

Joint statement regarding the safety of Norwegian Salmon

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Norsk Industri – The Federation of Norwegian Industries
Sjømatbedriftene – Norwegian Seafood Association

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To whom it may concern

First and foremost: The Norwegian Food Safety Authority clearly states that COVID-19 does not affect seafood safety as there are no known cases of infection by contaminated food or water. Norwegian salmon farmers are following strict measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 and are as always, continuously monitoring its seafood production under very strict hygiene and contamination measures. The entire industry and the Norwegian Seafood Council would like to take the opportunity to clarify the situation regarding seafood safety, Covid-19 in Norway and how our industry has dealt with the pandemic.

Scientific evidence regarding food and Covid-19

The SARS-CoV-2 virus that leads to COVID-19 is a respiratory illness and is spread primarily by droplet transmission when the virus is transmitted from the respiratory tract of an infected person to a healthy person. The virus can be transmitted by indirect contact when the virus is transmitted onto objects or surfaces (e.g. door handles, keyboards, telephones etc) by sneezing or coughing, or by sick persons having the virus on their hands. There is no evidence to date of viruses that cause respiratory illnesses through transmission via food or food packaging. Coronaviruses cannot multiply in food; they need an animal or human host to multiply. Currently there are no known cases of COVID-19 infection by contaminated food, imported food or water.

Relevant statements

- WHO statement on seafood safety: <https://sfd-seafood-prod.azureedge.net/49d997/globalassets/bilder/arter/laks/who-covid-19-and-food-safety-guidance-for-food-businesses-eng.pdf>
- The FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United States) statement on seafood safety: FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United States) <http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/q-and-a/impact-on-fisheries-and-aquaculture/en/>
- Norwegian Food Safety Authority statement on seafood safety: https://www.mattilsynet.no/language/english/fish_and_aquaculture/seafood/the_coronavirus_does_not_affect_seafood_safety.38145-7
- Norwegian Institute of Public Health seafood safety statement: <https://www.fhi.no/en/op/novel-coronavirus-facts-advice/facts-and-knowledge-about-covid-19/facts-about-novel-coronavirus/?term=&h=1>

- Study conducted by University College, London: "Our results suggest that SARS-CoV-2 can infect a broad range of mammals, but not fish, birds or reptiles."
<https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.05.01.072371v3.full>

Recent statements

- According to CBC, WHO officials stated this Monday that "The origins of a new cluster of coronavirus infections in Beijing are uncertain (...) but the claim that it might have been caused by imports or packaging of salmon was not the "primary hypothesis."
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/coronavirus-outbreak-china-who-1.5612838>

Transport to China

According to the Norwegian Food Safety Authority, the transportation time from Norway to China makes it unlikely that seafood from Norway would contain viable virus when entering the market in China. It is important to point out that there is no indication or evidence that this has ever occurred.

COVID-19 situation in Norway

There are now 8,655 positive cases in Norway, with 242 people confirmed dead. There are 18 people hospitalised around the country, just 7 of which are in intensive care. As of 15 June, 285,867 people have been tested out of Norway's population of around 5.3 million.

Following the reduction in cases during late April, Norway's Minister of Health and Care announced they had the outbreak under control. Daily numbers have continued to fall since then.

The Covid-19 situation in Norway is generally good with very low spread of the virus in the population: <https://www.fhi.no/en/id/infectious-diseases/coronavirus/daily-reports/daily-reports-COVID19/> Most of the salmon slaughter houses are placed in rural areas, with very few inhabitants, and the infection level in these areas are none to very low.

Together with the Norwegian Institute of Public Health and the Norwegian Veterinary Institute, the Norwegian Food Safety Authority carefully monitors and evaluates all new knowledge about the outbreak of coronavirus.

Food and safety

It is a basic requirement in the Norwegian regulation that people handling food including seafood, must be healthy. In Norway, every employee on sick leave gets fully paid, so people will stay at home when they are sick. Thus, there is no incentive to work if people are feeling sick.

During the Covid-19 outbreak, Norway has had general hygiene advice regarding social distance, quarantine, and isolation. For fish farms and factories, this has also meant restrictions on visits to the facilities, social distance between personnel during production and during breaks, increased cleaning and general focus on personal hygiene.

All employees in Norway have also been advised to be extra vigilant in their daily evaluation of their own health status, so that they stay at home at the slightest symptom of respiratory tract infection.

The producers in Norway have followed all these recommendations in their facilities:

<https://www.fhi.no/en/op/novel-coronavirus-facts-advice/facts-and-general-advice/social-distance-quarantine-and-isolation/>

Further hygienic measures on fish farms

When it comes to the hygienic measures and food safety, all companies have followed the instructions of the Norwegian authorities. Some companies have imposed further measures, such as:

- Extra hygiene measures in addition to normal cleaning and disinfection of hands
- Temperature check of staff at start of shifts
- Extra cleaning procedures
- Plexiglas separating all work stations
- Workers wearing facemasks and/or visor
- All internal and external meetings done using Microsoft MS Teams or similar communication platforms
- No external visitors to neither fish farms nor factories
- Transporters are kept separated from staff at the factories
- Canteens have been closed
- Crisis drills carried out together with local authorities

Various municipal boundary relocation bans have also been likely to further reduce the spread of infection in the population.

Only Covid-19 outbreak occurred at a time when the factory was closed

In Norway, there has been one single incident where employees at a salmon factory were infected by the COVID-19 virus. In this incident, at the end of March 2020, the factory was already closed due to Easter Vacation. In a close dialogue with the regional health authorities, the infected employees were quarantined, together with their colleagues as well as families and friends.

The factory remained closed until all employees at the factory were tested to be without Covid-19 infection. Only those documented without the virus were allowed to return to their job positions.

It is therefore safe to say that no fish farms or packing stations in Norway have had outbreaks in April, May or June and the only case recorded could not have affected any goods or shipments since the facility was already closed.

Facts about export of Norwegian salmon to China

- In 2019, around 23 500 tonnes of salmon from Norway were exported to China, worth NOK 1.6 billion
- So far this year, 9 600 tonnes of salmon from Norway were exported to China, which represents a decrease in volume of 5 per cent, compared with the same period last year.

For more information on Norwegian export to China, please contact The Norwegian Seafood Council, seafood.no