

Ocean Fish Farming

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What is Ocean Fish Farming?

Also called open ocean aquaculture or offshore aquaculture, it is the practice of growing finfish in huge, often over-crowded cages out in open ocean waters. Before any regional or federal plan for ocean fish farming moves forward, we need to better understand how these intensive fish farms affect human health, the economies of local fishing communities, wild fish populations, marine mammals, endangered species, birds and essential fish habitat.

A dozen reasons to stop ocean fish farming in the United States

- 1. No compensation to the general public for potentially exclusionary use of public resources for private profits:** Our U.S. waters and our ocean resources are held in trust by government officials for the American public. Allowing ocean fish farming in our waters would grant private, likely foreign, companies the right to use a public resource — our oceans — for personal financial benefit in a manner that could conflict with, or even completely exclude, others' existing uses.
- 2. Problems with competing/conflicting interests:** Because ocean fish farming facilities would take up real space in the environment, they could cause conflict of interest problems in areas including fishing grounds and routes to those fishing grounds, vessel traffic lanes, military sites and areas of national security concern, marine reserves, sanctuaries and other protected or fragile areas, and areas of significant multiple use.
- 3. Economic concerns:** Commercial fishermen often lose their jobs when there is farming of the species that they normally catch in the wild. Farming fish can make fish prices go down because farms produce a lot of fish, all the time, consistently flooding the market. Also, companies can charge less for farmed fish, which are produced more cheaply, given expenses of pursuing wild fish like oil, gas and crew time. However, often lower prices and more fish do not mean good quality or healthy seafood. Recreational fishing could be hurt by ocean fish farming too — charterboats and other for-hire vessels could lose customers because farms take up space and pollute the water and wild fish. Additionally, industry has failed to demonstrate that ocean fish farming is environmentally sustainable, technically possible or financially viable on a commercial scale. Most existing farms require large amounts of funding from the government and/or others to continue operations.



Offshore fish cage near Honolulu, Hawaii. Photo courtesy NOAA.

4. **Escapes:** Ocean fish farming uses cages, net pens or other containers to hold fish. These structures, even if well-designed and well-built, are subject to complications like severe weather, sharks and other predators, equipment failure and human error. Fish escapes can jeopardize the recovery of depleted or endangered species and lead to the spread of diseases, breeding with wild populations and disruption of natural ecosystems.
5. **Feed inefficiency:** Farmed fish are often fed wild fish either directly or after being processed into fish meal or oil. These prey fish are a crucial part of the marine ecosystem, serving as food for marine mammals, birds and other larger fish. Feeding wild prey to farmed fish is also inefficient: It can take two to six pounds of wild fish to raise one pound of farmed fish.
6. **Habitat impacts:** Dredging, drilling and other sediment and bottom habitat disturbances like large anchors can cause seagrass and coral die-off, displacement of ocean wildlife and other potentially significant ecological changes.
7. **Species of concern, endangered or threatened species:** Growing endangered or threatened species and/or species of concern could be a major problem for their wild counterparts. Because such species are already at a lower level, and an arguably weakened population state, escapement or intentional addition of artificially cultured animals could completely change the integrity of the wild population.
8. **Stocking:** Often ocean fish farming operations are developed for programs to re-stock natural populations in decline. Cultured animals can look or behave differently than wild ones because of their captive conditions and may even be genetically different because they were raised to grow faster and to be larger. Captive fish might not have the ability to feed, reproduce and survive in the wild. Intentionally adding cultured animals to wild populations can, over time, change the genetic composition and behavior of natural stocks.



9. **Unexpected environmental harm and abandoned/bankrupt facilities:** Ocean fish farming facilities are often subject to uncontrollable conditions including weather, currents, disease and human precision. Facility damage by any number of unplanned events (violent weather, hungry predators, human error) could cause a major escape or significant chemical pollution.
10. **Use of oil rigs for aquaculture:** During violent storms in the Gulf of Mexico in recent years, oil rigs were destroyed and carried miles to shore. Had fish farming facilities existed on these rigs at the time of the storms, there could have been massive releases of captive fish, feed and other pollutants. Remediating such situations would require significant monetary resources that might not be available from the company at the time of the incident.
11. **Water Pollution:** Fish wastes, excess food, fish escapes, antibiotics and various chemicals from fish farms can all result in water pollution and harm surrounding habitats by poisoning wildlife and causing other disturbances.
12. **Trade problems:** Ocean fish farming is unlikely to solve our import problem. Currently, we export about 70 percent of the fish we catch and grow here in the United States and import cheaper, often lower quality, seafood products. Fish grown in offshore aquaculture cages would likely follow the current export pattern, and the small quantity of newly farmed fish likely to be kept in this country would not offset the vast amount of fish imported.



Photo courtesy NOAA.

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