Begich Cautions FDA Against Another Christmas Surprise

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Alaska Senator Mark Begich is trying to head off any surprise holiday announcement from the Food and Drug Administration regarding genetically modified salmon. It was the day after Christmas last year when the FDA officially announced its initial ruling in favor of genetically-modified salmon. Begich says it’s like they were trying to slip something by when Americans weren’t looking. An FDA spokeswoman, though, says they publish documents when they’re complete.

At issue is Aqua Bounty’s plan to modify Atlantic salmon eggs with king salmon and ocean pout genes to produce fish that grow to market size in half the time.

“FDA has never approved anything of this nature, which is basically cloning, and from that perspective I don’t think they’re prepared to understand the potential long-term impacts.”

In a letter last week, Begich asked the head of the agency not to exploit the holiday season to release what’s expected to be an unpopular report, and he says they assured him the document isn’t coming soon.

“At least they’ve responded, which is a good sign that they recognize how important this issues is and they can’t rush it through at the end of the year because they want to.”

Nearly 38,000 people wrote comments to the FDA about Aqua Bounty’s plan. Most were against it. Begich, like Alaska fisherman, says the modified salmon could escape and damage the state’s wild stocks, and he says they’d hurt Alaska salmon in the marketplace.

“If this is such a great product, why is it being produced in Canada and then shipped to Panama to basically be basically manufactured and sold to the U.S. Market. If it’s so good, then let’s follow our rules. Well, the problem is, they can’t prove that it’s safe and that it is the right kind of product with what they’re doing.”

In the event the Aqua Bounty fish is approved by the FDA, it would be the first ever meat product approved for human consumption, and Begich says it will need proper labeling.

“We have language in there, on one of the appropriation bills, that require if any of this product ever hits the market there has to be a process for labeling. We got to get the appropriation bill passed, but the fact is this has been tried multiple times and failed. I got on the Appropriations Committee this year, and we won that vote on a; 15-to-14 vote, with a majority of the Democrats and a small group of Republicans.”

AquaBounty says its fish will be sterile and reared inland, in Panama, so that they can’t escape and harm natural populations. Canada last month cleared the firm to produce genetically modified salmon eggs for commercial use at its facility on

Prince Edward Island, a move Begich also blasted, saying he will seek a ban on shipment through the United States.