

MORTALITY RATE OF 16.7pc

DEATHS PLAGUE SALMON FARMS

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US\$2 billion lost when 63 million fish died prematurely in Norwegian sea pens last year

OSLO

THEY are hailed for their micronutrients, but Norway's salmon are not in the best of health themselves at the fish farms where they are bred.

Almost 63 million salmon — a record — died prematurely last year in the large underwater sea pens that dot the fjords of Norway, the world's biggest producer of Atlantic salmon.

That represents a mortality rate of 16.7 per cent, a record high and a number that has gradually risen over the years — posing an economic and an ethical problem to producers.

The salmon succumb to illnesses of the pancreas, gills or heart, or to injuries suffered during the removal of sea lice parasites.

"The death of animals is a waste of life and resources," Norwegian Veterinary Institute Aquatic Animal Health and Welfare director Edgar Brun said.

"We have a moral and ethical responsibility to guarantee them the best possible conditions."

Norway's salmon exports exceeded US\$11 billion last year, with the 1.2 million tonnes sold representing the equivalent of 16 million meals per day.

The 63 million dead salmon represent almost US\$2 billion in



A view of the Oksebasen fish farm in Giske, Norway, in February. AFP PIC

lost income for the industry.

Salmon that die prematurely are usually turned into animal feed or biofuel.

But according to Norwegian media, some fish that are in dire health at the time of slaughter, or even already dead, do sometimes end up on dinner plates, occasionally even sent off with a label marked "superior".

"I see fish on sale that I myself would not eat," a former head of quality control at a salmon slaughterhouse, Laila Sele Navikauskas, told public broadcaster NRK in November.

Eating them posed no danger to human health, experts said.

"The pathogens that cause these illnesses cannot be passed on to humans," Brun explained.

But the revelations damage the salmon's precious image.

"If you buy meat in a store, you expect it to come from an animal that was slaughtered in line with regulations and not one that was

lying dead outside the barn," said fish health expert Trygve Poppe.

The Norwegian Food Safety Authority said it observed anomalies at half of the fish farms inspected last year, noting that, among other things, injured or deformed fish had been exported in violation of regulations.

To keep its reputation, only salmon of ordinary or superior quality is authorised for export.

The lower quality fish — which accounts for a growing share of stocks, up to a third last winter — can only be sold abroad after it has been transformed, into fillets for example.

Robert Eriksson, head of the Norwegian Seafood Association which represents small producers — generally considered less at fault — said the irregularities reported at some breeders were "totally unacceptable".

"We live off of trust," he said.

Taking shortcuts means "you get punished by the market and

the economic impact is much bigger than the few extra kilos you sold".

The Norwegian Seafood Federation — representing the biggest fish farming companies, those most often singled out over quality — insisted it is addressing the matter but says more time is needed.

"On average, it takes three years to breed a salmon," said the body's director, Geir Ove Ystmark. "So it's difficult to see immediate results today, even though we have launched a series of initiatives and measures."

It is precisely the speed at which the fish are bred that is the problem, according to fish health specialist Poppe, who criticised the "terribly bad animal conditions" and who has stopped eating farmed salmon.

"The salmon are subjected to stress their entire lives, from the time they hatch in fresh water until their slaughter." AFP