

Ocean Fish Farming Can Hurt Recreational 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 recreational fishermen.

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 ruin the fishing experience. The developing plan is for commercial-scale aquaculture. 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, polluting our water and wildlife. Also, cages are not always completely underwater. Aquaculture operations are typically unattractive industrial facilities that attract predators, like sharks, looking for an easy meal. All of these things can substantially impair 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 and a similar situation is now occurring in the Pacific Northwest.



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Ocean fish farms could be safety hazards. The plan has no specific limitations where these facilities can be placed. During violent storms in the past, whole oil rigs have been ripped from their stations and brought to shore. The cages, held in place by anchors, themselves could become marine debris in the event they are damaged or pulled free by violent weather or human error.

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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