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CT Sea Grant-led Project Looks to Unlock Potential of Seaweed Industry

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By Judy Benson

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The UConn Avery Point-based program will lead efforts on the East and West coasts to boost commercial seaweed harvesting.

Connecticut Sea Grant, based at UConn Avery Point, will lead a three-year, multi-state initiative to create the economic and business framework needed to spur the fledgling domestic kelp industry into the mainstream.

Supported by a \$766,650 federal grant announced Wednesday, Jan. 27, the project will involve nine East and West Coast states where nascent seaweed aquaculture businesses are being impeded from further growth by the absence of comprehensive financial and management information resources. The economic analysis and business plans created by this project would be intended for use by different types of kelp farms as well as investors and lenders.

'There has been a real need for the information to be produced by this project to support the development of the kelp industry in Connecticut and the United States,' says project leader Robert Pomeroy, UConn professor emeritus, extension specialist and marine resource economist at Connecticut Sea Grant.

He will work with experts and colleagues in Sea Grant and university extension programs in New Hampshire, Maine, Rhode Island, Alaska, Washington, California, New York, and Massachusetts to develop education and outreach programs needed for seaweed farmers, investors, and lenders to make informed decisions. The grant funds will pay mainly for staff time required to research and analyze information on existing farms and markets, as well as varying regulatory and environmental conditions in different states.

'The anticipated outcomes of this project include more access to capital, more informed business decisions by farmers, investors and lenders, increased employment, greater success of business and environmental improvements,' Pomeroy says.

Working as co-investigator on the project will be Tammy Warner, assistant professor of management at Keene State College in New Hampshire. She will lead the business planning aspects.

'I look forward to leveraging my experience in small business and start-up financing to support the development of this exciting new industry,' Warner says. 'Fundamentally, business planning for seaweed farmers is the same as for any small business. It's about communicating your goals and intentions to those who can help them come to fruition.'

Kelp, the most common type of cultivated seaweed in the United States, is seen as an important new agriculture product for food, medicinal products, additives and bioremediation of marine pollutants. Internationally, the seaweed market has been expanding rapidly, and more than 95 percent of the seaweed now consumed in the United States is grown overseas. According to current estimates, about 1 million pounds of seaweed is currently harvested from U.S. waters, with forecasts that the market could expand to 4 million pounds annually by 2035 if barriers can be overcome. In Connecticut, there are currently 15 permitted kelp growing sites, with four of those growing product.

'This effort represents yet another opportunity to listen to aquaculture industry members, understand their needs, and apply local expertise for national scale benefits,' says Sylvain De Guise, director for Connecticut Sea Grant. 'This is very exciting, and squarely aligned with the mission of Sea Grant.'

Pomeroy notes that the project builds on another Connecticut Sea Grant-led initiative, the establishment of the National Seaweed Hub in 2019 and first-ever National Seaweed Symposium last March. It brought together 100 farmers, researchers, regulators, and others to work together to move the industry forward. Headed by Anoushka Concepcion, Connecticut Sea Grant aquaculture extension specialist, the National Seaweed Hub serves as a clearinghouse to troubleshoot and brainstorm how to overcome obstacles the industry faces.

'This project is fully complementary to the National Seaweed Hub,' Pomeroy says.

Concepcion says the project is a direct response to the work of the Seaweed Hub thus far.

'This project will address two priorities identified through a comprehensive national needs assessment of various seaweed stakeholders, conducted as part of the National Seaweed Hub's efforts,' she says. 'The first is to better understand the economics of seaweed farming in the United States, and the second is the need for assistance with developing business plans for prospective seaweed farmers.'

One part of the project will quantify the financial value of the ecosystem services performed by kelp farms, which consist of networks of lines anchored in offshore areas. The kelp is seeded onto the lines, growing to harvest size in a few months. After harvest, it is processed into products such as kelp noodles, kelp powder, and blanched and frozen to be served as a vegetable. It is considered both a highly nutritious and environmentally friendly crop, offsetting carbon emissions and removing excess nutrients from marine waters as it grows. One goal of the project is to enable farmers to monetize these ecosystem services.

The \$766,650 grant is the second largest of 12 awarded by NOAA Sea Grant program to specifically address the economic and market needs of the U.S. aquaculture industry. A total of \$4.7 million was awarded.

'The projects represent Sea Grant's commitment to not only understanding the science behind sustainable aquaculture in the U.S. but also the economics and market possibilities for sustainable aquaculture,' says National Sea Grant Director Jonathan Pennock. 'We think these projects will provide valuable knowledge and new resources to help strengthen and expand the U.S. aquaculture industry.'

STORY TAGS:

[seaweed](#), [Connecticut Sea Grant](#)

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