



BEYOND PESTICIDES

701 E Street, SE ■ Washington DC 20003
202-543-5450 phone ■ 202-543-4791 fax
info@beyondpesticides.org ■ www.beyondpesticides.org

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Ms. Michelle Arsenault
National Organic Standards Board
USDA-AMS-NOP
1400 Independence Ave. SW.,
Room 2648-S, Mail Stop 0268
Washington, DC 20250-0268

Docket ID # AMS-NOP-19-0095

Re. CS: Wild, native fish for liquid fish products

These comments to the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) on its Spring 2020 agenda are submitted on behalf of Beyond Pesticides. Founded in 1981 as a national, grassroots, membership organization that represents community-based organizations and a range of people seeking to bridge the interests of consumers, farmers and farmworkers, Beyond Pesticides advances improved protections from pesticides and alternative pest management strategies that reduce or eliminate a reliance on pesticides. Our membership and network span the 50 states and the world.

We share the concerns that lead the Crops Subcommittee to this discussion document. We believe that prohibiting the use of wild, native fish in liquid fish products used for fertility in organic crop production is not only a good idea, but is required to be consistent with organic principles. However, we are concerned that an alternative would not only be unenforceable, but would cause problems for organic farms, as well as environmental problems.

The use of liquid fish products in organic production must protect the marine ecosystem.

In order for a material to be on the National List, the NOSB must determine that it “would not be harmful to human health or the environment.”¹ The allowance of fertilizer made from wild, native fish—and, we contend, other fish—is harmful to the environment.

It is important to address not only the sustainability of harvest from the fisheries, but also the health of marine ecosystems in examining the impact of using fish products. The

¹ OFPA §6517(c)(1)(A)(i).

Oceans are not farms that exist for human use. Oceans contain complex ecosystems, which organic production systems are required to protect. Luybaert et al. conclude from their study of the state of oceans, “Marine population declines are ubiquitous, yet the consequences for the functioning of marine ecosystems are understudied.” They cite a reduction in marine fish abundance of 38% compared to levels in 1970. With the decline of marine biodiversity and degradation of marine ecosystems, ecosystem services provided by these ecosystems are being lost. The article says, “There is increasing evidence that the destruction and modification of structurally complex habitats is leading to the rapid disappearance of the diverse communities they harbor at local, regional, and global scales.” Examples are kelp forests and oyster reefs.²

Restricting the species and location of the harvest is not sufficient. The method is also important. For example, trawling activity has been reported on 75% of the global continental shelf area³ and is one of the “most significant forms of physical disturbance on the seabed.”⁴ “[T]he proportion of seabed area exposed to bottom trawling ranges from <1% to >80% in different regions of the world. Trawling may modify sediment texture (grain size), the presence and nature of bedforms and chemical exchange processes. Trawling can also have direct and indirect impacts on populations and communities of benthic invertebrates.”⁵

It is estimated that more than 50% of the material from the total fish capture is not used as food⁶ and might be used for fertilizer. “Production of fishmeal and fish oil requires significant amounts of energy for cooking, drying and evaporation.”⁷ The 50% of the capture not used as food includes “bycatch”—not only fish, but also dolphins, marine turtles, and sea birds. There are fishing methods that minimize bycatch that are not always used.⁸

In the *International Journal of Epidemiology*, Brunner et al. conclude, “Marine ecologists predict on current trends that fish stocks are set to collapse in 40 years, and propose increased restrictions on fishing, including no-take zones, in order to restore marine ecosystem health. Production of fishmeal for aquaculture and other non-food uses (22 MT in 2003) appears to be unsustainable.”⁹

² Luybaert T., Hagan J.G., McCarthy M.L., Poti M. (2020) Status of Marine Biodiversity in the Anthropocene. In: Jungblut S., Liebich V., Bode-Dalby M. (eds) YOUMARES 9 - The Oceans: Our Research, Our Future. Springer, Cham

³ Luybaert T., Hagan J.G., McCarthy M.L., Poti M. (2020) Status of Marine Biodiversity in the Anthropocene. In: Jungblut S., Liebich V., Bode-Dalby M. (eds) YOUMARES 9 - The Oceans: Our Research, Our Future. Springer, Cham

⁴ Colloca, F., Scarcella, G. and Libralato, S., 2017. Recent trends and impacts of fisheries exploitation on Mediterranean stocks and ecosystems. *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 4, p.244.

⁵ Colloca, F., Scarcella, G. and Libralato, S., 2017. Recent trends and impacts of fisheries exploitation on Mediterranean stocks and ecosystems. *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 4, p.244.

