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Code of conduct for European aquaculture. The producers' approach

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SUMMARY – It was, in 1998, decided by Federation of European Producers (FEAP) to prepare a code of conduct. A Code of conduct to promote the responsible development and management of a viable European aquaculture sector, in order to assure a high standard of quality food production while respecting environmental considerations and consumer demands. It has been a long process, with a lot of sectors to be heard, before a document was ready to serve as a base to establish and recommend guiding principles for those in Europe who are producing live fish species through aquaculture. The goal is to establish this common base for sectional responsibility within society and demonstrate the considerations of the production sector, towards the fish it rears, the environment and the consumer. It is not a code of details, as it does not seek to distinguish between the species nor the types or scale of farms, that are encountered within the European aquaculture sector. The Code of conduct is expected to help fish farmers to contribute actively towards the balanced and sustainable development of aquaculture and help them make their best efforts to assure the transparent development of the activity to benefit the consumer.

Key words: Code of conduct, responsible aquaculture, sustainability.

RESUME – "Code de conduite pour l'aquaculture européenne. L'approche des producteurs". Il a été décidé en 1998 par la Fédération des Producteurs Européens (FEAP) de préparer un code de conduite. Un code de conduite pour promouvoir un développement et une gestion responsables pour un secteur de l'aquaculture européenne viable, afin d'assurer un haut niveau à la production d'aliments de qualité tout en respectant les aspects environnementaux et les exigences des consommateurs. Ce processus a été long, ayant à prendre en compte un grand nombre de secteurs, avant qu'un document ne soit élaboré pour servir de base pour l'établissement et la recommandation de lignes directrices pour les personnes qui en Europe produisent des espèces vivantes à travers l'aquaculture. La finalité est d'établir cette base commune pour une responsabilité du groupe au sein de la société et pour rendre manifeste le souci du secteur de la production, concernant le poisson élevé, l'environnement et le consommateur. Ce n'est pas un code de détail, car il ne cherche pas à distinguer entre espèces ni types ni échelle des exploitations que l'on trouve parmi le secteur aquacole européen. Le code de conduite est censé aider les aquaculteurs à contribuer de façon active à un développement équilibré et durable de l'aquaculture et à les assister à faire leur plus grand effort pour assurer un développement transparent de l'activité au bénéfice du consommateur.

Mots-clés : Code de conduite, aquaculture responsable, durabilité.

Introduction

Why should our aquaculture industry make a Code of conduct. There is no simple answer to this question. In the following it will be explained why, how and by whom this was started, to inform you about this new form of proactive action.

The interest in how products are produced is growing in general. More and more people care about what they buy. They care about where it is produced and under what circumstances, and if it is food, they also care about animal welfare; environmental impact plays an important role. It is of course important for the producers to know about this interest, so they can ensure that their production fulfils the consumer's expectations. This is not the simplest task, as every person has a different background, education and experience on which his point of view and opinion is based. Political statements and/or the opinion put forward by different organisations, often through the media's heavy interest in animal welfare and environmental issues, can change public opinion in days.

It is no longer good enough to follow "normal procedures", they can be the "wrong procedures" tomorrow.

No, the producer has to guess what the public opinion will be next year, in 5 years and in 10 years, time, because, in the "real world", you can not change everything in days.

In the past the popular way was a "quiet life", reacting on problems and attacks when they occurred, but it is more and more understood that it is absolutely necessary to be pro active, and foresee what to expect of tomorrow. It is evident that a continuous development of all aquaculture operations should therefor be going on.

Who actually sets the agenda of tomorrow' s public opinion? It seems that it is also very important for politicians and different interest groups, evidenced by a lot of different papers that are produced, that in one way or another suggests or explains how aquaculture operations should be carried out, based on what is called the "public opinion".

Logically this reinforced the decision that: *The aquaculture section should have an opinion on what good conduct is and tell those who are interested what this opinion is.*

Code of conduct

A Code of conduct is defined as: *A voluntary and non-binding document, also called soft law, drawn up in response to self regulated sector development.*

After selecting people from within the FEAP for the working group, including each aquaculture sector, such as trout, salmon, and eel, including also the Fisheries Department of FAO which has been very helpful, the first task was to state the primary goal of the work, which was agreed as: To promote the responsible development and management of a viable European aquaculture sector which will assure a high standard of quality food.

Recommending guiding principles also had the purpose of establishing a common base, through effective self-regulation. The hope is that this base can be used on national level, distinguishing between the species and scale of farms is possible.

