

Alaska Aquaculture Opportunity Area Request For Information: Transcripts from Public Listening Sessions

Listening Session 1 of 3, Nov 14, 2023, 9:02 AM Alaska Standard Time

Moderator: Megan Ewald

Megan Ewald: Welcome everybody, let's kick it off. As a follow-up to our June 1, 2023 announcement beginning the process to identify [Aquaculture Opportunity Areas \(AOAs\) in Alaska](#) state waters, in partnership with the State of Alaska, NOAA Fisheries requests data, comments, views, information, analysis, or suggestions from the public to support the identification of AOAs in Alaska state waters.

The public input provided in response to this Request for Information (RFI) will inform NOAA as it works with Federal, State, and Local agencies, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, and in coordination with appropriate Tribal governments to identify AOAs. Comments provided today will be part of the administrative record.

As a reminder, this is an opportunity to provide oral comments--not a question and answer session. To provide a comment please "raise your hand" and the host will unmute you. Participants will have two minutes to provide verbal public comments before they will be muted.

To start us off today, we're going to go with around the room introductions. My name is Megan, and I'm the communications lead for NOAA's office of aquaculture. And I'm going to call on folks to introduce themselves.

Alexis Horn: Hi, I'm Alexis Horn. I am the co-host and the communications specialist with the Office of Aquaculture. Thank you.

Alicia Bishop: Hi, I'm Alicia Bishop, and I serve as the Regional Aquaculture Coordinator for NOAA fisheries in Alaska. Thanks.

Andrew Miller: Good morning everybody, my name is Andrew Miller. I manage the Aquatic Leasing Program for the state of Alaska's Department of Natural Resources.

Brent Reynolds: Hey, good morning. My name is Brent Reynolds. I work with the Aquatic Farm program with the Department of Natural Resources here out of Anchorage.

Carol Brady: Good morning. I'm Carol Brady. I am the shellfish program coordinator

with the state of Alaska Food, Safety and Sanitation program with the Department of Environmental Conservation. Thank you.

Chris Schillaci: My name is Christopher. I am the aquaculture lead for the National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science, Policy, and Planning team.

Kate Dufault: Hi, my name is Kate Dufault. I work in the Aquatic Farm Leasing program for the Alaska Department of Natural Resources here in Anchorage.

Kristine Cherry: I'm Kristine Cherry, I'm currently the acting Deputy Director for the Office of Aquaculture.

Kristy Beard: Hi, I'm Kristy beard. I'm with NOAA Fisheries Office of Aquaculture and I'm the national policy lead for Aquaculture Opportunity Areas.

Megan Ewald: Great Thank you all for joining today. And I'm going to pass it over to Alicia Bishop to continue with our presentation.

Alicia Bishop: Hi, everybody, thank you for joining us today and learning more about Aquaculture Opportunity Areas and the Request for Information that's currently out. So, my name is Alicia Bishop, as I mentioned, and I serve as the Regional Aquaculture Coordinator for NOAA Fisheries, and I am leading the AOA identification process in Alaska.

We're also going to hear from Chris today who works with the National Centers of Coastal Ocean Science (next slide). So some ground rules for today's meeting. This meeting is an introduction to Aquaculture Opportunity Areas and it's an opportunity to provide oral public comments on the Request for Information. This meeting is not a question and answer session. And we aren't going to be covering any specific permit applications or applications in the queue (next slide).

So the NOAA Aquaculture Program is comprised of 3 line offices National Marine Fisheries Service (where I sit), the National Ocean Service with the National Centers of Coastal Ocean Science, and Oceanic and Atmospheric Research with the National Sea Grant college program, and all of these organizations work together across NOAA to advance sustainable aquaculture in the us through policy, outreach, science grants and extension services (next slide)

AOAs and expanding U.S. seafood fit really nicely together. So as a complement to our wild capture seafood, expanding domestic agriculture is critical for economic and environmental resilience. So the resilience of the seafood sector, sustainable, domestic aquaculture and AOAs all fit together to help us expand U.S. seafood (next slide).

