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Offshore fish farming: The selling of common waters

By Anne Mosness

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Fishing families live with many of the same traditions, values and heart-breaks as farm families. Knowledge and dreams are passed through generations. Stores are often far beyond the horizon so improvisational skills are essential, especially with duct tape and twine. Pride in bringing nutritious and flavorful foods compensates for long hours and low pay. Both have strong connections to nature, facing storms and foul weather when work must be done, enduring discomfort and sometimes danger.

Family farms struggle to survive when policies favor agribusinesses and manure-spilling animal feedlots. The small boat fishing fleet in the United States also is facing extinction along with the wild fish they harvest, while factory operations take their place.

Significant sacrifices have been made in our region to protect salmon especially and many environmental groups recognize that harvesters of wild fish are often the strongest voices for conservation and habitat restoration. As the *Audubon Guide to Seafood* states, “Salmon are most at risk not from commercial fishers—who are the chief economic force behind their protection—but from logging, agriculture and dams.”

As boats are readied for another fishing season, elected officials in climate-controlled offices in Washington, D.C., and our state legislature in Olympia may be voting on bills this spring that would benefit corporations while jeopardizing ocean integrity and wild fish. If approved, the legislation also could destroy the livelihoods of thousands of fishing families and harm many coastal and native communities.

Proposed federal legislation

The waters from three to 200 miles offshore are called the “Exclusive Economic Zone” and are targeted for development by the Department of Commerce’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Propagandizing that the United States missed the boat by exercising caution and limiting salmon farming because of environmental concerns, aquaculture speculators are rushing back through the revolving door to cash in on the next wave of industrial farmed fish. Black cod, halibut, tuna, and a variety of tropical and genetically engineered species are in tanks and labs waiting for the go-ahead from Congress. An application to grow genetically engineered fish is before the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

The legislation that would open up our oceans to industrial fish farming is called the National Aquaculture Act. It would make NOAA the lead agency for promoting and managing fish farms three to 200 miles offshore. The bill also would provide streamlined “one-stop” permitting and allow long-term leases with very little oversight. Written into the legislation is an exemption to the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, changing current law so foreign corporations can own fish farms in our waters.



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A fivefold increase in the value of domestic farmed fish production is planned by 2025, from \$900 million to \$5 billion. Tax dollars are funding growth of this industry in much the way that agribusinesses receive money for research and development, consultants and feasibility studies, and for marketing and product promotions.

Some research expenditures are futuristic. Designs include computerized fish growing operations that are huge cages 174 by 270 feet hitching rides for months on ocean currents as fish fatten inside. Other facilities are 20-ton buoys or submerged spheres as tall as buildings that can be monitored from desks on shore. Sea Grant, another program under the Department of Commerce/NOAA, is spending millions of dollars on experimental production of genetically engineered fish, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture is investing heavily in fish-rearing projects.

A recurrent rationale for subsidizing industrial aquaculture is that it's needed for national or food security, based on the myth that a trade deficit in seafood leaves us at the mercy of unstable foreign corporations and countries that grow cheap shrimp, salmon and other farmed fish. NOAA's legislation, however, benefits multinational corporations such as PanFish, the owner of Washington state's salmon farms. The profits are taken out of the region. The pollution and problems remain.

Conducting an assessment of risks is required under the National Environmental Policy Act. This legislative environmental impact statement (LEIS) also ensures the public receives necessary information so people can comment on issues that directly affect them and commonly owned resources. Although NOAA was asked to conduct the required LEIS by 15 members of Congress, including Reps. Jay Inslee and Jim McDermott of Washington state, no action has been taken.

Subverting state regulations

By siting operations offshore, local laws and regulations can be subverted. Alaska prohibits fish farms in their state waters, yet under NOAA's legislation, floating feedlots could be placed as close as three miles to the richest salmon-producing rivers in the world. Cordova, near the famed Copper River fishery, has been described by Sen. Ted Stevens (Alaska) as a possible site for fish farms.