All other codes that the group had seen, address aquaculture's responsibility to sustainability, the environment and/or the welfare of the fish. The group quickly agreed to include these, but also included the important area of aquaculture's responsibility to the consumer which was missed in these drafts.

I guess that most people agree the fact, that any industry should consider sustainable processes and reducing impact as much as possible. And, that "animals in your care" should have the best conditions possible.

This has been discussed for so many years now, that it is more or less obvious, but it seems that the more we concentrate on these facts, the more often it happens that the consumer is forgotten. The health of human beings is seen to be put in the background in place of animal welfare, and I do presume and hope that this is a mistake, and that human welfare is "forgotten" in the eagerness, to optimise the conditions for the animals.

What level of impact can we expect to be acceptable in the future? As new methods of measurement develop, even to the level of the picogramme it has been possible to base "acceptable levels" almost anywhere. The big question is always: Acceptable on what grounds"? Who should decide? Politicians? Analysts? Governmental Organisations? NGO's or the producers?

It is a balancing act, between the fact, that any human activity has an impact on the environment, and that an industry has to be profitable. The discussions and lack of trust between green or consumer organisations and producers will have to change in the future; if they do not, then I believe that publics trust in both will disappear.

Broader perspectives have to be reached: *to give the best, most healthy product possible, with the lowest impact on the environment possible, that is economic viable.*

If this could be agreed, it would save a lot of work, and a lot of money; the big question is, whether both sides can and will agree to this, and will be able to set this as a goal. This Code of conduct is one of the steps the aquaculture producers have taken to go in this direction.

Working on the Code of conduct, it was realised that technical descriptions and complicated expressions are often used in codes. As the goal was that the paper should be for everybody, a lot of effort has been taken in using words and expressions that are known by the broadest audience possible.

Reading the Code of conduct, there will most certainly appear a lot of, How do they want to do that? or Is this possible in reality? in your mind, but the best effort has been made to cover aquaculture in general and to have a high level of realism. If we loose the realistic goals, we believe that the Code of Conduct will be forgotten, and not used. A wise man once said "*it is better to let the people kill the law, than letting the law kill the people*". He was absolutely right, because if the law is too hard to understand, not realistic and not fair, that is exactly what people will do: forget about it and thereby kill it.

Responsible aquaculture

Aquaculture has become an important production activity throughout the world and, as such, has to assume the responsibilities of its status. Aquaculture provides nutritious food to the consumer and its operators should plan, manage and maintain their activities to the standards expected.

The FEAP has developed this Code of Conduct with specific reference to:

(i) The provisions for responsible aquaculture development contained in the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, which was adopted by the 28 th Session of the Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (1995).

(ii) The FAO Technical Guidelines for Responsible Fisheries No. 5: Aquaculture Development (FAO Fisheries Department - 1997).

(iii) The Holmenkollen Guidelines for Sustainable Industrial Fish Farming (Oslo - 1994).

(iv) The Holmenkollen Guidelines for Sustainable Aquaculture (Oslo - 1997).

(v) The ICES Code of Practice on the Introductions and Transfers of Marine Organisms (Copenhagen - 1994).

(vi) Codes of Practice and Manual of Procedures for Consideration of Introductions and Transfers of Marine and Freshwater Organisms (EIFAC - 1988).

(vii) The Report on the Welfare of Farmed Fish [Farm Animal Welfare Council (UK) - 1996].

The Code is not definitive but addresses those areas that the Federation of European Aquaculture Producers considers to be important and of prime concern. Additionally, the role of the Code is to motivate and assist the development of the principles of best practices.

It is assumed that European and national legislation provide a minimum standard for aquaculture. It is hoped that this Code can serve as the basis for the development of individual national Codes of Practice or Codes of Conduct in order to interpret and apply existing standards and to develop, refine or improve standards, as required.

A code of conduct for European aquaculture

The primary goal of this Code of Conduct, prepared by the Federation of European Aquaculture Producers (FEAP), is to promote the responsible development and management of a viable European aquaculture sector in order to assure a high standard of quality food production while respecting environmental considerations and consumers' demands.

As a Code of Conduct, this document serves to establish and recommend guiding principles for those in Europe who are producing live fish species through aquaculture. This document, herebelow included, can be retrieved from: <http://www.feap.org/code.html>.

The Code does not seek to distinguish between the species nor the types or scale of farms that are encountered within the European aquaculture sector. Its purpose is to establish a common base, through effective self-regulation, for sectoral responsibility within society and demonstrate the considerations of the production sector towards the fish it rears, the environment and the consumer.

