

Ocean Fish Farming Can Hurt Consumers and the Environment

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 both consumers and the environment.

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

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.

Farmed fish can contain a variety of different chemicals and heavy metals. Kept in stationary cages in high numbers, farmed fish are more prone to disease and parasites, often requiring use of antibiotics and other substances. Furthermore, farmed fish are grown to be larger than wild fish and are given feed composed of highly concentrated, processed wild fish.

Wild fish typically contain small amounts of mercury and other heavy metals. When they are processed into fish feed for farmed fish, the heavy metals become more highly concentrated, therefore increasing the levels of heavy metals in farmed fish who eat the feed. Taken at these levels, heavy metals could pose serious health risks to humans.

Foreign markets will likely benefit from offshore aquaculture, not U.S. consumers. Because the United States currently exports about 71% of its domestic seafood production, the likelihood that U.S.



Growing fish in huge floating cages threatens could create health risks and environmental messes for U.S. consumers.

consumers would be eating domestically farmed fish is slim. We export U.S. fish for high prices and import cheaper farmed products from elsewhere for us to eat here. Because of this historical trade behavior, foreign consumers would likely receive the greatest benefit from offshore aquaculture, while U.S. citizens would be left cleaning up any mess this industry creates.

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.

Oil rigs to fish farms? Plans to put fish farms near or on old oil rigs are currently being discussed. These proposals are dangerous not only for consumers, but for the environment, too. Fish grown around oil rigs have a chance of becoming contaminated with harmful substances like mercury, which is proven to affect the brain, heart and immune systems of children and developing babies and can cause problems for adults, too. Furthermore, allowing oil companies to convert old oil rigs into fish farms absolves the company of the responsibility for removing the rigs. This places the burden on the taxpayer if there are problems in the future. These rigs are extremely expensive to remove (in some cases up to \$5 million). If these proposals are allowed, the Gulf could potentially be littered with old oil rigs, costing taxpayers thousands of dollars a year and leaving oil companies to continue to evade corporate social responsibility.

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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