

## Federal aquaculture push faces uphill battle in Alaska

By Ben Fisher

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With a hard push being made by the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump to up aquaculture production in the United States in order to reduce the country's seafood trade deficit, many are wondering where Alaska fits into that plan.

While certain types of aquaculture such as shellfish farming are permitted in Alaska, finfish farming is banned under Alaskan statute 16.40.210, which was passed by the state legislature in 1990.

Before that door closed, in 1985, there was a legislative push to authorize aquaculture in the state, which remains, to-date, the closest the state has ever come to legalizing salmon farming.

Richard Harris was, at that time, a member of a group of individuals in a loosely-structured association cooperating to promote mariculture, The group included Sealaska Corporation, the Washington Fish and Oyster Company, and Ocean Beauty Seafoods. Their efforts resulted in the first proposed complete legislation to permit fish farming in Alaska.

Reflecting on his own efforts 30 years ago, Harris said that was likely the best opportunity the state had to permit finfish aquaculture, but said in those early days of commercial aquaculture, the Alaskan public had a "large number of concerns" with salmon farming.

"There was some concern over visual impacts ... the issues of pollution associated with the farming," he said. "Not quite as intense was the concern over sea lice and other pathogens that might be affecting wild fish."

However, the biggest obstacle for the proposal were the state's salmon fishermen, who scuppered the deal long before any nets or fish could touch the water.

“The number-one issue was simply the fisherman control of the fishery and their opposition to any kind of salmon farming industry,” Harris said. “They felt it would diminish the Alaska brand, which was always wild – ‘wild Alaska salmon.’ They definitely had a very powerful voice.”

Those trying to pass the proposal could only do so much before running into the challenge posed by the unswerving opposition of the fishermen, he said.

“They really didn’t see any kind of a situation that was a win-win for them,” he said.

Looking back, Harris sees a number of things his group could have done differently which would have given the proposal a better chance for passage.

“We should have figured out some ways to pull more of the public into supporting it, such as requiring salmon farms to do a certain amount of remote release of king salmon in areas where there aren’t indigenous population so you could enhance both the commercial fishery but also the sport fishery,” he said.

Failing to make inroads into the fishing communities of Alaska was a fatal shortcoming of the pro-aquaculture effort, Harris conceded.

“In our efforts, we probably really never understood what the fishermen’s real motives were,” he acknowledged. “It’s one thing to say, ‘I don’t like it,’ or ‘I want wild,’ but there were other deeper motives that led them to oppose the industry.”

Harris said he believes that those motives were primarily monetary, but he thinks they were emotional as well. There is a romance associated with salmon fishing, he said. Even so, he is confident that if “a group of fishermen saw a financial benefit, they would jump right on it.” Without one, he believes they have a “hard time seeing why [they] should change the status quo.”

With that level of resistance, the efforts of Harris and his cohort were doomed to fail. Even so, the final tally was close.

“When we got to the [last] vote, there was one senator from Sitka who happened to be very influential at that time and he basically said, ‘If this bill passes, I will hold you guys hostage on anything you want, forever,’” Harris said. “We would have had an aquaculture bill except for one senator.”

Harris recently returned to Alaska from a trip to Europe, and lamented, “Most of the consumers [in Europe] don’t seem to care whether it’s wild or not.” He thinks perhaps getting the public on the side of aquaculture could have changed things and lit a fire under the fishermen to compromise.

Now, the landscape is vastly different, with millions more Americans and people around the world regularly consuming both wild and farm-raised salmon. But with concerns about dwindling numbers of wild fish and recently shortened commercial and sport fishing seasons in Alaska, there are those who believe that aquaculture could help to prop up the wild stocks.

Still, Harris said he expects an uphill battle for any attempt to permit aquaculture in Alaska because of the strong political support for the state’s fishermen. The fishermen, who Harris acknowledged are a mixed group with varying opinions, have found influential allies both in Juneau and in Washington D.C., who they have lobbied for many years with impressive results.

“These [fishermen] have made a very good case over a very long period of time in Washington D.C. with our senators and representatives, so it would be pretty hard to get an aquaculture provision passed because you’re going to run up against [U.S.] Senator [Lisa] Murkowski, U.S. Senator [Dan] Sullivan and U.S. Congressman [Don] Young, who have all over time become very strong advocates for fisherman on many issues.”

Asked whether he thought Alaskan fishermen in 2019 would be more accepting of an aquaculture push now that the demand for salmon is threatening the supply, he answered, quite plainly, “No.” When pressed, Harris added, “I think the politics then is the same as the politics now.”

“I think the challenge that we face then and even now is that the fishermen look at this and say, ‘There’s nothing in it for us. We don’t see that there’s any way it benefits us, it just throws another product in the market. They don’t want to lose that economic power of controlling all of the salmon coming out of Alaska,” he said. “Until the fishermen say, ‘Alright, there’s something in it for us,’ then they’re just not going to be likely to move off of their position, and the elected people are going to say, ‘Well, until you guys can make peace with the fishermen, I don’t see us making any real progress.”

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