

# Rare monk seal dies in fish farm off Hawaii

March 17 2017, by Caleb Jones

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In this undated photo provided by NOAA, an endangered Hawaiian monk seal known as RB18 lies on the shore of Hawaii's Big Island. The monk seal has died after wandering into a net pen and becoming trapped at a fish farm that was partially funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Hawaii. Officials with NOAA said Thursday, March 16, 2017, the death of the 10-year-old monk seal happened at Blue Ocean Mariculture, the same fish farm that NOAA's National Marine Fishery Service has been using for research in conjunction with a plan to expand aquaculture into federal waters around the Pacific. (Julie Steelman/NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service via AP)

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Officials with NOAA said Thursday the death of the 10-year-old monk seal happened at Blue Ocean Mariculture, the same [fish](#) farm that NOAA's National Marine Fishery Service has been using for research in conjunction with a plan to expand aquaculture into federal waters around the Pacific.

Ann Garrett, the service's assistant regional administrator for protected resources, confirmed the farm was the same one used for the NOAA-funded research, but could not comment further on the agency's involvement.

NOAA is working on a plan to expand aquaculture into federal waters despite concerns by some environmental groups who say the industrial-scale farms could do more harm than good to overall fish stocks and ocean health.

The NOAA plan would create a regulatory and permitting scheme for the industry. The plan includes federal permitting and management of commercial fish farms in [federal waters](#), the area of ocean from 3 to 200 miles offshore, around Hawaii and other Pacific islands.

The agency funded three rounds of research at Blue Ocean Mariculture operation.

NOAA officials said at a news conference Thursday that they believe the seal drowned after the farm operators opened one panel of a net pen to release a shark that had gotten inside. The seal died on March 5.

"We did not see any signs of trauma or entanglement or any gashes or

lacerations. We also saw no gross signs, meaning obvious signs, of disease," said NOAA's National Marine Fishery Service's David Schofield, the marine mammal response coordinator for the region. "The seal, B18, had a stomach full of fish and otherwise appeared in good body condition so we can draw no other conclusion than that the animal did die in the fish pen likely due to drowning or suffocation."

Schofield said it was unclear if the fish that were found in the [monk seal](#)'s stomach were farmed fish from the net pen, but further testing should help determine that.



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Fisheries Service via AP)

Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources Chair Suzanne Case said in a statement the death is a tragedy and the state will work with federal officials to prevent future problems with aquaculture operations.

There are only about 1400 Hawaiian monk seals left in the wild, according to official estimates.

Fish farming has been practiced for centuries in Hawaii and around the world. But modern aquaculture, some environmentalists say, carries pollution risks and the potential for non-native farmed fish to escape and enter the natural ecosystem.

Former NOAA chief scientist and founder of ocean advocacy group Mission Blue Sylvia Earle told the AP in an interview in December there are more environmentally sustainable and economically viable options than open-ocean aquaculture, which uses floating net-pens or submerged cages. "We have to make a choice with aquaculture," she said. "Is our goal to feed a large number of people? Or is our goal to create or to serve a luxury market?"

New technologies are being developed for open-ocean aquaculture, and many U.S. companies are sending their crews overseas to farm, according to NOAA officials. NOAA says the research being conducted at the farm is designed to better understand ways to make open ocean farming safe and efficient.

"The U.S.'s view is we'd rather have these U.S. companies pursuing these opportunities in a sustainable, environmentally sound way in the U.S.," said Michael Tosatto, NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service

regional administrator, in a 2016 interview.

A request for comment from Blue Ocean Mariculture was not immediately returned.

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