The process was launched in 2020, with an Executive Order on Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth, but the primary driver behind this is the ability to take a science based approach to planning for aquaculture development. We're looking for

areas that can accommodate multiple projects and can support seaweed and invertebrate aquaculture so, shellfish, sea cucumbers as an example. We want to understand the public's interest and concerns about aquaculture development in Alaska state waters. Ultimately, we hope that AOAs will incentivise investment in aquaculture development to address the increasing demand for seafood and promote American seafood competitiveness, food, security and economic growth while maintaining our commitment to stewardship and marine resources (next slide).

So, what is an Aquaculture Opportunity Area? AOA really just means an area with high potential for commercial aquaculture. The process for identifying AOAs is a multi-year planning process to advance commercial aquaculture that's going to result in the identification of areas that are determined to be environmentally, socially and economically suitable for aquaculture. In order to get there, we're going to combine spatial analysis, scientific review and public input from you to help us identify appropriate locations. We want to minimize user conflict with other ocean uses such as military, shipping, fishing, and subsistence activities. While we maintain our commitment to ocean stewardship (next slide).

So, what is this multi-year planning process? Think of it as being divided into 2 primary parts: the first 2 years are focused on a suitability analysis. Chris is going to walk you through in a little more detail in just a minute, and the next 2 years are focused on environmental review where we're going to be conducting a review through the National Environmental Policy Act. And those two parts are going to have two main products. So the spatial analysis is going to conclude in what's called an Atlas. It's a report that compiles all of that spatial information. And the 2nd, main product is the conclusion of that environmental review or NEPA document. The AOA identification process is very much public driven. We're looking for your input to help us design AOAs and determine the appropriate location for AOAs (next slide).

So some key points to consider: this is a multi-year planning process. It's not regulatory. Meaning NOAA doesn't have any new authorities through this process. These are not pre-permitted sites meaning that federal and state leasing and permitting requirements still apply within or outside of AOAs, and in Alaska, all AOAs will be sited within state waters, which means we are looking to support seaweed and invertebrates aquaculture. Finfish farming is prohibited.

The identification of AOA locations does not happen until the very end of that process. And AOAs do not restrict where you can site farms, farms can still be sited within or outside of AOAs, but siting within AOAs helps front load your process (next slide).

Looking at the Alaska AOA process timeline a lot has happened since we started this process back in June of identifying Alaska as the next location, where we wanted to explore AOA identification.

So, since that point, we've been engaging with the public collecting data and essentially trying to figure out how do we take the huge state of Alaska and narrow that down to some reasonably sized study areas. For that we have developed some initial siting parameters. And part of this Request for Information that we just released in October is to get your feedback on that, and to also help us collect information that's going to help us identify AOAs in Alaska. In November, we're holding 2 listening sessions. This is the first one, and tomorrow is the second one, and then we're going to be collecting public comment through December 18th.

All of that information together is going to help us finalize those study areas and collect appropriate information to help us move forward with identifying Alaska AOAs.

And then with all of this information, and those final study areas that's gonna really allow NCCOS to dive in with data collection and start their modeling for that siting analysis.

With those draft siting maps, we're hoping to hold some workshops in the spring to share that draft siting information. And then NCCOS is going to move forward with drafting that Atlas report that I mentioned, and that's going to be open for peer review. So this gets us through the end of 2024. The public process is really a big part of the identification process (next slide).

So this request for information is one of the 1st opportunities for public input, and we're looking for information to help us support the identification of AOAs in Alaska state waters, including siting parameters. That can be used to select potential study areas for further analysis. Additional opportunities for public input include that notice of intent to start our NEPA process as well as the draft NEPA review. So, throughout this multi-year planning process, there's going to be multiple opportunities for public input (next slide).

We hope that you want to dive in and learn more about this request for information and encourage you to reread what is located on the Federal Register Notice. So we've provided the link to that here. In addition, we've developed 2 websites- that NOAA Fisheries website identifies how to provide those public comments. You can do that, you know, electronic written or oral comments - like, today. It also gives you some of the overview maps of the study areas. If you want to dive into those study areas in a little more detail, check out the NCCOS website, that's going to provide you with the study area maps, including at the community level. In addition we have the information linked here to those websites and don't hesitate to reach out with questions (next slide).

And with that, we will turn things over to Chris to walk us through the spatial planning for AOAs.

Chris Schillaci: Thanks Alicia. Thanks everyone for joining us today (next slide).

My name is Chris, and with the National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science. Within the National Ocean Service (next slide).

