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**Cooke Aquaculture faces new cruelty allegations as second undercover investigation reveals ongoing abuse at Maine salmon hatchery**

*New footage shows workers clubbing fish, ignoring food safety protocols, and condemning the company's disregard for animal welfare; Animal cruelty complaint filed with state authorities*

**Bangor, Maine — May 14, 2026** — Six years after promising reforms, Cooke Aquaculture's salmon hatchery in Bingham, Maine continues to brutalize fish while workers openly mock the cruelty documented by a previous investigation, according to new undercover footage released today by Animal Outlook. The organization has filed a formal animal cruelty complaint with the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry's Animal Welfare Program, urging the agency to investigate the documented abuses and take appropriate enforcement action.

The investigation, conducted between September and December 2025 at the Bingham facility, reveals that previously documented problems persist alongside new potential violations of food safety and environmental protocols at the vertically integrated aquaculture operation that houses millions of Atlantic salmon. An undercover investigator working as a Hatchery Technician documented concerns strikingly similar to those exposed in Animal Outlook's groundbreaking 2019 investigation — the first-ever undercover investigation of a U.S. fish farm.

In a disturbing audio recording, the Hatchery Manager openly discussed the 2019 investigation, admitting "we did a lot of stuff that we weren't supposed to do." He boasted about appearing in the original investigation video "throwing fish yelling 'Kobe'," referencing workers appearing to play basketball with live salmon. The manager also described tracking down the previous investigator on social media and threatening to send animal parts to her home, calling her a "bitch."

**Systematic animal cruelty continues**

The new footage shows workers continuing to club fish to death — sometimes unsuccessfully, leaving the animals writhing in agony for extended periods. In one documented incident, a fish continued to thrash for 43 seconds after the initial blow. Despite having stunning equipment designed for more humane slaughter, workers routinely ignored it. "Back in the day we all used to walk around with a bat and if the fish jumped out or was still alive we just clubbed them and that was that," one worker explained. The investigator even filmed a fish being cut open while its heart was still visibly beating.

In another incident, a worker kicked a fish, then struck the fish three more times with a metal bar over a 29-second period while the animal thrashed. Multiple incidents show fish continuing to move for over a minute after being struck, and workers placing live fish into garbage bags and dry barrels to slowly suffocate.

"Based on the repeated inhumane treatment of fish depicted in the footage, carried out in full view of co-workers, it is my professional opinion that animal welfare guidelines at this facility are not adequately implemented, enforced, or supported through appropriate training and oversight," states Dr. Jena Questen DVM CertAqV, former president of the World Aquatic Veterinary Medical Association, in an expert affidavit. "Absent such measures, it is my professional opinion that animals will continue to experience unnecessary and avoidable suffering until substantial corrective measures are implemented."

### **Environmental violations threaten wild salmon**

Beyond animal cruelty, the investigation uncovered serious operational and environmental concerns at the Cooke facility. Workers admitted to ignoring containment protocols, allowing hatchery fish to potentially escape into surrounding waterways where they threaten wild salmon populations by spreading disease and competing for resources. "They have screens that are supposed to be down, but there's so much shit in there that we pretty much just keep them up all the time," one worker explained.

Another employee described how fish "get out through the drum house" and "eventually make their way into the culverts there and right out" into the Kennebec River. The escape of farmed salmon into wild populations poses serious ecological risks, including disease transmission, genetic contamination, and competition for food and habitat — threats that are particularly concerning given Maine's efforts to restore wild Atlantic salmon populations.

### **Rodent contamination, disease, and mass mortalities**

One worker described plans to use fish feed contaminated by rodents, stating: "Technically, should we use that feed? No. But are we going to? Yes!" The investigator documented feed bags torn open by rats and mice, creating conditions ripe for disease transmission. Another employee casually remarked about rodent infestations: "I mean, everywhere's got rats."

The unsanitary practices and overcrowding, among other issues, appear to have devastating consequences. The investigator filmed fish suffering from severe fungal infections eating away at their faces and documented unexplained mass mortality events, with barrels full of dead fish and workers casually discussing die-offs. In one incident, an employee estimated that approximately 25,000 to 30,000 fish died in a single tank. Workers speculated about various causes including oxygen deprivation, bacterial infections, and operational failures.

### **Workers condemn company's priorities**

Workers expressed deep frustration with what they perceived as the company's prioritization of production over animal welfare. "Unfortunately, I don't think the company is in it for the fish health side, they just want fish production," the Hatchery Manager was recorded as saying, adding that the facility's veterinarian had left because management ignored her recommendations.

Another worker criticized the disconnect between the company's public image and its practices: "For as family-orientated and churchgoing and all that the Cooke family seems to claim that they are, they do a lot of f\*cked up shit."

## **Industry certification fails to prevent abuse**

Cooke Aquaculture markets its salmon under the "True North" brand, which is sold at major grocery stores throughout the northeastern United States. True North formerly partnered with Martha Stewart, but that collaboration appears to have been quietly dropped shortly after Animal Outlook's first investigation into Cooke Aquaculture. Currently, True North carries the "Best Aquaculture Practices" certification — an industry seal meant to assure consumers of responsible farming methods.

"If this is what passes for the aquaculture industry's best practices, it proves beyond doubt that industrial fish farming cannot regulate itself," said Ben Williamson, Executive Director of Animal Outlook. "We returned to this facility years later hoping to find meaningful change. Instead, we found the same callous disregard for animal welfare, the same dangerous shortcuts, and the same workers openly mocking the very idea of accountability. We've now asked Maine authorities to hold Cooke Aquaculture accountable for this documented cruelty. The labels on packages of farmed salmon conceal an ugly truth that consumers deserve to know."

Animal Outlook is calling on Hannaford and other retailers carrying True North salmon to drop the product and is urging consumers to stop supporting an industry that hides systemic cruelty behind misleading certifications. The organization is also calling for stronger regulatory oversight of aquaculture facilities and meaningful consequences for facilities that violate protocols.

The investigation documented over 100 specific incidents of animal cruelty, improper killing methods, environmental violations, and food safety concerns between September and December 2025.

The full investigation video and additional materials are available at **[animaloutlook.org/investigations/cooke-aquaculture](http://animaloutlook.org/investigations/cooke-aquaculture)**

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*Animal Outlook is a nonprofit animal protection organization working to end the abuse of farmed animals through undercover investigations, litigation, corporate outreach, public education, and other advocacy programs. <http://animaloutlook.org>*