Offshore Aquaculture in the United States: Opportunities and Challenges

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The U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), is focused on creating domestic seafood supply to meet the growing demand for all seafood products. Currently, over 70% of the seafood Americans consume is imported, and at least 40% of those imports are farmed seafood. Domestic aquaculture can be an effective option to reduce dependence on seafood imports, provide jobs for economically depressed coastal communities, and increase regional food supply and security. As it develops, offshore aquaculture will be one component of the broader NOAA Aquaculture Program, which currently addresses coastal and onshore marine shellfish and finfish farming. NOAA's Aquaculture Program also includes stock enhancement research and hatchery activities that support commercial and recreational fishing, endangered species restoration, and habitat restoration.

Currently, there is not a regulatory process for permitting aquaculture in U.S. federal waters – that area which extends from the outer boundary of U.S. coastal states to the 200-mile (322 km) limit of the Exclusive Economic Zone. This regulatory uncertainty is widely acknowledged as the major barrier to the development of offshore aquaculture in the United States. To solve the problem, the federal government, as part of the Administration's U.S. Ocean Action Plan, proposed legislation to establish a regulatory structure for offshore aquaculture in the United States. The National Offshore Aquaculture Act of 2005 (Act), which was introduced in the U.S. Senate in June 2005 as § S. 1195, will facilitate the approval of marine aquaculture operations in federal waters where there is great potential for aquaculture production.

The Act provides for the development and implementation of strong environmental protection measures. Issue-specific details about the permit requirements for offshore aquaculture will be addressed in the regulatory design process once Congress enacts the proposed legislation. In drafting regulations, the U.S. federal government is likely to draw on industry best management practices, codes of conduct, and regulatory examples from U.S. states and other countries with experience in marine aquaculture. The regulatory design process will include stakeholder consultation and a strong role for industry, states, coastal communities, fishery management councils, and conservation organizations.

One area of particular concern of resource managers is the risk of spread of infectious diseases from farmed animals to wild animals. Information was provided in the presentation on how this issue will be addressed by NOAA in cooperation with its federal partners.