# Alaska Aquaculture Opportunity Area Request For Information:

## Transcripts from Public Listening Sessions

**Listening Session 2/3, Nov. 15, 2023, 2:00 PM Alaska Standard Time**

**Moderator: Megan Ewald**

**Note: There were technical difficulties during this listening session and participants were only able to join the webinar via phone, therefore the slides were not visible.**

**Megan Ewald**: Thank you everyone for joining we're gonna give it a couple minutes just to allow people to trickle in. Thank you for attending today. And for everyone's awareness, this webinar is being recorded.

We are having some technical difficulties with the video, but thank you to everyone who called in over the phone, so thank you all for your patience. This is being recorded.

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. To start us off today, we're going to go with around the room introductions. I'm going to start with Brent Reynolds and the folks in Alaska.

**Brent Reynolds**: Good morning. My name is Brent Reynolds. I work with the Aquatic Farm Leasing Program with the Department of Natural Resources here out of Anchorage, Alaska.

**Kate Default:** My name is Kate Default, and I work with Brent and the Aquatic Farm Leasing Program here in Anchorage for the Alaska Department of Natural Resources.

**Sandra Miller:** Hi everybody, my name's Sandra Miller. I also work with Kate and Brent, in the Aquatic Farm Leasing Program for the Department of Natural Resources.

**Alex Horn:** Alex Horn. I am with NOAA's Office of Aquaculture, and I'm a communication specialist. Thank you.

**Alicia Bishop:** My name is Alicia Bishop, and I'm the Regional Aquaculture Coordinator for NOAA Fisheries in Alaska.

**Carol Brady:** Good afternoon. My name is Carol Brady. I'm the Shellfish Program Coordinator with Alaska's Department of Environmental Conservation.

**Megan Ewald:**: Thank you. I'm going to have Chris, Kristine, and Kristy introduce themselves.

**Chris Schillaci:** Hi Everybody, my name is Chris Schillaci. I work for the National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science, leading the aquaculture spatial planning analysis for Alaska state waters.

**Kristine Cherry:** My name is Kristine Cherry. I am the acting Deputy Director for NOAA Fisheries Office at our headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland.

**Kristy Beard:** Kristy Beard, I'm a policy analyst for NOAA Fisheries Office of Aquaculture at our headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland.

**Michelle Morris:** Hi, my name is Michelle Morris. I am the Permit Coordinator for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game located in Juneau, and I handle all permits for aquatic farming.

**Megan Ewald:** Thank you and from here, I'm going to pass it over to Alicia and Chris to give their verbal presentation on why we are meeting today.

**Alicia Bishop:** Just out of curiosity are we going to share slides? Or are we just speaking?

**Megan Ewald:** All of our attendees have called in today.

***No slides were visible to the audience***

**Alicia Bishop:** So, I'll just speak then. Hi, everyone. I'm Alicia Bishop, and thank you for joining us today to learn more about Aquaculture Opportunity Areas and the Request for Information. So, today you're going to hear from myself and Chris with the National Centers of Coastal Ocean Science. As Meg pointed out, the intention of today's meeting is to share information on Aquaculture Opportunity Areas and also to accept public comments on the Request for Information.

This meeting is not about having a Q and A session and will not be covering any specific permit applications or projects in the queue.

So, the NOAA Aquaculture Program is comprised of three line offices - NOAA Fisheries where I sit, the National Ocean Service with the National Centers of Coastal Ocean Science, and the Oceanic and Atmospheric Research with the National Sea Grant Program, and all of these organizations work together across NOAA to advance sustainable aquaculture in the US through policy, outreach, science, research, and extension services.

AOAs fit really nicely into our mission of expanding the US seafood sector as a complement to our wild capture seafood, expanding domestic aquaculture is critical for economic and environmental resilience. The resilient seafood sector, the sustainable domestic aquaculture and AOAs all fit together to help us expand US seafood.

So, what are we trying to achieve with Aquaculture Opportunity Area identification? The AOA process was launched back in 2020 with an executive order on promoting American seafood competitiveness and economic growth. But the primary driver 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, such as shellfish and sea cucumbers. And we want to understand the public's interest and concerns about aquaculture development in Alaska state waters.

Ultimately, we hope that it will incentivize 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 of marine resources.

So, you may be wondering what is an AOA? Aquaculture Opportunity Areas are simply locations that show high potential for commercial aquaculture. The process for identifying is a multi-year planning process. From this process, we are looking to identify locations that are environmentally, socially and economically suitable for aquaculture.

And in order to get there, we're going to combine spatial analysis, scientific review, and public input to help us identify those appropriate locations. We want to minimize user conflict with other ocean uses, such as military shipping, fishing, and subsistence activities, but it's not just about what areas we want to avoid. It's about finding the best areas to optimize the growth of the species you want to farm with the gear you want to use, while maintaining our commitment to ocean stewardship. And then, as we look at this multiyear process, you can think of it as being divided into two main parts. So the first two years are really focused on that site suitability analysis. And the next two years are focused on the environmental review with the National Environmental Policy Act. And from those two different sections, you can think of two main products that come out of those. The spatial analysis concludes with what's called an Atlas report. It includes all of our mapping and analysis behind that. And the environmental review will conclude with our NEPA document. The AOA identification process is a public driven process. So, public input is really crucial and helps us design AOAs and helps us identify where to properly site.

