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Algal bloom are a common problem at this time of year. Photo: Sernapesca

Chile farmed salmon losses mounting quickly from low oxygen levels, algal blooms

This time of year is a typically high-risk period for algal blooms and low oxygen issues, with higher temperatures and increased rainfall putting additional nutrients into the water.

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By [John Evans](#)  


Eighteen salmon production sites in Chile's Aysen and Los Lagos regions are implementing contingency plans to react to growing losses from low oxygen levels and algal blooms.

Chile's National Fisheries and Aquaculture Service (Sernapesca) said in an update Wednesday that a total of 3,949 metric tons of salmon have been lost since the outbreak began: 12 sites in the Aysen region have lost 2,033 metric tons, while six sites in Los Lagos have lost 1,916 metric tons.

The total losses account for 2.5 percent of the biomass in the affected areas, according to the Chilean environmental superintendency (SMA).

The SMA is now actively intervening in the outbreak, and pressing the industry to report on progress with contingency, removal and disposal plans.

As of Wednesday, around 847 metric tons have been removed from Los Lagos production sites, in addition to 1,761 metric tons from Aysen, equating to 66 percent of total mortalities, Sernapesca said.



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This time of year is a typically high-risk period for algal blooms and low oxygen issues, with higher temperatures and increased rainfall putting additional nutrients into the water.

And while [industry executives have so far rejected suggestions the Chilean industry is facing a return to a disastrous 2016 outbreak](#), when 39 million salmon worth \$800 million (€673 million) were lost, according to Global Aquaculture Alliance (GAA) numbers, harmful algal blooms can grow quickly.

"Although this raises concern, it is important to note that through today the event has been limited to specific areas," said Esteban Ramirez, general manager at Intesal, the research arm of salmon producers trade body SalmonChile.

"[These incidents are] expected from the end of summer to the start of autumn, but are not on a scale compared to 2016."



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Camanchaca bearing brunt

Recent separate incidents suffered by Camanchaca in the Los Lagos region of Chile, including in the Camau and Rinihue Fjords, have cost the company significantly.

In an April 4 update, [the producer said the algal bloom had so far resulted in cumulative mortalities of 1.3 million fish, the equivalent of 2,250 metric tons of biomass, with weights between 450 grams and 2.5 kilograms, depending on the farm affected, and 1.2 kilograms on average.](#)

Those losses correspond to 11 percent of the company’s total biomass and are expected to have a direct financial impact of \$4.4 million (€3.7 million).

In mid-March, [Camanchaca projected the die-offs at two production sites in Chile's southern Los Lagos region would cost the company approximately \\$3.5 million \(€2.9 million\), or nearly 3 percent of its biomass.](#)

In the Aysen region, salmon production sites operated by Cooke Aquaculture, Mowi, AquaChile, Yadrán, Multiexport and Granja Marina Tornagaleones have been hit by either low oxygen levels or harmful algal blooms (HAB), Sernapesca reported.


On Tuesday, Cooke Aquaculture confirmed to **IntraFish** that it suffered from low oxygen levels, while Mowi, the world's largest producer, said so far there were no instances of algal blooms at its sites, according to *Diario Financiero*.

The algae causing the bloom in the Comau Fjord -- *Flagellate Heterosigma Akashiwo* -- is common worldwide, and has impacted farming operations in other regions.

Along with producing a reddish-brown stain in the water, it generates problems for salmon gills, ultimately leading to suffocation.

Ongoing concern

The Chile Salmon Council, a trade association made up of AquaChile, Cermaq, Mowi Chile and Salmones Aysen, said harmful algal blooms are a matter of permanent concern, since climate change has led to drier summers, increasing the blooms.



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Salmon Council members, who account for roughly 50 percent of the country’s overall production, have stepped up preventive actions this year, including the deployment of oxygenation systems and perimeters of microbubble underwater curtains, which reduce the entry of the microalgae into the pens.

Where a bloom has already been detected, several companies are proceeding with the movement of fish with prior authorization from Sernapesca to areas without blooms, and disposing of mortalities following the protocols and making the transfers to reduction plants, the trade body said.

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