

Norway says working to end Russian boycott on fish exports

Norway is working to end a limited Russian boycott of Norwegian fish exports that took effect Jan. 1, Fisheries Minister Elisabeth Aspaker said this week.

Under a move announced last month by Rosselkhoznadzor, the Russian Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance, Moscow has banned Norwegian exports of deep-sea whitefish such as cod and pollock and so-called pelagic fish, including herring, mackerel, capelin and sprat.

Rosselkhoznadzor cited what it called unhygienic practices by the Norwegian seafood industry, which counts Russia as its top export market at \$940 million in 2013.

The ban affects 485 Norwegian exporters of whitefish and pelagic fish -- salmon and trout exports were not covered under the boycott.

The move came after the Russian agency said in April it had found parasitic round worms in cod livers and the Listeria bacteria in fresh, chilled fish.

Aspaker told Norwegian news agency NTB Monday a dialogue between the Norwegian Food Safety Authority and Rosselkhoznadzor is ongoing and promised to carry out inspections of Norwegian plants as quickly as possible.

"I don't perceive that these are impossible demands from Russia," she said. "We can carry out the inspections demanded by Russia. I hope that both we and the industry jointly find a solution to this problem."

While admitting it's a "challenge" to face a fish boycott, Aspaker said it can also be a learning experience for her country.

"This teaches us one thing, namely, that the Norwegian government must be very careful with hygiene," she said. "We must also be very careful that we facilitate inspections and ensure that the dialogue between the Norwegian and Russian veterinary authorities are as good as possible to prevent such problems in the future."

Terje Martinussen, chief executive of the Norwegian Seafood Council, said the boycott is putting a damper on the trade potential between the two countries.

"I believe that this boycott means that we are failing to realize the full and complete potential of the Russian market," he told NTB. "But the industry adapts. It becomes a more bureaucratic system of approval."

Norway faced a similar Russian boycott in 2006 over salmon exports and has been subject to periodic sanctions since then, but each time the problems have been resolved and markets reopened, he noted.

"Our experience from salmon is that we eventually get it right, but the result is that exports to Russia require more effort and higher costs," Martinussen said.

The Russian fish boycott is an "overreaction" to hygiene problems reported by the Norwegian Food Safety Authority in October, an FSA official told Norwegian broadcaster NRK.

Regional Director Bjorn Knudsen Rothe said the agency believes the Russians have no reason to doubt the quality of Norwegian fish, despite a nationwide inspection that cited more than 200 companies for breaking national hygiene requirements.

"In all industries there is a need for regular upgrading of facilities and procedures," he said. "But the question here is whether there is proportionality between the deviations detected and the reaction that came."

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