for countries in the Asia-Pacific region when exporting aquatic products to countries such as Japan, the USA and the European Union members. It is estimated that over half of the world fish trade in value originates in developing countries and most of these main exporters are currently Asian countries. Export of fisheries products represents an important source of foreign exchange earnings, contributing to GDP as well as providing employment opportunities and livelihood benefits to millions of people in the region.

Food safety is high on the agenda in most importing countries and there are increasing cases of detentions and rejections at their borders. There are a variety of reasons for this, but the impact on the fish farmers and the exporting countries are the same i.e., they lose profits and market access.

Not only a concern for ensuring access to export markets, food safety has become of great importance in addressing domestic public health issues. Products destined for export or for the higher-end domestic markets are typically channeled through good quality processing facilities (often HACCP certified); however, products for the lower-end domestic market rarely pass through any control between harvest and point of sale. Increasingly, products which cannot meet export quality standards are also diverted into domestic markets or intra-regional markets.


Production of good quality products from aquaculture is therefore of importance to ensure access to foreign markets as well as to provide safe and quality products for local consumers.


There is an increasing need for FAO member countries to focus on traceability, food safety standards and better management practices at

the farm/pre-harvest level. However, applying new food safety standards and traceability at the farm level poses special organizational difficulties particularly for the large community of small-scale farmers in the region. There is a need to better understand the implications of new food safety standards and international trading standards for small-scale farmers, and to develop suitable market-oriented solutions to the problems faced by the small-scale sector. This will allow the sector to benefit from the development opportunities, while reducing exposure of small farmers to the associated risks.

FAO is working with its member governments and partners to ensure the quality of aquaculture products and to minimize and avoid the rejections in exported products. It is thus expected that there will be an improvement in the quality of aquaculture products available in domestic markets.

FAO's on-going and pipeline initiatives at the regional and global levels, to support member governments are described below.

 Preparation of Technical Guidelines for the Improvement of Safety and Quality in Aquaculture. These guidelines will form a practical and normative framework for addressing food safety at the production level in aquaculture. The guidelines will address both biological food safety issues such as fishborne zoonotic parasites and bacterial contamination as well as food safety issues related to chemical use and residues.


 At the Third Session of the COFI Subcommittee on Aquaculture (New Delhi, India, September 2006), FAO member countries requested for FAO to work on guidelines on aquaculture certification. Food safety and aquaculture certification are closely related, since better management




Dried seafood products for sale at a local fish market in China

practices at the pre-harvest level can lead to more responsible use of chemicals and possibly also to minimize the prevalence of fishborne zoonotic parasites. There are already a number of schemes certifying aquaculture and more schemes are being developed. Currently there is no global norm for aquaculture certification in contrast to fisheries eco-labelling which benefits from the recently developed eco-labelling guidelines. In the absence of globally accepted norm and harmonized procedures among regional countries, the proliferation of certification schemes has the potential to confuse consumers and lead to negative impacts on the ability to trade.

In the first half of 2007, it is planned that an FAO/NACA/DOF Thailand Expert Workshop on Guidelines to Certification in Aquaculture will be held in Bangkok, Thailand. This workshop will review the potential for aquaculture certification as well as develop a roadmap for the future elaboration of the technical guidelines.

 The Tenth Session of the COFI Sub-Committee on Trade (Santago de Compostela, Spain, May 2006) discussed issues in relation to trade and certification/marketing. New developments related to traceability systems for fish and fish products were discussed together with their implications on trade. Also aspects related to food safety and quality in traded products was on the agenda and all areas were seen relevant and FAO member countries recommended FAO to work more on these issues.

 The Codex Alimentarius Committee on Fish and Fishery Products has developed a code of practice for fish and fishery products, including aquaculture products. These integrate general food safety principles and adapt them to aquaculture.

Many Asian aquaculture systems have traditional and diverse advantages in safe, healthy and sustainable seafood production, such as some ecologically sound integrated farming systems. This should not be overlooked when

considering food safety and labelling issues. Collaborative research and development should be used to encourage both traditional systems and innovations in aquaculture farming that could provide the region with comparative advantages in developing better management practices.

It is clear that member countries recognize the importance of addressing the issues of food safety, certification and labeling of aquaculture products. Member governments are already assisting through trust funds with FAO and in implementing recommendations of relevant FAO statutory bodies. What is clear is that work on assisting Asian countries in developing their national capacities in seafood safety and developing and implementing strategies for production of safe aquaculture products is of great importance. This is an emerging issue which has quickly risen as a top priority, largely as a result of recent globalization activities and the accession of many Asian countries to the WTO.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that while many aquaculture products are of good quality and are safe to eat, there is still room for improvements and regional and international cooperation is very important and necessary for the development of harmonized and transparent standards and compliance procedures. These should build on the work of the FAO/WHO Codex (safety and quality), the FAO (eco-labeling, guidelines on organic fish farming, and regional guidelines for better management practice). They must also be harmonious with overarching systems such as the ISO standards for certification and accreditation.

Implementation and operationalization of these systems will require collaboration with regional intergovernmental organizations like NACA to develop regional initiatives and to further develop better management practices in a regional setting. More attention should be given to opportunities for mutual recognition of standards, and simplification of compliance procedures, which in turn should lead to cost reduction, especially for developing countries and small enterprises.

Producing safe aquaculture products is increasingly required by markets and is in the interest of the consumers. Establishing workable systems must also respect the ability of aquaculture farmers to produce and market their products.

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Workshop on "*Guidelines for Aquaculture Certification*" to be hosted by Thailand's Department of Fisheries, and jointly with NACA, 27-30 March 2007, Bangkok, Thailand, is a scoping exercise to develop certification guidelines and lay the groundwork for aquaculture certification. Further information may be obtained through the Aquaculture Certification website at <http://www.enaca.org/modules/tinyd10/index.php?id=1> or via email: Rohana.Subasinghe@fao.org