General News

- NZ Salmon Firm’s Assurance p.216
- Vietnam Implements Seven-Year Biotech Development Plan p.218
New Zealand company King Salmon urges consumers not to be alarmed by the study published in Science that has found significantly higher levels of cancer-causing pollutants in farmed salmon compared with fish caught in the wild. The study also advised people to eat less farmed salmon. The Science study did not cover salmon farmed in New Zealand.

According to the Chief Executive of King Salmon, Paul Steere, salmon farmed in New Zealand have extremely low levels of contaminants. He said that the food they are fed comes from South America, known for low levels of pollutants, and the company does not use chemicals, vaccines or antibiotics.

US food regulators have rejected the results of the study but environmental groups have called for more research and better labeling. “We do not see a public health concern here. If anything, we’d like to see people eat more,” said Terry Troxell, who heads The US Food and Drug Administration’s (USFDA) office of plant and dairy foods and beverages. Nutritionists have long recommended salmon as a healthy choice, with benefits for the heart and brain, as well as relatively low levels of mercury contamination.

One scientist who read the study said the data were sound but dismissed the advice to eat less salmon as “polemic”. Mike Gallo, a toxicologist at Rutgers University, said many of the same contaminants are found in beef and other meats, though at lower levels.

The study demonstrated that the levels of a chemical known as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) measured well within FDA safety limits. The regulator’s standard is 2,000 parts per billion, while the salmon measured 50 parts per billion or less. But authors of the Science study argued that the FDA rule, set 20 years ago, was outdated and based their conclusions on more stringent rules from the Environmental Protection Agency.

“Industry can continue to fall back on that (standard) as a defense for selling fish that’s not safe for people to eat,” lamented Jane Houlihan of the Environmental Working Group, which warned about salmon contamination last year.

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Vietnam Implements Seven-Year Biotech Development Plan

To become a biotechnology leader by 2010, Vietnam will be aiming to develop its biotech industry over the next seven years — with the refurbished biotech industry expected to deliver new plant varieties and animal breeds with increased productivity, quality and competitiveness.

The biotech sector will also focus on developing artificial reproductive technologies, producing disease free plant varieties and animal breeds, cleansing the aquaculture environment, and controlling epidemic diseases. Biotechnology is expected to generate jobs for about 700,000 rural workers, and the Ministry of Science and Technology in Vietnam hopes to train an additional 2,000 scientists between now and 2010.

The ministry suggested that the government devise specific policies aimed at attracting foreign scientists to increase the professional capacity of the local biotech industry, and also in order to encourage Vietnamese researchers residing abroad to return to their homeland to work.

Speaking at a biotech conference held in Hanoi, Vietnam’s Deputy Prime Minister Pham Gia Khiem called for a strengthening of training and international cooperation in the industry. He urged the industry to rationalize the management of biotechnology and increase the use of information technology.

Laws to regulate intellectual property rights and genetic modification were currently being made in Vietnam. While the country has previously concentrated its biotech efforts on plant breeding, fertilizers and bio-pesticides, Vietnam is now edging towards a more systematic technology-based approach to biotech at the same time. With six national biotech laboratories already planned to open by 2006, the Vietnamese government is also making vast investments to generate opportunities for companies in the biotech-IT field.

Vietnam has already used advanced gene technologies to create novel vaccines and insect-resistant plants, and Vietnamese scientists are starting to study the cloning of animals. Facilities are being set up to store genetic material from a variety of plants, animals and micro-organisms, which will provide up to 500 species for biotech research use.