BioFish Forum[1] discussed revision process for EU organic aquaculture production rules- dynamic organic seafood market threatened?

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The interim rulings for organic aquaculture products laid down in the European organic regulation are phasing out which is putting organic aquafarmers under pressure, but also is threatening related import and retail business. A legal action by EU commission is needed to avert this threat. BioFish Forum organized by Organic Services and IFOAM EU-Group discussed need for actions to avoid negative impact on the young organic seafood industry which has exceeded the 1 billion EUR global turnover mark in 2012[2].

Organic seafood markets to grow

World-wide, the organic aquaculture movement is gaining a good momentum. Also outside of the European Union, more national regulations are in place like in Brazil, China, Hong Kong, India and since last year also in Canada. In particular export oriented shellfish growers in Canada have plans to go strongly for organic shellfish production.

The growing organic food market has reached a total turnover of about 50 billion EUR in 2012 and drives also the development of the organic aquaculture industry. With approx. 25 billion EUR turnover the US market is by far the biggest organic food market in the world followed by Germany (where the 7 billion EUR mark has been exceeded in 2012). All the more it will be important for export oriented organic aqua-farmers world-wide to follow the regulatory discussion on organic aquaculture production rules in the United States. There, it is still not permitted to label organic seafood products with the well-known USDA label for organic food.

[1] BioFish Forum takes place annually as part of the BioFach Congress www.biofach.de in Nuremberg, Germany.
[2] All trade data related to organic seafood markets and organic seafood production are results of Organic Services market monitoring programme which has started in 2009.

As an example, the lion's share of certified organic shrimp, totaling to approx. 25,000 tons (2012), are sold to European Union/EFTA countries. Germany, France, Switzerland, and the UK are the leading importers. This figure has been built up by a handful of pioneering companies since the late nineties, who have invested a lot to develop organic shrimp supply chains in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In the pilot phase, some of these projects received public funds to develop organic shrimp production and certification schemes as a way to strengthen this important industry in Southern countries and to create additional income for marginalized small shrimp farmers by accessing high price markets in Europe.

Interim rules phasing out - but industry is lacking alternative solutions

In 2010 EU production rules for organic aquaculture have been set into force[3] containing a number of interim rulings, for example for the reproduction and hatchery management in finfish, mollusks and crustaceans. These deadlines are concerning all juvenile animals that are foreseen to enter the organic grow out farms, and even the origin and management of their parents. Basically, the whole range of "typical conventional" methods for inducing spawning, such as hypophisation in finfish, or eyestalk ablation in shrimp species is not permitted in certified organic hatcheries, particularly for animal welfare reasons. Not enough with these serious scientific challenges - unsolved or rather un-addressed by the aquaculture research for decades, there are also far-reaching restrictions for the inclusions of wild spawners (relevant for Black Tiger shrimp), artificial daylength-prolongation (relevant for subarctic finfish), formulated hatchery feed (relevant particularly for tiny larvae), and others.

Up to 2012, the concerned organic aquaculture operations were allowed to work under the principles of "availability" and "2/3rds", meaning that as long as there is no supply of certified organic juveniles, then it is permitted to buy in conventional juveniles, that have to spend at least 2/3rds of their living time under organic standards. Basically such a regulation is meant to create enough incentive for a sufficient number of hatcheries to convert to organic production. This concept has worked out e.g. in organic salmon, trout, carp, seabass and -bream, posing smaller obstacles with respect to organic breeding. But the very tight deadlines in the regulation obviously were not helpful where the technical hurdles have been too high, or where the EU rules are not adequately reflecting the reality and particularities of aquaculture production.

It is important to emphasize the great and demonstrable efforts that have already been undertaken by the organic companies for tackling these issues (e.g. by building experimental flow-channels for stimulating natural spawning in Pangasius catfish). This working spirit leaves the confidence that at least a part of the R&D tasks may be solved over the next few years, but only if there is a steady, predictable and reliable legal and market situation, justifying such investments in the organic sector.

[3] Reg. (EC) No. 710/2009

One should also take into account that in 2013, after more than 20 years with the organic agriculture regulation in place, the use of conventional seeds for certain plant species is still permitted under certain circumstances, even if the organic reproduction of these species is feasible. Why then, organic aquaculture, should solve organic breeding of all species within less than 10 years?

The current EU organic aquaculture regulation contains a kind of roadmap for a revision process to start by July in 2013. However, the precondition is that member states will submit substantiated arguments. Currently, involved stakeholder organizations in different member states are working on related argumentations which will be submitted in the next time. Obviously, the whole revision process of the organic food regulations is delaying. But the European organic seafood industry needs a quicker solution to avoid decertification. Therefore, the lion's share of involved stakeholder organizations follows the idea to extend the time span for a sound revision process. And, at the same time stakeholders see the necessity to prolong the existing interim rulings. This underlines the need for an immediate and clear regulatory act by EU commission, for not endangering the whole organic aquaculture initiative.

Expert hearing at BioFish Forum 2013

The BioFish Forum 2013 gathered different experts in order to discuss the present situation, potential impact and need for further discussion and action.

Hanspeter Schmid, attorney at law and organic food regulatory expert, pinpointed that the present regulatory text is vague in parts which allows for interpretations of the regulation. And, completely unclear is how the production rules for organic aquaculture are construed in the different member states at the moment.

Dr. Otto Schmid (FiBL research institutes) made clear that for a number of technical issues like production of juveniles, alternative feeding regimes and animal welfare more research is still needed. He underlined also that the EU revision process should be seen also in the context of Codex Alimentarius discussion where organic aquaculture is actually high on the agenda.

Dr. Pino Lembo, member of the Expert Group for Technical Advice on Organic Production (EGTOP), asked for more flexibility in regard to set deadlines in the regulation in order to avoid that organic marine fish farmers in the Mediterranean region might switch back to conventional production as no organic fry is available.

Michèle Stark, Head of Aquaculture and Fishery Department of the Institute for Marketecology (IMO), made clear that IMO as an EU approved certifier has limited possibilities to interpret the present regulations and no possibilities to grant derogations. Thus, some of the very extensive organic shrimp supply chains might be decertified by July 2014 if no derogations are granted by EU commission.

Luiz Martín Pláza, DG Agri/EU Commission and among others responsible for organic aquaculture (together with Richard Bates, DG Mare) attended the expert hearing and expressed his interest and willingness to learn more about the current constraints and bottlenecks in the implementation of production rules for organic aquaculture. But he made also clear that actions from the member states as well as the organic seafood industry are the precondition. Otherwise, EU commission cannot become active.

In the intensive discussion representatives from the producer side, trading companies, certification bodies and competent authorities agreed in principle that derogations are needed in short term. And, in case of aquatic species newly introduced to organic aquaculture a framework is needed to allow for the development of organic hatching protocols.

However, different views have been presented where „flexibility“ is acceptable and where not. Organic hatching is technically possible for many aquatic species, but not for all, at least not short-term. Therefore, derogations might be granted only for those species where it is still not feasible to produce juveniles organically. Nevertheless, technical or scientific breeding obstacles may be further acerbated by legal, veterinary or customs' restrictions e.g. for marketing and transporting organic juveniles over longer distances. There may e.g. exists a first certified organic hatchery in one Latin American country, but not in others, that may have organic shrimp farms, but not own hatcheries, are restricted to import shrimp larvae from completely different countries. Similar overriding regulations are in place e.g. in German trout farms that are registered as "disease-free", restricting them from sourcing certified organic fish from distant hatcheries.

Organic Services syntheses. strategies. solutions. Bio Fish Forum

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