⁶ Arvanitoyannis, I.S. and Kassaveti, A., 2008. Fish industry waste: treatments, environmental impacts, current and potential uses. *International journal of food science & technology*, 43(4), pp.726-745.

⁷ Arvanitoyannis, I.S. and Kassaveti, A., 2008. Fish industry waste: treatments, environmental impacts, current and potential uses. *International journal of food science & technology*, 43(4), pp.726-745.

⁸ <https://www.worldwildlife.org/threats/bycatch>.

⁹ Eric J Brunner, Peter J S Jones, Sharon Friel, Mel Bartley, Fish, human health and marine ecosystem health: policies in collision, *International Journal of Epidemiology*, Volume 38, Issue 1, February 2009, Pages 93–100, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyn157>.

A targeted prohibition against wild, native fish in liquid fish products does not protect the marine environment.

The TR seems to say contradictory things. On one hand, it seems to suggest that because fish are not harvested solely for fertilizer, the use as fertilizer really doesn't matter, while on the other hand, it says:

While none of the fish species known to be harvested for fish reduction purposes and which are incorporated into fish-based fertilizer products are threatened or endangered species (see Table 2), their population dynamics are not understood in many cases. It is also difficult to ascertain the effect of removing biomass, even from a sustainable fishery, considering that these species may be a food source for other species. Meal and oil fish can be critical to the function of entire ecosystems; for example, Pacific thread herring (*Opisthonema libertate*) and Pacific anchoveta (*Cetengraulis mysticetus*) are critical links in the Gulf of California, transferring energy through the food web and controlling the organization of these ecosystems.¹⁰

We believe this paragraph is important. Given that the importance of removing fish biomass is not well understood, either from the perspective of an energetic balance or from the perspective of food web dynamics, the organic industry should take a precautionary approach to protect marine ecosystems. Rather than seizing the opportunity to exploit “fish waste,” we should be asking, “What is the best way to return those nutrients to the oceans?”

A targeted prohibition against use of wild, native fish is unenforceable.

The most attractive option is the use of “invasive” species to process into fish products. However, a species that is “invasive” in one place is native to another place. Asian carp species—probably what most people think of when they think of an “invasive fish”—are native to Asia and is considered vulnerable to extinction in the wild, but a pest in many other places.¹¹ How do we track where that carp might have been caught?

Rainbow trout is native to the western U.S., but when introduced elsewhere, outcompetes native species and may carry disease. Like largemouth bass and other species popular among anglers, they cause problems where they have been stocked for sport fishing.¹² Again, the enforcement issue is how to distinguish fish where they are considered “invasive” from the same fish where they are native or purposely introduced.

Bycatch is also a problem with “invasive” fish, as with wild, native fish.

¹⁰ 2019 TR, Lines 342-349.

¹¹ <https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/animals/stories/10-most-invasive-fish-species-world>.

¹² <https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/animals/stories/10-most-invasive-fish-species-world>.

Farmed fish do not solve the problems.

Aquaculture regulations have not been adopted, so farmed fish are not organic. According to the 2019 TR, “Formulated feeds for herbivorous and omnivorous fish can contain soybean, cottonseed, and peanut meals as well as protein obtained from fish and terrestrial animals. Formulated feeds for carnivorous fish are composed of large proportions of fish meal and fish oil, which include the essential amino acids lysine and methionine.”¹³ Therefore, use of farmed fish does not remove the pressure on wild fish and additionally adds contaminants, including pesticides and their metabolites, that occur in the nonorganically raised feeds.

In addition, farmed fish are routinely treated with antibiotics, leading to high residues in fish¹⁴ and antibiotic resistance genes in the fish and the water.¹⁵

Conclusion

We conclude that although well-intended, the attempt to avoid impacts on marine ecology by distinguishing wild, native fish from others, which might be acceptable for use in liquid fish products, is doomed because it is unenforceable and cannot prevent damage to marine ecosystems.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,



Terry Shistar, Ph.D.
Board of Directors

¹³ 2019 TR, lines 601-604.

¹⁴ Yipel, M., Kürekci, C., Tekeli, İ.O., Metli, M. and Sakin, F., 2017. Determination of selected antibiotics in farmed fish species using LC-MS/MS. *Aquaculture Research*, 48(7), pp.3829-3836.

¹⁵ Goptaitytė, G., Skerniškytė, J., Krasauskas, R., Ružauskas, M., Armalytė, J. and Sužiedėlienė, E., 2018. Detection of antibiotic resistance determinants in bacteria isolated from fish. In *COINS 2018-13th international conference of life sciences: 28 February-2 March 2018 Vilnius, Lithuania:[abstracts book]/Vilnius University Students Representation. Vilnius: Vilnius University Students Representation, 2018.*