

MADE IN ALASKA

MARICULTURE

The Honorable Wilbur Ross, Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20230

Re: NOAA Aquaculture Opportunity Areas, Request for Information – Alaska Letter of Support

Dear Secretary Ross,

December 21, 2020

The Alaska Mariculture Task Force recommends Alaska for your consideration as a potential Aquaculture Opportunity Area (AOA). ***Specifically, the Task Force recommends appropriate state and federal waters off Alaska for the cultivation of shellfish and seaweeds be given particular consideration in your determination of future suitability analyses for Alaska.***

In Alaska, mariculture is defined as the enhancement, restoration and farming of shellfish and seaweeds. Species include oysters, clams, mussels, geoduck, crab, sea cucumber and seaweeds (kelp). ***It is important to note that finfish farming in Alaska state waters is prohibited under Alaska Statute 16.40.210 and is thus not included in mariculture activities in Alaska.***

In 2014, the Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation (AFDF) began spearheading the Alaska Mariculture Initiative – a strategy to accelerate the development of mariculture in Alaska. The Initiative led to the establishment of the Alaska Mariculture Task Force by [Administrative Orders #280](#) and [#297](#) under Governor Walker and the adoption of the [Alaska Mariculture Development Plan](#) in 2018 (also see [brief summary](#)). The goal of the comprehensive plan is to grow a \$100 million industry in 20 years, with dozens of near-term and long-term recommendations, research priorities and goals. Governor Dunleavy maintained the Task Force, which is now working closely with the Governor’s Alaska Development Team towards priorities identified in the Plan.

The Task Force consists of 11 members with one member from each of the Alaska Department of Commerce and Department of Fish and Game, University of Alaska, and Alaska Sea Grant, and seven representatives from an inclusive group of stakeholders in Alaska. The Task Force also includes ex-officio members from the Alaska DEC and DNR, and NOAA. Other closely involved stakeholders include aquatic farmers, fishermen, seafood processors, shellfish/seaweed hatcheries, marketing organizations, Alaska Native organizations, and coastal communities.

Aquaculture in the United States has been growing since 1996, but it remains well below production levels in the rest of the world. In 2017, global aquaculture production of seaweed alone was 31.8 million metric tons per year, with a net worth of \$11.7 billion. The majority of edible seaweeds consumed in the United States are imported from Asia. Alaska has over 30,000 miles of coastline with pristine, nutrient-rich waters. In 2018, Alaska's seafood industry produced \$5.6 billion in economic output, which is more seafood than the rest of the U.S. combined. The potential for increased domestic seafood production and sustained economic development from mariculture in coastal communities is profound; consequently, the potential positive impact of a designated AOA in Alaska is much higher than in other U.S. regions.

Although the mariculture industry in Alaska is in its infancy (valued at \$1.5 million in 2019), it is poised to experience considerable growth in the near future due to a number of factors that make Alaska an ideal place for growing seaweed. For example, Alaska has the largest existing seafood processing infrastructure in the U.S.; Alaska has approximately 9,000 vessels registered for commercial fishing, most of which have excess capacity during the year, along with experienced operators. Seaweed is generally planted in the fall and harvested in the spring during seasonal low periods for both processors and fishermen; Alaska has the largest amount of state and federal waters, in combination with the least conflicting uses.

A recent indicator of growth for the Alaska mariculture industry is seen in the number of applications received by the state for aquatic farms in the period from 2017-2020. For example, in 2016, the state received only 4 applications. In 2017 through 2020, the state received a total of 64 applications (over 2,500 new acres). These new applications are broadly spread across the state in the following regions: Southeast, Prince William Sound, Kenai Peninsula, Kodiak, Aleutian Islands and the Alaska Peninsula. Species include Pacific oysters, geoduck, blue mussels, sugar, ribbon and bull kelp. Correspondingly, farmed seaweed production in Alaska grew from none in 2016 to approximately 600,000 pounds in 2020.

Additionally, seafood processors are showing interest in both farming and processing seaweed and oysters. In recent years, three applications have been submitted by two companies for a total of 307 acres, of which one application was recently approved for a 182-acre oyster farm near Sitka.

The Task Force and partners have provided [informational sessions](#) to Alaska stakeholders on this impactful opportunity through the NOAA AOA program, and solicited feedback across a diverse group of Alaska stakeholders in the private and public sectors, including the seafood industry, community representatives, and Alaska Native organizations. We appreciate this opportunity, including investment in a Programmatic EIS, spatial analysis, site suitability studies, and additional information provided by NOAA if selected. This would provide invaluable siting information and spatial analysis of state waters and appropriate federal waters off Alaska, identify areas of potential conflict, and garner increased public and private investment, both of which are necessary to foster the continued sustainable growth of the Alaska mariculture industry. The benefits would extend far beyond the mariculture industry in Alaska.

Supported by feedback from Alaska stakeholders in Southeast Alaska, South Alaska Peninsula, Pribilof Islands, Kodiak, and Prince William Sound, the Task Force offers this Letter of Support for AOA designation in appropriate state and federal waters off Alaska for the cultivation of shellfish and seaweeds.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on future Aquaculture Opportunity Areas and your attention to this important issue. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me directly with any questions.

Respectfully,



Heather McCarty, Chairman

Alaska Mariculture Task Force

Cc: Danielle Blacklock, Director, Office of Aquaculture, NOAA

John Moller, Office of the Governor

Fred Villa, Office of the Governor, Special Assistant

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Alaska Mariculture Task Force