

NATIONAL AND LOCAL GROUPS OPPOSE INDUSTRIAL FISH FARMING REGULATIONS

Department of Commerce approves new rules allowing offshore aquaculture in Gulf of Mexico

For Immediate Release

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New Orleans, LA –Today, consumer, environmental, and sustainable fishing and farming organizations expressed their strong opposition to new federal regulations that permit development of industrial fish farms offshore in U.S. waters. The new rules allow up to 20 facilities and collectively 64 million pounds of fish to be produced each year in the Gulf of Mexico. The controversial permitting scheme, many years in the making, is heavily criticized by various groups and individuals.

“Just like factory farms on land, industrial offshore fish farms risk the health and welfare of communities, the environment and wildlife,” said Wenonah Hauter, Executive Director of [Food & Water Watch](#). “This plan to allow a private industry to abuse our public resources must stop now.”

Marianne Cufone, long-time fisheries expert, environmental attorney and executive director of the [Recirculating Farms Coalition](#) said, “Offshore industrial fish farming is outdated and unnecessary.” The Coalition uses on-land farming techniques that reuse water and wastes in closed-loop systems to raise fish. She said, “It took nearly 11 years to finalize this law, too much has changed for it to be relevant now.”

The Gulf of Mexico has changed significantly – effects on fisheries, habitat and communities from hurricanes, like Katrina in 2005, and the 2010 oil spill are all still emerging. Industrial, open-ocean aquaculture has also proved to be environmentally damaging. Major problems include the release of untreated waste; increased risks of diseases and parasites in wild fish by transmission from farmed fish; risks from drugs and chemicals, such as antibiotics and hormones, entering natural waters; and escapes of farmed fish altering wild populations.

Cages used to contain fish are flow-through, meaning anything from the pens - excess feed, fish wastes, and any chemicals - can go directly into Gulf waters. Massive fish escapes from aquaculture facilities occur around the world. Fish farms in Chile, Scotland and Canada had serious viral outbreaks. Notably, such facilities do not ease pressure on global fish populations, since raising larger carnivorous fish often uses smaller wild fish in feed. This can result in overfishing of these smaller fish, creating an imbalance in natural ecosystems.

The global experience with aquaculture shows these operations also threaten fishing communities, and related businesses too. Industrially produced fish can flood the market and compete with wild fish caught by local fishermen, immediately driving down prices. Less money for fishing families reduces available money for them to spend in other coastal community businesses.

Cynthia Sarthou, executive director of the Gulf Restoration Network said, “The Gulf of Mexico is still recovering from hurricanes and the 2010 oil spill; we don’t need more problems from fish farms.”

In addition to concerns about harm to the environment and local businesses, the process used to create the regulation was unusual and legally questionable. Rather than passing a law specifically to regulate aquaculture, the agencies used existing fishing laws to manage this new and fundamentally different activity, industrial aquaculture, as “fishing.” Worse, while only the Gulf of Mexico is affected by the new regulation right now, the law-making process could be replicated in other parts of the country to allow industrial fish farms elsewhere.

“This is a misguided decision,” said George Kimbrell, senior attorney for the [Center for Food Safety](#). “We need to better manage and protect our native fisheries, not adopt **destructive industrial practices that put them at risk.**”

The groups are analyzing their legal options to challenge the new regulations.