

Field work and lab studies: Two sets of standards?

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There are various reasons for doing experiments in fish farms. A common motivation is to do field experiments as part of industry co-funding in different project types, both national and international. Own contributions from the industry is a prerequisite in many project types, to match the grants given to research groups from public sources. Few companies in this sector have the financial strength to contribute cash, so in-kind contributions are commonly accepted.

Recent experiences from the EU-funded collective research project FINE FISH are used to illustrate some of the challenges related to doing experiments in fish farms. From a total of 14 defined field experiments done by the participating SME hatcheries in this project, practically no scientific progress was made. One experiment resulted in formulation of a hypothesis that was later tested under controlled conditions. One experiment indicated a possible treatment effect, but no conclusions were possible due to weak design, lack of precision and a shorter experimental period than desirable. The SMEs in question were led by skilled and highly motivated aquaculturists, the experiments were suggested and done by the SMEs themselves, and assistance was offered from researchers.

In this project, the field trials were addressing relatively minor deviations from standard procedures, and no harm was probably done to the welfare of the animals. It is nevertheless a reason for concern that all these activities were done mainly in order to fulfil requirements in the area of public research funding. As a consequence, these animals were exposed to risk without being protected as experimental animals.