Washington, California and Oregon have bans on production of genetically engineered fish that also would be circumvented by placing fish farms three miles offshore. Although production and escapes of genetically engineered fish alarm scientists, NOAA has stated, "priorities to conserve genetic biodiversity should not deter research to improve breeds." At this time, the FDA is considering approval to raise and sell transgenic AquAdvantage™, a genetically engineered salmon. This would be the first genetically modified animal protein to be foisted on U.S. consumers.

Even if laws of individual states are respected, pathogens, parasites, chemicals and escaped fish are not stationary in a fluid environment. Economic devastation also cannot be contained. Production in one region can collapse fish prices and economies in another, as salmon farming has proven.

What's under the waterline?

The damage from industrial fish farming is largely under the waterline and out of sight, so the industry has gotten away with pollution that would have closed down comparable dirty land-based operations.

From 1996 to 1999, more than 600,000 nonnative Atlantic salmon escaped from salmon farms into Washington waters. These nonnative, invasive fish compete for food and spawning territory with local wild fish and carry potentially epidemic parasites and pathogens. In British Columbia, several wild salmon populations are facing extinction from sea lice infestations released by farms concentrated along the pathways of migrating wild salmon.

But escaped fish are not the only pollutants from floating feedlots. Arthur H. Whiteley, professor emeritus of the University of Washington's Department of Zoology, compared waste generated by four fish farms near Bainbridge Island to that from 830,000 Seattle residents who paid for an expensive sewage collection system to protect Puget Sound waters.

The West Point Treatment Plant cost more than \$573 million to build and \$80 million per year to operate. It releases around 4 million pounds of sterilized total suspended solids into Puget Sound annually.

Dr. Whiteley compared that to the amount of waste flushing into Puget Sound from salmon farms in Rich Passage, across from Seattle. Based on inputs of feed and numbers of fish permitted by the Department of Ecology, he calculated these fish farms produce more than 5.18 million pounds of feces annually. Fish farm sewage is untreated and non-sterile and the cost to fish farmers for this use of our public waters is zero.

Although fish farmers try to convince the public they're protecting wild fish, the industry is causing a significant net loss of protein. The explosive growth of salmon farming has led to unsustainable overfishing in oceans near developing nations. Anchovies, mackerel, sardines and other small fish are scooped up to make feed pellets for farm fish. As aquaculture moves towards production of more carnivorous species, the collapse of wild fish populations will be hastened while depriving subsistence-based fishing communities the small fish so important to their diet and income.

Opening the door to other industries

The U.S. Ocean Policy Commission Report recommends using a new science-driven regime. But instead of protecting the oceans, it will lead to greater exploitation of oceanic resources.

According to research originally published on tidepool.org and conducted by Jeremy Brown, Food and Society policy fellow and salmon troller, the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy (established in 2000 by Congress and appointed by President Bush) has conducted its business quietly while it recommends opening up the offshore waters to more industrial activities. The 16-member commission and its executive director include "nine with direct ties to the oil, mining, development, aquaculture and waste disposal industries."

Another piece of congressional legislation, the Rigs to Reefs bill, furnishes a loophole for oil companies to escape from lease agreements requiring removal of offshore oil platforms and site cleanup when oil pumping ceases. By converting to a fish farm, companies can avoid decommissioning costs of up to \$30 million dollars while avoiding future liability for environmental disasters.

Proposed plans for local waters

Washington's foreign-owned salmon farm industry, operating near Bainbridge Island and Anacortes, is for sale. One prospective buyer has its own dubious history that includes breaking commitments to fishermen, fines for illegal discharge of industrial waste and violations of health codes.

The Strait of Juan de Fuca is farther from public scrutiny and is a target for industrial farming of other species. A report by the Washington Fish Growers Association, funded by a grant from NOAA, stated the Strait has "potential for net pen aquaculture and none of them should have significant, site specific resource or shoreline owner conflicts which prevented growth of the industry in Puget Sound."

