

SATS launches new campaign to spur US aquaculture expansion

By Sam Hill

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U.S. aquaculture advocacy group Stronger America Through Seafood has launched a new campaign this week, titled “Essential Aquaculture,” that aims to create a sense of urgency for Congress to act swiftly on aquaculture expansion in the country.

Specifically, SATS is calling on Congress to clarify a regulatory pathway for permitting offshore aquaculture.

“Offshore aquaculture is constrained by complex and inconsistent regulations, which hinder its growth. American aquaculture currently meets only 5 to 7 percent of seafood demand. Instead of farming more locally grown seafood, the U.S. imports 90 percent of its seafood. By establishing a clear regulatory pathway for permitting sustainable offshore aquaculture, federal lawmakers can increase domestic seafood production and reignite a vibrant American seafood future that benefits the American economy, industries, and communities nationwide,” the group said in a press release.

According to the organization, an additional 40 million metric tons (MT) of seafood will be needed to meet current demand trends by 2030 (even more when global population rises to an estimated 9.5 billion by 2050) and aquaculture can help increase seafood production.

“Aquaculture presents a unique opportunity to build an American seafood future that can bring us through this challenging time and support a diverse workforce, enhance sustainable ecosystems, and guarantee healthful, locally-sourced protein for American consumers,” a letter penned by numerous SATS members to U.S. President Joe Biden earlier this year said. “As America begins to rebuild from the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing America’s seafood supply through aquaculture will have benevolent rippling effects throughout many areas of the country. Increased aquaculture production will increase demand for American-grown crops, such as soybeans, corn, and peas, which can be used in fish feed, and will open up new markets to heartland farmers while lessening dependence on the uncertainty of foreign trade relationships.”

While the Biden administration hasn't made any definitive statement in support of aquaculture, its emphasis on action on climate change could align well with support for the domestic seafood industry in general, according to senior NOAA officials. At a Seafood Expo North America *Reconnect* event in March, NOAA Fisheries Acting Assistant Administrator Paul Doremus told the audience numerous synergies exist between the fishing industry and climate interests in Biden's "building back better" resiliency plan.

"There's a really big place for seafood in the climate-resilient food future that we're looking for," Doremus said. "That resilience extends to our entire food system, and a stronger place of seafood in that world will have a big impact on our overall climate resilience."

Doremus is a supporter of aquaculture expansion – specifically offshore expansion – in the U.S., believing that the country can be a significant producer in the global industry, not just a technology partner.

"The coastal zone is getting too crowded – too many competing uses, too challenging to produce there – and the technologies are developing to effectively and efficiently grow, at scale, fish in the offshore environment that puts them outside of a lot of areas that create risk and drive up cost in the nearshore environment," he said in a 2020 SATS video. "We're going to need all modes of agriculture, but the vanguard is really offshore."

Doremus said U.S. aquaculture technology is being exported to other countries, instead of being put to use domestically.

"We see promising technologies, many of which have developed here," he said. "We should be growing the fish here and not just producing the technology to go to the fish elsewhere. That's been a pattern in the past and we can have the opportunity to turn it around."

The administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump was supportive of the aquaculture industry and expansion. An executive order signed by Trump in May 2020 was designed to enhance the competitiveness of the seafood industry and included several boosts for aquaculture including removing barriers to permitting, a section devoted to improving "regulator transparency for aquaculture," one to establishing "Aquaculture Opportunity Areas," and an update to the National Aquaculture Development Plan.

The launch of the Essential Aquaculture campaign includes new fact sheets, social media shareables, and an infographic that outline how essential aquaculture is a solution to some of the most pressing food security and sustainability issues we face today.

"As Congress debates ways to address the many pressing challenges we face, including economic recovery, food security, and environmental challenges, aquaculture should be considered as one of the solutions," SATS Campaign Manager Margaret Henderson said. "The expansion of American aquaculture is essential to the U.S. economy. Aquaculture can strengthen American communities by supporting new jobs and a diverse workforce in a post-pandemic world. Increased seafood production would also ensure families have a steady supply of affordable American-raised seafood produced sustainably with minimal impact on the environment, which is essential to climate and conservation efforts."

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