Summary of the
Aquaculture Amendment Public Hearing
New Orleans, LA
December 11, 2007

Council and Staff:
Harlon Pearce
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The hearing was called to order and the opening statement was read by Chairman **Harlon Pearce** at 6:00 p.m. at the Hilton New Orleans Airport. **Wayne Swingle** gave a presentation on the Aquaculture Amendment. Thereafter the public was invited to speak. There were 72 members of the public in attendance and 17 people spoke.

Many people agreed with prior speakers before offering their own testimony. Therefore the common concerns were summarized below followed by the list of participants, their affiliation, and any specific comments or recommendations that were offered.

Several people commented that they felt the public input process was inadequate. Some of their concerns were:

1. If the current document was used going forward, it should not be considered anything more than a draft scoping document, not a final document.
2. That their voiced concerns would be compressed into nothing more than a 2 paragraph summary.
3. That the Council was not talking to and getting feedback from actual fishermen.
4. Some stated that while hurricane ravaged areas were trying desperately to rebuild their lives, the stalled amendment suddenly started moving along again, which was suspicious to them. They wondered about this timing and absolutely opposed any fast-tracking of this amendment.
5. People want an option to say "no" to entire proposal. The document did not offer a choice of prohibiting aquaculture altogether.

- Some felt that bad management had led to the current dilemma and now aquaculture was being touted as the panacea to fix a situation that poor management created.
- Some wondered who stood to benefit financially from this industry and if that benefit was ethical or a conflict of interest.
- Some wondered where the placement of cages would be allowed and expressed concern about being restricted in accessing popular fishing areas.
- Participants wondered what economic impact the plan would have on coastal communities and whether aquaculture would be feasible for small family operations. Large industrial/corporate farms could harm the economies of coastal communities. Smaller businessmen could not afford to participate in this.
- What would the impact of aquaculture be on commercial fishermen and market prices? The sentiment was to help, not harm the historical fishermen. Introduction of an entirely

new industry would require very careful consideration and regulation. Cuts in the TAC were already hurting current fishermen.

- Bringing in a totally new business industry to compete with them would hurt them even more. If the resources were used to restore traditional fishing, there would be enough wild fish to feed everybody.
- There was already an active fishery in place if the regulators would just let the guys fish. Excess catfish farms have prevented increases in catfish prices and harvest from shrimp farms have lead to decreases in shrimp prices.
- Aquaculture was seen as a similar kind of culture. It would waste natural resources and be less economically effective than good fishermen.
- Regarding potential problems such as diseases and escapements, it appeared as though they were going to be handled in a reactive rather than proactive way. Stated solutions to potential problems were very ambiguous. People believed that there was a real threat of degradation of the marine environment and peoples' livelihoods. Because of a lack of data supporting aquaculture, the idea was considered nothing more than a grand experiment where the risk of ruin was high.
- Environmental issues were a concern, such as concentrated excrement polluting surrounding areas, genetic mutations, escapements, and farmed fish spreading diseases and parasites to wild stocks.
- Potential damage or loss of fishing vessels caused by underwater debris.
- Restriction of available fishing areas because of placement of pens.
- A large use of menhaden in order to provide feed for aquaculture would reduce the menhaden stock and its availability as a food source for wild stocks, resulting in possible cannibalism.
- Commercial fish operations would generate large amounts of pollution and expand dead zones. Resource must be properly cared for.
- All risk for clean-up funding for facility removal should fall on the shoulders of the business owners and the banks that fund them, not on the local citizens and their economies.
- The use of oil rigs being used as farms. Many believed this could pose a health threat due to contaminants found in the drilling fluids.
- Antibiotics, growth hormones and other feed additives that may present health issues.
- Public resources should not be used to benefit of private corporations.
- How aquaculture would increase MSY and OY was not clear in the document.
- Enforcement and oversight, including lack of personnel and funding was an issue. If land-based operations currently in place could not be adequately monitored, how would it be possible to adequately monitor offshore facilities.

<u>The speakers and any additional comments or recommendations:</u>

Myron Fisher, spoke as a charter boat captain in opposition to the amendment.

Daryl Carpenter, a Grand Isle charter fisherman favored the preferred alternatives, but spoke mostly in opposition to the amendment.

Dean Blanchard, spoke as a Grand Isle fisherman in opposition to aquaculture off Louisiana.

Robert Waldron a fishery scientist, spoke as a private citizen in opposition.

