

Interview with Professor Torger Børresen, Project Coordinator SEAFOODplus

Research results enable new product developments

It's nearly half-time for the participants of the SEAFOODplus project. Eurofish asked Torger Børresen, the co-ordinator of the 26 million euro project with over 200 researchers from 17 countries, what stage their work had reached so far. The balance he draws is clear: all 20 sub-projects are running to plan and co-operation between the different groups is good. Already now, initial findings have furthered our knowledge concerning the value of seafood in our daily diets.

Eurofish: *The project has now been running for over two years. Can you give us a brief outline of its current status?*

Torger Børresen: The third open SEAFOODplus Conference has just drawn to a close. The talks and discussions there showed what a high level the research work has reached. It was definitely a wise approach to design the projects on an interdisciplinary basis so that researchers from different scientific fields could work together towards common goals. This enables better utilization of available synergies, acts as a stimulus for new ideas, and encourages creativity among all participants.

Eurofish: *So scientists who usually compete with one another were inspired by co-operation?*

Børresen: Yes, that's right - an interesting and hardly surprising effect. Scientists often tend to submerge themselves in their own specialist area. And in doing so they sometimes forget how inspiring discussion with researchers from other areas can be. Added to this is the fact that working in an isolated environment makes it more difficult to see the entirety, which sometimes means that connections are overlooked which



Professor Torger Børresen, Coordinator of SEAFOODplus, Danish Institute for Fisheries Research, Department of Seafood Research.

might be quite obvious if viewed from a different perspective.

Eurofish: *That sounds almost as if there are hardly any problems as regards co-operation?*

Børresen: Right from the start we looked for ways and suitable instruments for drawing the participants together, for helping them to find a common language to discuss the project work. Put plainly, this was about breaking the ice between them. Scientists are only people, too, of course, each with their own individual strengths and weaknesses. The better people understand and deal with one another, the stronger the team and the better the results can be.

topics was kept open in case it became necessary or in case a new promising approach evolved as a result of the initial findings. For that reason, the whole project was divided into three periods each lasting 18 months, at the end of which corrections and fine adjustments would be possible. We are now in the middle of the second 18-month period and so far no serious changes have been made to the individual sub-projects. One new project has been started, however, which could not be predicted at the start: researchers from the aquaculture sector are co-operating with scientists from the fields of consumer science, product safety and product quality.

Eurofish: *What are the most promising results so far? Can you give us some examples?*

Børresen: For understandable reasons it is very difficult for me to choose individual results out of the wealth of findings we have got so far. SEAFOODplus is a complex research project which unites technological developments with health and dietary issues and medical studies. Due to this unique combination we get very high-quality results which reveal elementary connections and explain more aptly than before, for example, why fish is so healthy. Naturally, tests had already been carried out in the past on the health value of seafood but they mainly concentrated on the Omega 3 fatty acids. SEAFOODplus has shown that fish has much more to offer, that the long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids alone are not the only factor that contributes towards the health value of this food but that they act in combination with other components that we find in fish: proteins and amino acids, soluble components etc. All of these elements together make fish a healthy, high-quality food. Further important results can ►

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be expected from the project in this area during the coming months, and I encourage your readers to visit our homepage www.seafood-plus.org, where we are releasing the most recent news in a popular form.

Eurofish: *One of the objectives of SEAFOODplus is the practical utilization of the results. What concrete findings have you got to offer the food industry?*

Borresen: I can give you an example here: A lot of the tests carried out in the project focus on the consumer. Our studies have confirmed that most consumers are aware of how healthy fish is. In spite of this, a lot of people still don't eat fish because they are afraid of the bones, or they dislike the flavour or the smell of fish. This means that products have to be developed which eliminate these problems, products that are better adapted to the public's taste, "customized products", so to speak. Among other things we are investigating different ways of enhancing fish products. The aim is to avoid everything that puts the consumer off while at the same time strengthening the properties which make the product attractive to him. To do that, we naturally have to know what consumers actually want, what is important to them, and what isn't. In the context of SEAFOODplus we are analysing and distinguishing consumer expectations across Europe. This will lead to numerous and varied opportunities for the industry: food producers will gain information on what consumers expect so that they can then better gear their product developments to consumer preferences.

Eurofish: *You and other representatives of SEAFOODplus regularly present the project and its initial results to the public, for example*

at fairs and conferences. What sort of feedback are you getting from industry?

Borresen: Many industry representatives are at first surprised to meet and talk to scientists at such events. Contacts like these are still relatively new and presumably rather unusual for both parties. When we get to talking, however - at least that's my experience - we notice a lot of interest in the studies and results. Industry members are pleased to note that we want to make contact and want to deliver our findings directly.

Eurofish: *Do you always find a common language?*

Borresen: No, not always. There are still certain deficits here. Scientists are known to have difficulty in presenting their findings in a simple way so that industry can understand them. But we do take trouble and repeatedly try to communicate our message in a comprehensible way.

Eurofish: *So research and industry are coming closer together?*

Borresen: Exactly! Progress in this area is very apparent. The industry is learning to express its interests clearly and we are working on trying to explain our results better.

Eurofish: *Despite that, there is still a strong impression that the third open SEAFOODplus Conference was sooner a meeting of scientists and that it didn't attract many members from industry.*

Borresen: You are right, but from the industry members we get the response that the subjects and results we present are very relevant. So we are increasing our efforts to get more representatives from industry and one important aspect is to deliver presentations

in simple language that appeals to the industry. We are training our researchers to improve their skills in this respect. It is also encouraging to observe that a lot of companies today employ scientists or at least co-operate closely with scientists who are then often sent to conferences because they have easier access to the problems discussed there. That should make communication easier as well. We have already resolved to intensify our approach to industry members for the next open conference, however, to integrate them more strongly.

Eurofish: *Are there already concrete ideas for that or is it still too early?*

Borresen: With the third conference just finished it really is still too early to start making concrete announcements. We will be making a thorough evaluation of this meeting and then, on the basis of our analysis, we will decide what to do in future. But one thing is already certain: the fourth open conference of the SEAFOODplus project will take place in the week from 4 to 8 June 2007 in Spain in Bilbao. The organizer in Bilbao is an institute which is responsible for co-operation with small and middle-sized companies within the SEAFOODplus project. That gives us high hopes that this conference will be strongly geared to SMEs.

Eurofish: *So your balance of the SEAFOODplus project so far is positive?*

Borresen: I can answer that question with an immediate, wholehearted "yes". We have delivered punctually what we promised when we were planning the project. And there are already signs that the work we have ahead of us will be just as successful. ■