

OPINION

FISH FARMING INTERNATIONAL

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IntraFish

One aquaculture scientist is putting forward a radical concept: research that pays off.



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Steven Summerfelt, aquaculture research program leader at the U.S. Freshwater Institute, said something at the European Aquaculture Society (EAS) conference in Trondheim, Norway, last month that was so radical, so controversial, so absolutely *insane* it was probably lost on 99 percent of the room.

Summerfelt did not say the moon was made of cheese, or Superman was real; no, he said something else much, much further out there.

"The only reason to do research," Summerfelt said, "is to help the industry."

Don't get me wrong, I like science. I enjoy living a life without polio, cooking blueberry pancakes on a Teflon-coated frying pan and sticking Post-It notes around the office. But I suspect far too many aquaculture researchers are not interested in discovering the next big commercial breakthrough, but the next big pile of grant money.

Recirculating aquaculture systems (RAS), integrated multi-trophic aquaculture, going offshore -- all of these topics are important for the future of this industry and should be on the schedule at any aquaculture research conference.

But time after time, when you ask researchers what it would cost to put their



test-tube ideas into commercial production, you are answered with blank stares. The idea of actually trying to make money off their ideas seems like an alien concept or, at least, not spoken about in polite society.

When I asked one EAS conference speaker about the commercial applications of his research, he testily replied he was "not going to talk about economic viability." Another said his idea could work commercially if "fish farms could be run at a loss."

Am I missing something here?

Silly me, if I was a researcher and going to compare a submerged cage with a conventional floating one, besides measuring the stress level of fish, the differences in feed conversion ratios, etc., I might actually have a spreadsheet the computer with "cost comparisons" on top.

In the left-hand column, I'd put down all

the costs of the conventional cage, and in the right column the costs involved of running the submerged. This information I might find as valuable as the first.

Summerfelt's talk at the conference was on the use of ozone at a RAS trout farm. Not only was the experiment done to scale, the research was not concluded until the mature trout were slaughtered, studied and cooked to see if there were any off flavors.

In the hall, I asked Summerfelt why his research was so industry-orientated; not a single other lecturer I heard even mentioned taste.

The reason is simple, he said: his funding comes from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "If our work is not industry relevant ..." and he made a cutting motion across his throat.

If that's what it takes, if that's what it takes.

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