Karen Hopkins spoke on behalf of Dean Blanchard Seafood of Grand Isle Fish. She spoke in opposition stating that she believed fish farming would put commercial fishermen out of work.

Margaret Curole spoke for the Louisiana Shrimp Association, Commercial Fishermen of America, World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers in opposition.

Sasha Bollag whose comments are attached spoke in opposition to finalizing the amendment on behalf of Food and Water Watch. Holding many of the same concerns as others, he also included the following:

1. Poor fish quality because of overstuffed cages, genetic modifications, chemicals used to combat disease and parasites, feed containing mercury, and pollution from concentration of feed and feces.
2. U.S was already exporting 70% of our fish to get higher prices while importing the same fish of inferior quality in order to pay lower prices. In order to maximize profits, farmed fish would be shipped abroad as well, leaving the Gulf communities with only the environmental consequences.
3. Lost or submerged fish farm equipment becoming Gulf debris.

Charlie Smith spoke in stark opposition on behalf of Louisiana Charterboat Association. He named many of the same risks as other participants as well as the following:

- He recalled historical environmental government blunders and implied a distrust of government in general, particularly the Army Corps of Engineers and its ability to properly assess vulnerabilities.
- He noted the potential for devastating consequences since there were no guarantees, no models, which could illustrate absolute protection against unforeseen catastrophic events such as hurricanes.
- Wild behavior would be bred out of farmed fish, disease would weaken the species, and escaped fish could breed with wild fish weakening wild fish gene pools.
- State legislatures and environmental policy making organizations should be given the right of oversight on all aquaculture facilities.
- Recent hurricanes caused the loss of 165 oil rigs. How many fish farms would be lost during a similar storm season.

Aaron Viles of the Gulf Restoration Network concurred with many of the comments and spoke in opposition to the amendment. He commented that he believed that the document in its current form would not pass the requirements for MSA or NEPA. Also, reversing the depletion of menhaden, which are filter-feeding fish, was a major concern for preventing larger dead zones.

Keith Bergeron of Pair-A-Dice Charters of Grand Isle concurred with many of the comments and spoke in opposition to the amendment.

Brian Marks spoke as a private citizen and geography graduate student. Concurring with other comments already made, he also expanded on the social impact statement; that the social impact

could not be assessed because no project to collect social information had been implemented. Furthermore, where assessments were required by law, no conclusions could be made due to a lack of data. The assumption was that moving forward would be benign, which he thought ran contrary to federal law, common sense, and logic. He strongly objected to the social impact statement (found on pgs. xii-xiii in the document) and the document as a whole. He wondered why no data was available when census data, including demographics of fishing communities, was already compiled readily available. Moving forward without adequate impact data was perverse… "The less data you have, the faster you can go" this kind of thinking is bad social science. Other countries' experience could be used as inference data, if necessary. Also, there was no policy language to regulate price minimums.

C. William Belsom, **Jr**. an employee of Uptown Angler, a fly-fishing shop spoke as a recreational angler in opposition to the amendment.

Tracy Kuhns was present on behalf of the Louisiana Bayou Keeper, Association of Family Fishermen, and Louisiana Environmental Action Network. She spoke in opposition to the amendment. She felt the Council did not provide adequate protections for environmental fisheries resources, public access rights, and traditional fishing communities. States should provide those protections. Foreign companies should not be able to farm here. Revenues should be kept in the local and state economies and used for assisting local fishing families.

Marianne Cufone, an environmental attorney, spoke in opposition to the amendment on behalf of the Center for Food Safety. She was a member of the Gulf Council's Aquaculture Advisory Panel and she felt that the Panel put together a plan that was a very good foundational plan for future aquaculture operations. She felt that the Council essentially scrapped their recommendations because NOAA/NMFS asked the Council to hold off on its plan until NOAA could get national legislation passed. She commented that the current plan was created by a consultant who was paid by NOAA and was only approximately 9 months old. She also expressed disappointment with what she saw as a lack of public outreach regarding the last round of public hearings on aquaculture by the Council. She specified that if aquaculture was to be done right, it should be done by:

- not culturing endangered species
- or threatening species
- or HMS species,
- or species under an IFQ
- or genetically modified species
- or non-native species
- It should also include enactment of pollution standards.

