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Growing concern on 'Frankenfood'

Written by NICK KOSTOV

It was once the stuff of science fiction – but soon a genetically modified salmon growing twice as fast as normal could land on our dinner plate.



QUICK: GM salmon can grow two to three times faster

One of the last remaining hurdles to GM salmon being sold in American supermarkets was cleared last week when US watchdogs ruled it could find no reason to ban it, clearing the way for the fish to appear on American dinner plates within months, and possibly on British plates soon after.

The move will be seen as opening the door for other GM animals to appear on supermarket shelves – chicken, beef or lamb, for example – and has reignited the debate about what critics have dubbed 'Frankenfood'.

Although the company behind the salmon said its fish will be sterile and raised in physically contained facilities, critics are worried about the fish getting into the wild.

Ian Rawls, a campaigner with Cambridge Friends of the Earth, said he thought the risks associated with GM salmon outweighed the potential benefits.

He added: "Salmon's a luxury item, it's not a staple, we're not saving the starving here.

"We are against the release of GMOs into the wild – you can't grow salmon twice as fast and expect there not to be consequences."

The growth of the salmon is accelerated by adding two growth-enhancing genes to the eggs of a wild Atlantic salmon. The result, according to the company, is that fish are normal, but grow up to two or three times more quickly, saving money for the farmers and allowing them to produce more fish.

But opponents are worried it may be years before we know what the consequences of tampering with nature in this way may be. They point to nuclear power, which enjoyed widespread support when it was rolled out but which has since left us with a mountain of radioactive waste which will take years to clear up.

Scientists take these concerns very seriously but argue we have been tampering with nature for thousands of years, through agriculture for example. Simply put, we now have a more sophisticated way to tamper.

Prof Laurence Tiley, an expert on genetic modification at Cambridge University, defended the use of GM food.

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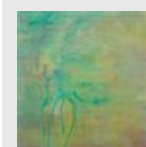
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He said: "GM food is not intrinsically dangerous and it has huge potential for improved health and production. One day we will look back and wonder why it took us all so long to realise this.

"The proposed production system and properties of Aquabounty salmon should ensure that the risks to health and the environment are no more than that of any other farmed salmon."

Scientists point out that the so-called 'Frankensalmon' will have just two genes altered, accounting for a tiny proportion of its DNA. The key, they say, is strict and rigorous regulation to minimise the risk of unforeseen consequences.

Dr Martin Vinnell, who formerly oversaw GM research at Cambridge University, insisted the regulation of GM food was extremely strict in the UK and described the risk to the public as "negligible".

Besides, he said, much of the opposition to GM meat – with a number of supermarkets in the US already pledging not to sell the meat – is to do with ethics.

"People are not thinking we're going to get a salmon with huge teeth eating our children," he said.

Asked if he would be happy to see GM salmon on sale in British shops, however, Dr Vinnell cleverly side-stepped the question. "I'd try it once and see if I liked it," he said.

Bon appetit.

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