A. Guiding principles

The Code of Conduct for European Aquaculture addresses the responsibility of the fish farmer to the fish, the environment and the consumer.

Individuals, co-operatives and companies that engage in aquaculture, singularly and collectively:

(i) Shall consult and collaborate with European, national and regional authorities for the development and implementation of policies, practices and regulations. These policies should assist the achievement of environmental, economic and social sustainability of the aquaculture production sector.

(ii) Shall consult and co-operate with other aquaculture producers and sectoral suppliers for the development and agreement of common standards and objectives.

(iii) Shall plan and operate aquaculture sites in a manner that avoids unacceptable negative interaction with the environment.

(iv) Shall use only such sites whose characteristics are compatible with long-term sustainable operation and with acceptable ecological effects.

(v) Shall plan and operate aquaculture sites in a manner that conserves water resources.

(vi) Shall respect the considerations for welfare that apply to the species being raised.

(vii) Shall take such measures as are appropriate to avoid disease outbreaks and implement regulated containment procedures should a disease outbreak occur.

(viii) Shall use therapeutic agents in accordance with the appropriate legislation and the principles of best practice.

(ix) Shall dispose of waste and chemicals in a manner that does not constitute a hazard to human health and the environment and in accordance with the appropriate legislation.

(x) Shall co-operate with those involved in research, technological development and training activities that seek to improve the social and environmental compatibility of aquaculture.

(xi) Shall implement improvements in technology and in management where such advances are economically possible and can assist the sustainability of the activity and improve the social and environmental compatibility of aquaculture.

(xii) Shall make the best efforts to produce products of the highest quality at all stages of the aquaculture process.

B. Fish husbandry and welfare

Any person who owns farmed fish, or has farmed fish under his or her control, and every person engaged in the overseeing of farmed fish shall, according to their responsibilities, ensure that every step is taken to safeguard the health and welfare of such fish.

1. Water

The water supply should be of sufficient quality and quantity to ensure the well-being of the species being farmed.

2. Fish stocks

The intake of live fish stocks into an aquaculture system must be of good health and known origin.

Genetically modified organisms. The FEAP does not endorse the use of genetically modified fish in aquaculture since it is concerned about the maintenance of the natural characteristics of the products, in addition to the environmental qualities of biodiversity. However, the results of genetic research may play an important part in the future development of global food production. The FEAP may review its position on this topic if such developments are acceptable to the consumer and do not pose any safety or environmental problems.

3. Fish health

The responsibilities concerning the optimisation of fish health include:

- (i) Avoidance of unnecessary stress of the fish – all measures should be taken to ensure that the media and conditions in which the population is held are optimised for the reduction of stress.
- (ii) Regular inspections – the fish should be inspected frequently enough to ensure that significant behavioural and physical changes would be discovered and acted upon immediately.
- (iii) Avoidance of the introduction of diseases – fish brought into an aquaculture system must be of good health and certified origin. Adequate precautionary measures should be taken to avoid inter-farm contamination through direct physical contact.
- (iv) Seeking proper diagnosis if disease presence is suspected.
- (v) The use and application of therapeutic agents should observe the prescribed dosage and where appropriate, withdrawal times, in order to avoid the accumulation of residues in the flesh.
- (vi) When required, only licensed or approved therapeutic agents should be used.
- (vii) Avoidance of spreading of diseases – farmers have the responsibility to minimise the risk of the spread of diseases beyond their farms into the ecosystem where wild fish and other farms may be affected.
- (viii) Regardless of the reason for mortalities, any dead or dying fish require prompt removal from the growing area, in a way that does not affect the welfare and health of the remaining stock.
- (ix) The disposal of dead fish should be done carefully and effectively, in a way that does not affect the environment negatively.

4. Food and feeding food and feeding

Correct feeding practises reduce wastage, assuring better water quality, good health and farm performance:

- (i) All fish should receive adequate quantities of feed, using the correct nutritional formulation for the species farmed.
- (ii) Such feeds should be properly composed and manufactured and, where possible, labelled and providing the correct granular or pellet sizes for the size of the fish.
- (iii) Daily rations should be appropriate for the species and the growing conditions available in the site facilities.
- (iv) Feed distribution methods should ensure that all individuals have sufficient access to the feeds supplied.
- (v) Excessive feeding should be avoided since this can result in feed wastage that may cause water quality deterioration.

5. Handling and transportation

- (i) For the avoidance of unnecessary stress and injury to live fish, the handling of live fish should be kept to a minimum and should be done using the least stressful method.
- (ii) The movement and transport of live fish should be done as quickly as possible and with an adequate oxygen supply.
- (iii) The strictest control procedures should be applied to fish that are transferred between farms and freshwater catchment areas in order to reduce the potential transfer of disease to a minimum.