She understood that the Council had requested many of these options as their preferred alternatives, but the preferred alternatives were not necessarily cast in stone. She wondered why the public's comments were being perpetually ignored. She felt that the document needed a lot more review and revision before it could even be considered for implementation.

George Barisich of the United Commercial Fishermen's Association spoke in unison with all the participants in opposition to the amendment. If the legislature was unwilling to act on this subject, he wondered why the Gulf Council was moving so quickly on the issue.
Pete Gerica of Lake Pontchartrain Fishermen's Association and fourth generation fisherman spoke in opposition to the amendment. He felt that no good could come from it.

Harold Schoeffler of Lafayette wondered how law enforcement would control highly regulated species coming out of these facilities. He felt that until issues such as pollution, diseases, water oxygen levels, etc. were addressed, the amendment should not go forward.

Mr. Pearce thanked everyone for attending. He commented that as one of 17 Council members, he had always, in the past, and will continue, in the future, to do everything in his power to help commercial fishermen. He reminded everyone of the January 17, 2008 deadline for submission of comments for the upcoming Council meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 7:50 p.m.

Fish farming is coming soon to our Gulf waters: concerns for consumers and the environment

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service are federal bodies that make decisions about fishing in U.S. waters. Right now they are finishing a plan to allow the growing of fish in huge floating cages out in our Gulf of Mexico. This is called "ocean fish farming", "open ocean aquaculture" or "offshore aquaculture". Whatever the name, it could cause serious problems for consumers and the environment! How?

- *More fish at lower prices does not mean good quality* – Farmed fish are bred to grow fast, reproduce often in overstocked stationary cages prone to disease and parasites and may be exposed to assorted antibiotics and other chemicals to combat illnesses and algae and barnacles. Fish feeds contain concentrates of wild fish exposed to mercury in the wild, and the farmed fish can have high levels of mercury from the feed.
- *We export our good stuff and eat imports* - Currently the U.S. exports 71 percent of its domestic production, including tilapia, tuna, salmon, crabs, and some shrimp. Ironically, these all are among the six top seafood imports. Essentially, we are sending our U.S. fish abroad where it fetches a higher price, and serving our own citizens imported fish, often of a lesser quality, that is cheaper. Likely this will still be the case if we begin ocean fish farming in the Gulf, as it is intended to be a profitable industry - leaving the U.S. with the environmental consequences that could devastate wild fish populations and critical habitat, and little else.
- *Farms can infect wild fish* - Farmed fish are held in captivity, usually in much higher numbers than would be normal in the wild. Cramped quarters, concentrated fish wastes, stress and other factors are often breeding grounds for illness. In Norway, there have been numerous problems with farmed salmon spreading diseases to wild salmon. Something similar is now happening in the Pacific Northwest. Because the Gulf farm facilities will allow free flow of water in and out of the ocean, parasites and other diseases will be able to escape the farm and infect wild fish.
- *Farms could pollute the environment and wildlife* - Concentrated amounts of fish food, fish waste and any chemicals or antibiotics that may be used to treat the fish to kill parasites and diseases or to keep cages free of algae and barnacles will flow straight into ocean waters through the open cages. Environmental problems have been reported at one of the nation's four experimental fish farms. A farm affiliated with the University of Hawaii "grossly polluted" the seafloor and "severely depressed" sea life. Additionally, the cages themselves could become marine debris in the event they are damaged or pulled free by violent weather.
- *Growing fish on or nearby oil rigs* – Wild fish that feed and are caught around oil rigs may have more contaminants than those used in the farm. Mercury levels around oil and gas platforms have been found to be higher than normal, as have mercury levels in fish caught around those platforms and around fish farms. More studies are needed on whether the fish grown in farms near or on oil rigs have higher levels of mercury. Mercury is a known toxin to humans that affects the brain heart and immune system, especially for children and developing babies.
- *Keeping old oil rigs* - Another issue with oil rigs is that allowing fish farming on them might give oil companies an excuse to keep the rigs in place, when they were originally to be removed after they were finished extracting oil. It can cost up to $5 million to remove a rig, and only about $800k to convert it to another use, so of course oil companies prefer not to remove the rigs. This means we could have many old oil rigs remaining in the Gulf after they are done extracting oil.

Fortunately, we have a chance to fix this bad plan. Public hearings will be held in New Orleans, Louisiana on Tuesday December 11th from 6-9pm at the Airport Hilton, 901 Airline Drive, Kenner- (For directions, call: 504-469-5000). See you there!