Our team within the National Ocean Service, and then NCCOS, specializes in coastal marine, spatial planning and in particular aquaculture spatial planning. Over the last 5 years we've completed over 50 analyses with customers, including ports, states, harbors, as well as looking at farm specific sites. Two products you may be familiar with are the aquaculture Atlases we've developed for Round 1 in the Gulf of Mexico, in Southern California (next slide).

For any of our analysis we begin with identifying project requirements or parameters, help narrow down the focus and areas for further study. In Alaska, we've been working to understand critical parameters for siting and in particular looking at issues, like distance from port as well, as constraints, like ice cover, we're also looking to gather input on the final products that we'd like to see analysis whether those are species gear combinations, specific opportunity analysis, consideration of economic development goals for a particular area where the largest area that might support multiple types of aquaculture (next slide).

Based on our work to date. We identified for consideration within the parameters for narrowing down the study areas, within the state of Alaska, where we will further focus our analysis. One proxy for needed infrastructure to develop successful aquaculture within the state is a radius to coastal population community, coastal community population centers. So looking at census data, we've identified a number of coastal population centers that have the resources to support mariculture or aquaculture within the state. Another critical constraint we've identified is ice cover. And taking the aggregate maximum ice expanse between 2013 and 2021, we're able to identify 16 communities for further opportunity for analysis (next slide).

These communities are in the Southeast, Southcentral and Southwest portions of Alaska. That's fine. We're seeking input on those specific study areas as well as data around spatial information for those study areas, or for other areas within the state of Alaska state waters. This can include military data and oceanographic, biological industrial things like fishing activity, or other ocean uses as well as important boundaries such as municipal state, military operating areas (next slide).

All of our models start with first identifying the factors to be successful with mariculture or aquaculture. So, as we build our suitability model, we look at the specific characteristics, environmental characteristics that would promote success. These include things like the type of substrate, current speed. We also may develop a species gear combination thresholds for each of these for each species gear combination considered. And as part of the request for information, we're seeking information on the candidate species and gear types, which we should further analyze within our study (next slide).

As we consider constraints and suitability factors in the kind of data that incorporate into our, we put these into into sub models. Each model is given equal weights for the data and the sub model, and we use a geometric mean to calculate the score across all sub models. Again, the types of data we're specifically interested in looking for are things like military operating areas, cargo vessel traffic, passenger, vessel traffic, sensitive habitats, protected species. Commercial and recreational fishing activity important cultural sites. Shipping lanes, environmental sensors, corals, important habitats and other activities, such as active oil and gas wells or that may constrain aquaculture. Or limited suitability, or promote suitability (next slide).

As we move forward, we start to identify spaces within the study areas that we focus on that have the highest potential for opportunity. As you see on the left, you take the suitability scores for various cells within the study areas, and start to get a picture of clusters within those study areas that support the highest compatibility with aquaculture. You see on the right you can see we further narrowed down the study area into this high high suitability clusters (next slide).

This is where we get into identifying the best possible options within a study area, and we can do this by looking at the specific species gear combinations and where the suitability may overlap or where discrete sites where one versus the other can be identified. We're looking for spaces that suit multiple types of aquaculture without distinction to the type of species or gear that it would be crucial (next slide). Okay once we've characterized those options, and once we've identified those options, we do further characterization is another important source of data that we're seeking. Data that might help us understand environmental conditions or other social economic factors on the site that may increase suitability. Um, or compatibility with aquaculture activities (next slide).

Once we've identified suitable areas, characterized options, we put that information into an Atlas report. That is then used to help further the analysis and move forward with the next steps for identification of AOAs (next slide).

Alicia Bishop:

So, for all of this information we are seeking your help to fill in those gaps as part of those questions we have posted in that request for information.

So, one of the things we're looking at are the parameters that are useful. So, as Chris mentioned, you know, the population centers and ice coverage- what else should we consider? How big or small should AOAs be within study areas? Should we connect the size of AOAs with economic development goals? Are there specific locations that we should consider, or avoid for AOAs? Are there subsistence harvest locations, fishing areas, sacred sites, etc. that we should avoid? Are there protected resource concerns or overlap or data that you want to make sure we're

aware of? Are there health concerns like HABs, or impaired water quality? Is there additional research we should be aware of such as all of the great work happening under EVOST and the mariculture cluster projects, or from our universities? Is there other data? Chris laid out a bunch of those sub model needs. So we're definitely looking for information to help populate those sub models- Is there information on oceanographic, natural resources, social and cultural government boundaries, industry, military, navigation, or recreation that you have that you would like us to include? Is there species and gear that you want us to analyze? We want to make sure that we are analyzing the species and gear combinations that you want to see advance in Alaska. So, are these species/gear combinations? What's currently in use, or even species/gear combinations that you would like to see in the future? Be sure to flag those for us. And do you have any information on the biological and physical thresholds for those species/gear combinations to help us with that siting analysis? And then finally, is there anything else that you would like to flag for us?

