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Commerce Secretary Gutierrez Announces Bush Administration Bill to Boost Offshore Aquaculture

BOSTON – Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez today unveiled proposed federal legislation to promote safe and sustainable aquaculture in order to meet the growing demand for seafood, help the U.S. industry better compete and reduce the need for U.S. imports. The bill will allow aquaculture in federal waters—seafood farming beyond three miles off the coast—with stringent environmental provisions and is designed to complement efforts already underway in the states. Aquaculture is currently a \$1 billion U.S. industry and a key area for future sustainable economic growth in the fishing industry.

“Because we don’t encourage aquaculture in federal waters, we’re letting technology, investment and jobs go overseas,” said Gutierrez, speaking at the International Boston Seafood Show. “This bill will provide a federal aquaculture framework that meets the long term needs of the seafood industry and the growing demand of U.S. consumers.”

With an \$8 billion seafood trade deficit, the United States is largely dependent on farmed seafood imported from other nations to meet domestic market demand. Last year, the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization reported that half of global seafood production came from aquaculture.

“The United States accounts for only one percent of the global \$70 billion per year aquaculture industry,” added Gutierrez. “The U.S. is not in the game and this bill will help the U.S. compete in this highly profitable industry.”

The Department of Commerce, through its National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), has invested in aquaculture research and technology over the past thirty years. Development of this legislation was recommended by the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy and prioritized in President Bush’s 2004 U.S. Ocean Action Plan. In 2005 and 2006, Congress held two hearings on a previous version of the bill. In November 2006, NOAA released its 10-year plan for aquaculture for public comment.

The National Offshore Aquaculture Act of 2007 will bolster domestic seafood production by allowing aquaculture (fish and shellfish farming) in the open ocean, beyond three miles offshore. In addition to creating jobs and enhancing revenue in coastal communities, this new industry will benefit other industries, including soybean and grain producers, equipment and technology providers, seafood processors, transport, marketing, food service, veterinarians, and commercial and recreational fisherman through stock enhancement.

America's wild fish stocks are rebuilding to sustainable populations, and the nation has committed to stop overfishing by 2010. However, even fully restored wild fish stocks will not be able to fill the growing demand for seafood. Nutritionists, medical researchers and government agencies have encouraged increased consumption of fish and shellfish for its wide range of scientifically documented health benefits.

"The United States needs both a strong commercial fishing industry and a robust aquaculture industry to meet growing market demand for healthy seafood, so we envision the two industries complementing, not competing with, each other," said Gutierrez.

"By adopting industry best practices and through tightly controlled and monitored aquaculture operations, the United States has a unique opportunity to set a high global standard for seafood farming," said retired Vice Adm. Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Ph.D., under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator.

The Administration's aquaculture bill was developed in close consultation with industry, conservation groups, states, the research community and others. Their collective input led to specific environmental protections; an opportunity for states to opt out of aquaculture within 12 miles of their coasts; streamlined permitting requirements, and enhanced research focus.

"Today's action opens the door for close collaboration and partnerships between NOAA and our stakeholders as we work with Congress to enact the bill and later, as we develop an environmental impact statement and during rulemaking and permitting for aquaculture," said Bill Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries Service. "We will be counting on public involvement every step of the way so the end product will be something we are all proud of."

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National Offshore Aquaculture Act of 2007: www.aquaculture.noaa.gov

NOAA Fisheries Service: www.nmfs.noaa.gov

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