So, some key points to think about is that AOAs have not yet been identified in Alaska. We're at the beginning of that multiyear process and this is a planning process. We're seeking to gather the best available information to help farmers and regulators make informed decisions about where to site farms. This isn't a regulatory process.

And NOAA doesn't have any new authorities. These are not pre-permitted sites. Meaning aquatic farms can be sited both inside and outside of AOAs. And you still have to go through the same state and federal leasing and permitting processes. However, siting operations within AOAs will hopefully front-load that leasing and permitting process. In addition, for Alaska, we are looking at siting completely within state waters, which

means we want to support seaweed and invertebrates. Finfish aquaculture, or fish farming is prohibited within state waters.

The identification of AOA locations isn't gonna happen until the very end of the process when we conclude with a NEPA document. And as I mentioned, aquaculture projects aren't going to be restricted by this process, so you can site within or outside of an AOA.

So, if we're looking at our Alaska process timeline. We just started this process in June where we kicked off identifying Alaska as the next region to explore AOA identification. And since that time, we've really been spending a lot of time engaging, gathering information and thinking about how we take the huge state of Alaska and narrow that down to just some reasonably sized study areas.

So, from that initial input, we were able to formulate a Request for Information and that Request for Information just went out in October. And as part of that Request for Information, we are holding these two Listening Sessions, today being the second. So that's an opportunity to provide oral public comments. But there's multiple ways to provide public comment. You can provide electronic comments or written comments to the Region. And we are going to be collecting those through December 18, and with all of that information that's going to really help us finalize those study areas based on public input.

Once we have those study areas finalized, then NCCOS can really dive in with our data collection and modeling for that site suitability analysis. We intend to hold some mapping workshops in the spring of 2024, where we can share some of that draft mapping information and seek some feedback.

And then again, NCCOS will draft the Aquaculture Opportunity Atlas's, and put those out for peer review. So that brings us through the end of next year. So, I want to remind everyone that this is very much a public process and the Request for Information is one of your first opportunities to engage in that process.

So, we're looking to support the identification of AOAs in Alaska state waters, including the siting parameters that can be used to select potential study areas for further analysis.

But this is one of many opportunities for public input. The next will be that Notice of Intent to prepare our NEPA document. And then there'll also be another opportunity when we draft our NEPA review. We've prepared a

number of websites to help share additional information about this Request for Information.

We encourage you to read the Request for Information that's posted on the Federal Register and as a reminder, we are going to be collecting public comments through December 18th. So, this Request for Information is seeking comment on the draft study areas, and the parameters used to determine those. And Chris is going to walk you through that in just a minute as well, seeking data analysis and other information relevant to identifying AOAs in Alaska State waters. So this can really be an area where you help us help us fill in those data gaps and move things forward.

On the NOAA Fisheries website, you will find information about how to provide comments during that 60 day public comment period, including electronic written and oral comments as well as an overview of the study area maps, and then the NCCOS website is going to provide all of the study areas, including more detailed maps at the community level. So I encourage you to check that out.

And with that, I'll pass things off to Chris to walk through our spatial planning process.

**Chris Schillaci:** All right, thank you. Alicia. My name is Chris. Actually, again, I'm at the National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science. I am leading the spatial planning process development of the suitability models for Alaska. Our team at NCCOS have been working in aquaculture, spatial planning and siting for a number of years.

We've done about fifty of these analyses over the last 5 years and most relevant are the two Atlases we developed for Round 1 in the Gulf of Mexico and in Southern California. You can find links to those Atlases, which provide a really good overview of the spatial planning process.

On the slide deck from today, we've also worked to support state designated aquaculture use areas. There's spatial planning for ports and harbors and specific farms. So all of our spatial models begin with identifying critical parameters for success, you know, we want to identify spaces that are really optimal for production, but also reduce conflicts with other users and environmental parameters.

So based on a lot of discussions, publications and review of growth in aquaculture in Alaska, and we've identified a couple parameters that we'll talk through to help us narrow down the study areas, we also are

soliciting input on the product of the Atlas's. Are we considering specific species/gear and where is most suitable for those individual species and gear combinations?

Are we looking at economic development goals across Alaska? Where are we looking at areas that multiple types of aquaculture can be successful? So, we started with Alaska state waters, and as much as we'd like to, we don't have the resources to do this type of analysis across the entire state. And, as we said, we really want to narrow down to those areas that have the greatest opportunity for success. So, we identified two proposed criteria to narrow down study areas.

The first, being the need to have infrastructure to support aquaculture growth, get products to market, and bring in supplies and seed and other needed resources to be successful. So we chose a 25 mile radius from the top 25 coastal communities by population and we used 2010 census data. So, how much has changed in the 2020 census data? But looking across, that identified 25 communities, but we also narrowed down the specific study areas or proposed study areas, looking at maximum size.

