

DNA tracker can make your food safer

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Safety | RPC, Cooke Aquaculture use DNA program to monitor food safety

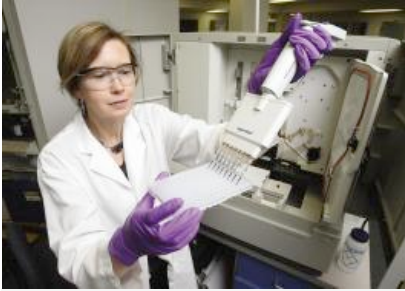
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For The Daily Gleaner

THE DAILY GLEANER

College Hill's RPC and Cooke Aquaculture are working to ensure New Brunswick's fish are safe to fry.

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STUDYING DNA: rachael ritchie, head of food, fisheries and aquaculture at RPC, loads dna samples onto a plate for analysis in the genetic analyzer behind her.

Their DNA traceability program is being designed to easily spot diseases in the province's salmon products, so that producers can speed up recalls in an emergency.

"You should never use your nose, eyes or taste buds to judge the safety of your food," said Rachael Ritchie, head of food fisheries and aquaculture at RPC. "You can't tell if a food is going to have a pathogen in it, or cause an illness, by its looks, smell or taste."

She said the food tests pick up what the naked eye will miss, and act as a gateway before producers release their products to supermarkets.

RPC's goal with the traceability program is to take DNA samples of all salmon from Cooke Aquaculture and create a genetic inventory.

That way, if customers fall ill or an outbreak occurs, Cooke can immediately determine whether or not its products were the cause. It can also use the program to find which fish were diseased, so outlets can make quicker recalls.

Once the program is developed, she said it would be able to trace the entire life cycle of all of Cooke Aquaculture's fish - from spawned eggs in the river to fillets on kitchen tables across the province.

Ritchie likened it to the human genotyping for crime analysis on television shows such as CSI, or paternity analyses used to track children back to their parents.

"If you read the newspaper, almost every week there's a food recall somewhere," she said, adding that recent recalls for cheese, processed meat and dog food, along with E. coli in lettuce, spinach and tomatoes, are just a few examples across the country.

"Consumers are becoming aware, without even trying, that food can become contaminated. And food preparers are aware of the risks involved, and that they need to step up their testing because consumer confidence is really the key to

the industry."

Nell Halse, vice-president of communications for Cooke Aquaculture, agreed that giving customers peace of mind is more than just good business.

"Especially after all the deaths from listeria, anyone who's working in the food business today needs to assure their customers they've been careful every step of the way," she said.

"They need to be extra cautious, and they need to be able to demonstrate that with a clear paper trail. That way, our customers will know what happened to the fish before it ended up in the store as a kabob or smoked salmon."

Ritchie said similar programs have been used to combat mad cow disease in Canada's western provinces, and that more programs should be established for all food types so Canadians can eat in peace.

"It's important to make recalls faster," she said. "But the most important thing these programs will lead to is increased consumer confidence that food safety is being looked at and looked after."

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