Dan Swecker, executive director of the Washington Fish Growers Association, admitted in a front-page article in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* on Aug. 23, 2004, that he is a fish farmer first and state senator second. About the plan to place fish farms in the Strait, he says, "If you could do it on a massive enough scale, it could be worthwhile."

In December 2004, Olympic Aquaventure, LLC, sought permits from the Department of Ecology and other regulatory agencies to grow black cod in submerged cages near Port Angeles. The plan calls for a fish hatchery and processing plant at the former Rayonier mill site, despite contamination with PCBs, dioxins, arsenic, lead and other substances from decades of industrial activity.

Sen. Swecker now is sponsoring legislation in Olympia (SB 5787) to shortcut the permit process and reduce oversight for placing fish farms in the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

Moreover, during a closed-door legislative meeting last year, Washington's fish farmers requested that they be ex-

empted from paying the state minimum wage and providing mandated health care coverage. The committee has not yet acted upon that request.

Despite promises of employment, greater usage of high-tech equipment and robotic operations has resulted in a declining number of jobs in the fish farm industry even as production has increased.

Loss of value and heritage

Subsidized industrial fish products flooding the marketplace can cause devastating economic downturns for once-successful family businesses. There's a lot at stake. In addition to what's happened with salmon, wild black cod (also known as sablefish) has a value of more than \$141 million annually to local boats. Wild Pacific halibut, another abundant and high-value wild fish, brought \$168 million to harvesters in 2004, many living in the Puget Sound area.

According to a study by Dr. Rosamond Naylor, senior fellow in Environmental Science and Policy at Stanford University, wild salmon incomes and license values dropped dramatically when farmed salmon replaced wild salmon in restaurants and stores. Between 1990 and 2002, the price for many limited-entry salmon permits in Alaska fell by 75 to 90 percent, plummeting in one fishery—Bristol Bay—from \$300,000 to \$30,000. Thousands of families lost significant income in the last decade because of artificially low fish prices and many face serious debt and bankruptcy.

After several years of low fish prices and reduced processing capacity, last winter the Bristol Bay Native Corporation invited oil exploration under the waters of the richest wild salmon-producing region of the world. Other remote villages are considering opening up their coastlines to oil, gas and mineral extraction, further jeopardizing wild fish, the natural environment, traditional cultures and economies.

Citizen actions: go wild

Locally, some governing bodies and organizations have passed ordinances and resolutions opposing commercial fish farming and to support wild fisheries. In February 2005, the Whatcom County Council passed an ordinance prohibiting salmon farming in county waters. San Juan County, the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians and Washington State Democrats also have passed resolutions opposed to fish farming or offshore exploitation.

At farmers markets, through the Slow Food movement and in stores such as PCC, thoughtful people appreciate regional and artisan foods, from heritage turkeys to dozens of varieties of locally grown fruits and vegetables. Wild fish are especially prized for their health-enhancing omega-3 fish oils, high-quality protein, diversity of species and flavors. Many consumers also understand that their conscientious purchases help support sustainable family fishing businesses and build strong communities that value and protect the natural environment.

Our oceans and coastal waters should not be for sale. Call your elected representative and senators and let them know we're counting on them to be wise and courageous and to keep our oceans wild. Tell them "no" to NOAA's offshore aquaculture bill. In our state, say "no" to exploitation of the beautiful Strait of Juan de Fuca and other marine waters. And for your health and the health of coastal communities, go wild for wild fish. ▣

For more information, visit www.iatp.org/fish or e-mail eatwildfish@aol.com.

About the author

Anne Mosness was captain of salmon fishing boats in Alaska and Washington for more than 20 years. Her fondest memories are fishing with her father, daughter and son. Anne is West Coast coordinator of Marine and Fish Conservation, a program of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

About IATP

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works globally to promote resilient family farms, communities and ecosystems through research and education, science and technology, and advocacy.