

REFRAMING THE DEBATE OVER AQUACULTURE

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Spurred on by the growth of aquaculture worldwide, the role of aquaculture in meeting consumer seafood demand, and the enhancement needs of commercial and recreational fisheries, aquaculture continues to attract attention from researchers, fisheries managers, policy makers, and the public. In addition to the inherent health benefits and potential economic benefits of a more robust domestic industry, experts are focused on research challenges, including genetics/escapes, pollution, disease, and feeds.

A federal agency under the U.S. Department of Commerce, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is focused on creating domestic seafood supply to meet the growing demand for all seafood products. Currently, over 80% of the seafood Americans consume is imported, and at least half of those imports are farmed. The U.S. aquaculture industry is diverse, but tiny compared to the global industry. However, additional U.S. aquaculture production would be an effective option to reduce the nation's dependence on seafood imports, provide jobs for economically depressed coastal communities, and increase regional food supply and security. However, fear, myths and misperceptions about aquaculture practices and aquaculture's effect on the environment abound despite significant improvements in the way seafood is farmed. Advances in feed conversion ratios, the protection of water quality, prevention of escapes, genetics research, and disease management are not widely understood or acknowledged by the interested public, including many in the marine policy and science fields. And, although current market and regulatory forces are pushing the aquaculture industry toward a higher level of sustainability, those advances are also misunderstood or ignored.

Beginning in 2005, the NOAA Aquaculture Program successfully opened a national dialog focused on marine aquaculture as a critical element in the nation's fisheries management toolbox. In order to advance further, this national dialogue must include a science-based examination of the benefits and challenges inherent in building our nation's capacity for domestic aquaculture production.

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