6. Predators

Many predators affecting aquaculture are species that are protected by legislation:

- (i) Whenever possible, predators should be excluded from the areas where live fish are held.
- (ii) Where this is not possible, lethal methods of predator control shall only be used when this action is legally permissible for the predator species in question.

7. Stocking density stocking density

The stocking density for fish should be adjusted to the specific requirements of the species and include respect for:

- (i) The average live weight of the fish.
- (ii) The population's health and behavioural needs.
- (iii) The population's demands on the growing environment, in particular their behavioural needs, the availability of an adequate oxygen supply and the removal of wastes to avoid the excessive accumulation of substances that may cause stress or toxic effects (e.g. CO₂ and ammonia).

8. Slaughter

- (i) All fish should be fasted sufficiently before slaughter so as to induce a completely empty digestive system.
- (ii) Fish should be killed quickly and humanely, referring to national regulations for guidance.

9. Monitoring record keeping

(i) Fish farms should aim to be self-regulating. To achieve this, proper systems of monitoring and recording are required so that problems can be averted before they arise.

(ii) Written records are essential for the farmers to ensure good husbandry and welfare of the fish.

(iii) The use of computer-assisted monitoring of stocks and record-keeping is to be encouraged given the benefits of:

- Optimal feed distribution,
- Use of therapeutic agents and their traceability,
- HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) systems.

(iv) Effective self-regulation can be achieved through the routine monitoring of:

- Water quality (on and off-farm),
- The quality of other inputs and resources used in the production process,
- Off-farm environmental parameters that are of immediate and direct relevance to the production process,
- Environmental standards and objectives that, ideally, are agreed with local authorities,
- Product quality and safety standards.

C. Environment

Aquaculturists should work together with other water users to assure equitable use of the resource and mutual understanding.

1. Water use and quality

Abstraction and discharge: (i) the practise of aquaculture requires water and therefore the profession has to accept that the activity has an impact and be committed to limit it; and (ii) unnecessary water use must be avoided.

2. Site selection site selection

All fish farms should be designed, developed and managed with a view to the equitable and efficient use of resources.

Aquaculturists shall use only those sites that are compatible with: (i) long-term sustainable operations; and (ii) acceptable ecological effects.

Best efforts should be made for aquaculture to integrate harmoniously with the surroundings of the site.

3. Site management

(i) Aquaculturists should apply the best available technology and procedures in order to optimise both the farm husbandry and the interactions of the farm with the environment.

(ii) Best efforts should be made so that the general appearance of the site is attractive, neat and tidy.

Escapes: (i) farmers will seek to minimise the potential risks that are presented by farmed fish escapes to wild fisheries; and (ii) farmers will, in the event of escapes, co-operate and inform the respective authorities to assure that appropriate actions will be taken.

Therapeutic actions: (i) farmers will ensure that the potential for contamination of the environment will be minimised when using disinfecting agents and other therapeutic agents; and (ii) recommended withdrawal periods for therapeutic agents must be carefully observed and implemented prior to harvesting.

D. Social and economic relationships

Aquaculture has an important role to play in bridging the gap between the supply and demand of affordable, nutritious food of high quality:

(i) Aquaculture operators must be aware of the social contribution required of their professional activities and assure their integration in local community development and planning.

(ii) Aquaculture operations must be based on technology and equipment that ensure the safety of the employees. This includes establishing routines for handling materials and chemicals to avoid health hazards to workers.

(iii) The aquaculture sector acknowledges its responsibility towards local society by providing a safe and stable workplace.

(iv) Training appropriate to the responsibilities of those engaged in aquaculture should be integral to all operations.

(v) Aquaculture sectors throughout Europe provide significant economic benefits in the regions where they are located, many of which are remote and relatively disadvantaged. Each sector will endeavour to ensure the short and long-term balance between supply and demand, so as to deliver economic stability to European aquaculture.

E. Consumers

The aquaculture producers of Europe should produce nutritious products of the highest quality. Aquaculture is a controlled process that allows the farmer to harvest fish, which is of consistent good quality, with the following characteristics: (i) a protein source of high dietetic quality; (ii) nutritious; (iii) continuous availability; (iv) freshness; and (v) good taste.

Fish farmers shall contribute actively towards the balanced and sustainable development of aquaculture. They shall make their best efforts to assure the transparent development of the activity to the benefit of the consumer.