Remember that we are accepting comments through December 18th (next slide).

So, what's next? You can provide us with oral comments today and tomorrow, and also you can provide us with electronic comments through regulations.gov. Or you can mail us your comments to the regional office.

So, all of these will be collected through December 18th. And with that, I'll pass things back to Megan.

Megan Ewald: All right, thank you so much, Alicia and Chris. So, from here, we're going to start collecting our oral comments.

To submit a comment, please raise your hand and I will unmute you individually. As a reminder for those who may have joined late, this webinar is being recorded and comments submitted today will be included as part of the administrative record. And with that, I'll open it up to the group if you would like to, you would like to comment, please raise your hand.

Neil Stichert: Yes, please, thank you. Neal Stichert with the regional fisheries program for the U.S. Forest Service. I've not previously engaged in this effort, but I think I need to do a little catching up. My question is, what scale do AOAs go down to? Speaking specifically, the Forest Service has a number of tidewater cabins in upland areas that are highly popular recreation areas that we manage. We don't manage the water jurisdiction obviously, but we do have a lot of recreational use in some of our use areas in Prince William Sound, and across Southeast Alaska so these planning areas get down to very specific.

Willow Hetrick: Well, I would just request an update on it and we fully intend to submit a more thoughtful, detailed public comment by December 18th. But one of the projects that I wanted to talk about this morning when I heard Alicia talk about Exxon Oil Spill Trustee Council funding that was awarded to the Alaska Community Foundation. It is titled Social, Cultural and Economic Assessment of Cultural Opportunities for Coastal Villages within the Spill Zone. The project period for that project is February 1st, 2022 through January 31st 2027. I strongly encourage NOAA to wait or, uh, at least, track along with that project, the goals of that project are to understand if and how coastal villages in the spill zone want to be engaged in mariculture it's also designed to target some of the questions that you're asking, like, what are cultural resources that you don't want impacted? Are there areas that you use a lot that you would just really not want to see buoys in the water? We want to track along with that particular project because it's going to be very important to answer those cultural resources in that region. I'm with the Chugach Regional Resources Commission, I'm sorry I should have said that first off, and we represent 7 communities in coastal, southcentral Alaska. They have a lot going on, they have a lot of opportunity flying at them and flying by them. It's really hard to grasp everything that's going on right now in terms of funding and all of this great opportunity. This is a great opportunity. I should also say that very, very important these Aquaculture Opportunity Areas are. We submitted a letter in support of those originally. We're happy it's here in Alaska, we need to take our time and we need to be sure that all of the information is gathered from coastal communities, which often takes quite a long time. So, again, January 31st, 2027 is when that project is going to be done and, uh, final reports are going to be ready for the public to disseminate and consume and use your modeling. So, again, uh, expect a letter from us.

Jon Bonkoski: Can you hear me?

Megan Ewald: Yes, I can hear you.

Jon Bonkoski: Great. My name is John. I am representing myself, but I work for Eco Trust. We are a nonprofit based in Portland, Oregon, and we work from California through Alaska, and we are supporting mariculture development in Southeast Alaska. I believe that the request as part of a public process, like this, is inappropriate, and it should be revised as to how good NOAA interacts with tribes. This should be more government to government relations. And this is not part of it should not be part of the public process. I think that requesting this, as part of the public process, ignores guidance from the administration about interacting with and engaging with indigenous communities and obtaining indigenous knowledge and I think that NOAA needs to revise that request as part of this process and engage in government to government relations with tribes to obtain that information. Thank you.

Megan Ewald: Thank you very much for everybody who submitted a comment. Thank

you for those who attended and to our presenters today. And we welcome all additional comments via the Federal Register link or mail. Thank you to everyone who attended and have a great rest of your day.

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