CONCERNS WITH OFFSHORE AQUACULTURE

The issue: Farmed fish escapes from their containment can harm ecosystems, particularly when farmed fish of the same species interact with wild fish.

Farmed fish can outcompete wild fish for habitat, food, and mates. These fish may also not be adaptable for life in the wild, so they could pass on their compromised genes and behaviors when they mate – weakening (and thus reducing) wild populations over time.

The issue: Finfish farms can spread diseases and/or parasites to wild fish and other marine life, as most cages allow natural waters to flow in and out.

Because more farmed fish can equate to more money in the market, many fish farms densely stock fish in cages/pens. Stress from being confined and cramped can make farmed fish more susceptible to illness. When marine wildlife come near the cages, or when farmed fish escape or are released, they can significantly harm the ecosystem and wild fish by transferring diseases or pests. A 2021 study published in The Royal Society found that sea lice developed resistance to pesticides used by salmon farmers in Norway, and the resistant sea lice populations migrated to other areas of the ocean far from the fish farms.

The issue: Pollution is a serious concern. It includes excess fish feed, concentrated fish waste, pharmaceuticals, and other chemicals.

These pollutants originate from inside the net pens and readily flow into natural waters. This is especially concerning in places with fragile and threatened areas, such as the widespread coral die-off and algal blooms off the coast of Florida. Dilution is not the solution to pollution – it all goes somewhere, even if it is not readily apparent in the immediate area.

The issue: When finfish farms have buffer zones (no fishing areas) around the cages, this displaces both commercial and recreational fishing.

Buffer zones also concentrate fishing pressure in certain areas, and increase fuel costs as fishermen have to go around to avoid the industrial finfish aquaculture facilities.

The issue: Fish cages attract other wild fish and wildlife. Congregating fish in a specific location could lead to an increase of fish eaten by predators.

Captive fish, and their waste and feed, attract fish

and other wildlife. Fish attracted to the cages might get eaten by other predators that are likewise attracted to the cages. This could harm the long-term health of wild fish populations.

The issue: Marine life attracted to the cages - such as whales, dolphins, predator fish, and birds - might become entangled in lines, nets, and other equipment.

Finfish farms come with various lines, anchors, nets, and even support structures, like platforms or large vessels with their own equipment, that can entangle, harm, drown, and kill marine wildlife.

The issue: There will likely be an increased take of wild bait / forage fish to feed farmed fish. Fish feed also comes from the industrial production of corn and soy.

An increased take of wild bait / forage fish could reduce rebuilding, and long-term stability of existing recreational and commercial fisheries, such as Gulf menhaden. These small fish are a critical part of the food chain, and depleting a food source can hurt the health of other marine wildlife. Fish feed sourced from corn and soy may contain genetically modified organisms and contribute to the land grabs that feed the global commodity markets.

The issue: In other marine industries, bonding, insurance, or a fund for potential environmental and economic damages has been required. There is no such requirement to cover offshore finfish farms in the U.S.

Millions of coastal U.S. businesses and residents will be forced to take on the risk associated with finfish aquaculture facilities. Industrial finfish farm operations should absorb risks.

The issue: The existing multi-billion dollar recreational and commercial fishing industries, and others who rely on healthy marine waters and habitats, will bear the unintended consequences of offshore finfish farming.

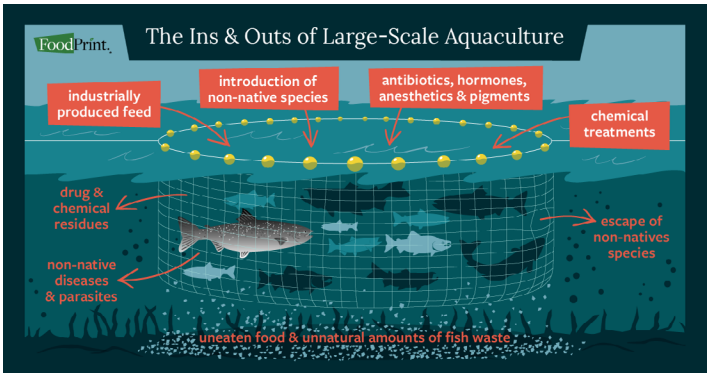
"First do no harm" should be the goal. The global experience with offshore finfish farming highlights many problems with the practice. Other countries have seen significant environmental and economic harm that outweigh benefits. It is irresponsible and unnecessary to create a new industry that is likely to endanger existing industries and cause ecological harm to our marine ecosystems.

The issue: The offshore finfish aquaculture industry will likely lead to a net loss of jobs.

Operations are rapidly becoming automated, and most companies bring in their own experts and workers, rather than train new people. Developing offshore finfish farming would seek to replace a historic and traditional industry - commercial fishing - with a new industry that would redirect control of food away from rural, coastal, and indigenous people, as well as independent businesses, and toward a large, international, corporatized industry.

The issue: Offshore finfish farming will not be used to feed our communities.

Offshore finfish farm proponents argue that the U.S. imports about 90% by value of the seafood eaten domestically, so growing more fish locally would help the country rely less on imports. However, this figure is misleading. It includes a significant amount of seafood we catch here in the U.S. that is shipped elsewhere for less expensive processing and then re-imported for sale and consumption. Also, much of the fish caught or produced in the U.S. is exported – because other countries are willing to pay more for better health, environmental, and labor standards. Offshore aquaculture is an expensive endeavor, and these fish will likely follow the same existing trajectory – exported to earn more money, instead of feeding communities in the U.S.



Infographic courtesy of FoodPrint (foodprint.org).