

Ocean Fish Farming Can Hurt Commercial Fishing

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service are federal bodies that make decisions about fishing in U.S. waters. Right now they are finishing a plan to allow the growing of fish in huge floating cages out in our Gulf waters. This is called “ocean fish farming,” “open ocean aquaculture,” or “offshore aquaculture.” Whatever the name, it could cause serious problems for commercial fishermen.

Commercial fishermen could lose money due to ocean fish farming. In fact, often fishermen lose jobs when there is farming of species that are also wild caught. This can happen because farming produces more fish, all the time, usually at a cheaper rate than catching them, so there is less of a market for wild fish. Prices for fish could go down because there is so much fish available and because companies can charge less for the fish, which are cheaper to grow on the farms than they are to catch through fishing. Often, fishermen cannot compete, especially with rising oil and gas prices. Foreign investors (who have already shown interest and own much of the ocean fish farming operations worldwide) might establish

facilities using their own money and staff, then ship the production elsewhere, leaving the United States with little more than a mess in our waters that could hurt wild fish populations and critical habitat. Either way, commercial fishermen could lose out.

Individual Fishing Quotas (IFQ) could become less valuable. When fish under an IFQ system are farmed, the market is consistently flooded with the farmed product. Leasing or selling shares for catching the wild version of the farmed species will be difficult if there is already plenty of inexpensive farmed fish to go around — fishermen will likely not want to waste the time or money to go catch the wild fish that will now get a lower price at market.

Fishing grounds could be lost. Facilities could be located on or nearby popular fishing grounds. It is very possible that fishing near or around the farms will be prevented, so both the space the farm takes up and the area around it could be lost for fishing.

Ocean fish farms could infect wild fish. Farmed fish are held in captivity, usually in much higher numbers than would be normal in the wild. Cramped quarters, concentrated fish wastes, stress and other factors are often breeding grounds for illness. Because farm facilities allow free flow of water in and out of the cages, parasites and other diseases could get into ocean waters and infect wild fish. In Norway, there have been many problems with farmed salmon spreading diseases to wild salmon



Growing fish in huge floating cages threatens the health of wild fish and could cause commercial fisheries to lose money.

and a similar situation is now occurring in the Pacific Northwest.

Ocean fish farms could pollute the Gulf. The proposed farms are intended to be industrial in scale. This means the use of many cages (an average cage is 80 x 100 ft), placed close together and packed with fish. Concentrated fish feed, fish waste and chemicals or antibiotics that might be used can flow straight out of the open cages into our oceans. Additionally, the cages themselves could become marine debris in the event they are damaged or pulled free by violent weather or human error.

Ocean fish farms aim for quantity, not quality. Farmed fish are bred to grow fast and reproduce often. When these fish escape, they can disrupt the natural ecosystem by requiring more food than wild fish and by interbreeding with natural populations. Even though the farmed fish may be bigger and more aggressive, they also may be less fit for living in the wild because traits important to survive in farms are not the same as those needed in the wild. The farmed fish can pass on lower quality genes to wild fish, making the whole population weaker.

There could be less wild prey/bait fish for wildlife and fishermen. Bait/prey species are being caught in mass quantities to feed farmed fish. In recent years, about 23-33 million tons of wild fish worldwide have been used annually for the production of fishmeal and oil. It can take about two to six pounds of wild fish in feed to produce one pound of farmed fish. Aquaculture is now the world's largest user of fishmeal and fish oil, consuming about half the world's supply of fishmeal and more than 80 percent of the fish oil each year. Many of the same small fish going into the feed serve as bait for fishing and are also food for the wild fish and other marine life. Less food in the food chain means less wild fish for the fishermen.



Fortunately, we have a chance to stop a bad plan. Public hearings will be held in Key West on July 21 at 5:30 at the Radisson Hotel (3820 Roosevelt Blvd) and in Key Largo on August 13 (exact time to be announced) at the Hilton Key Largo (9700 S. Overseas Highway). Visit www.foodandwaterwatch.org/fish/foridakeys or call Christina at (202) 682- 2495 for more information.

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