

Things to know about marine aquaculture

November 26 2015, by Julie Watson

Some 90 percent of seafood consumed by Americans is imported, yet the Obama administration's push to expand U.S. marine aquaculture into federal waters has failed to see one offshore farm in operation, nearly two years after the first permit was issued.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is pushing for [marine aquaculture](#) production in the U.S. to jump by 50 percent by 2020. The federal agency says marine aquaculture is vital to relieving the pressure of fishing on oceans, creating coastal jobs and securing the nation's food supply.

Read: [Projects stall after feds allow fish farming in open ocean](#)

Here's a look at the challenges still facing the young U.S. industry and how they're being addressed:

ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS POSED BY AQUACULTURE

Poorly managed, large scale aquaculture in some countries has polluted bays with the accumulation of [fish](#) feces and led to escapes of farm-raised stock, threatening wild fish and spreading disease. Feeding fish fishmeal and fish oil also threatens to further deplete world fish populations.

SOLUTIONS IN WORKS TO ADDRESS ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Marine ecologists say placing farms in deep ocean where water is circulating and regulating farms' size can help dilute the accumulation of feces. Researchers also are developing new vaccines against diseases, plant-based feeds for predator fish, and improved pens.

NO REGULATORY FRAMEWORK FOR AQUACULTURE IN FEDERAL WATERS

The first regional management plan for aquaculture in [federal waters](#) is in the final phases, according to NOAA officials. The plan aims to streamline the permitting system for offshore farms in the Gulf of Mexico and it will be implemented with other federal regulatory agencies. The plan could serve as a model for aquaculture in federal waters elsewhere, according to NOAA. They aim to develop a coordinated permitting process that outlines a set of clear environmental requirements such as baseline assessments, monitoring and data collection. Others are calling for a single permit for an aquaculture zone to make it more accessible to people.

THE FUTURE OF U.S. MARINE AQUACULTURE

With [wild fish](#) harvests flat for the last 30 years, a draft of NOAA's five-year strategic plan calls for marine aquaculture production to jump 50 percent by 2020. China today supplies most of the seafood imported to the U.S., but that could change as the Asian nation meets domestic demand that is expected to increase given the country's growing middle class. No open ocean farm is in operation in the United States yet. Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute in San Diego wants to start an offshore commercial fish farm to someday harvest 5,000 metric tons of yellowtail jack annually, with the potential for more than \$30 million in profits.

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