You can certainly do aquaculture where there is regular ice that develops in the winter, but it limits opportunity and creates challenges. So we decided to use an aggregate maximum ice layer to focus down on areas that don't regularly experience ice. So that leaves 16 communities. And those were in Southeast, Southcentral, and Southwest Alaska. You can go to the website that Alicia referenced earlier to see those specific study area maps.

We're definitely taking feedback on, you know, are these the appropriate study areas? Are there other areas we should look at? And additional consideration to help focus the study area selection process.

Once we've identified study areas, our next step is to compile a comprehensive geodatabase that includes spatial data for it. Military activities navigation, oceanographic, biological, and industrial as well as cultural significance, we want to put context of those data layers and understand how each of those activities that they represent are suitable, or not suitable with aquaculture development. And we can do that in a number of ways if we were to go with the species/gear combination direction we would want to identify environmental thresholds that each of those species/gear combinations can thrive in and then start with the areas that meet those thresholds and whittle down from there. So you can, on the slide deck that you can get a copy of you'll see, we're looking

at things like current and depth that will impact activities like rack and bag, or floating gear, or hanging baskets would be most suitable.

After you've identified areas that are super for growing, we then focus on taking in those various spatial data layers into a quantitative suitability model, so that we can identify how sensitive habitats, protected species, vessel traffic, and military, commercial and recreational fishing. and important cultural and environmental concerns overlap with those study areas or which of those areas seems suitable for the particular species or a combination.

In the questions, we then look for patches of suitability clusters where multiple areas, multiple cells have high suitability and that's where we focus the rest of our analysis. And as we go through, once we see clusters that might be suitable for one or multiple types of mariculture. Operations we identify those as options within the study areas for further consideration.

During the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement process, this will provide a lot of data to characterize those options within the study areas.

So, not only are we looking for data that can help with the suitability modeling, but also data that can help with characterizing what activities may occur there? What are the conditions? All of us being equal are there things that need to be considered--not captured in the suitability model, but could relate to suitability of that area for aquaculture development.

Following that we would produce an Atlas report similar to what was developed for Southern California and in the Gulf of Mexico. I'm going to turn it back over to Alicia to talk through some of the specific Requests for Information questions.

**Alicia Bishop:** Thanks everybody. So, this brings us back to the questions that we have identified in that Request for Information where we are looking for your feedback on. So, the first question is, are those parameters that we used to identify our study areas useful? So that goes back to the population centers and ice cover, what else should we consider?

The second question is how big or small should areas be within study areas. So should we connect the size of AOAs with economic development goals? There are a number of mariculture economic development goals in Alaska, including those from the Mariculture Task Force, and the Alaska Mariculture Alliance, and the mariculture cluster

project, so think about, should we try to connect the size of these areas with some of these development goals?

Number three, are there specific locations we should consider or avoid in Alaska?

Number four, are there subsistence harvest, locations, fishing, areas, sacred sites, et cetera that we should avoid. Now, we understand some of this information may not be readily available, or it may be sensitive information. In that Request for Information, we say, you know, if this isn't ready to be submitted, could you please at least identify points of contact so that we can follow up and have conversations about those data sources?

Number five, protected resources concerns overlap. So, for this, we're trying to figure out, you know, do you have information, for instance, on whale feeding areas, or haulout locations that you want to make sure we are aware of within those study areas?

Number six, are there health concerns, like harmful algal blooms or impaired water quality that you would like to flag?

Number seven, is their research we should be aware of? There's a lot of great work happening with the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee research projects, and the mariculture cluster projects from our university in the state. So are there components that you really want to make sure we are aware of and including in our analysis?

Number eight, is there other data? Chris just highlighted a number of spatial models that are going to be part of our analysis. So, can you help us populate those spatial models? Do you have oceanographic, natural resources, social and cultural, government boundaries, industry, military, navigation, or recreational information that you want to share with us?

Number nine, is there a species/gear combination you want us to analyze? We really want to make this analysis useful to you. So, can you identify the types of species you're interested in growing in Alaska and the gear you want to use, whether that's currently in use now or things that you would like to see developed in the future? And if you have any information on the biological and physical thresholds for those species/gear combinations, that would really be helpful for us in our siting analysis.

And then number ten, is there anything else are we missing? So please, let us know we look forward to hearing from you and your input is going to be really critical in this process. Remember that comments are due by December 18.

And with that, I'll pass things back to Meg to open it up for public comment.

**Megan Ewald:** Great, thank you so much Chris and Alicia. From here, we are going to open our public comments.

As a reminder this webinar is being recorded and all verbal comments given today are included in the administrative record from here. I invite you all to raise your hands.

For those of you on the phone, you can press star three to raise your hand.

I'm not seeing any raised hands as a reminder. Please press star three to raise your hand and star six to unmute. We'll give it five minutes and if nobody wants to comment today, we can call this Listening Session.

As a reminder, we will be holding a makeup session due to the technical difficulties we've experienced today. So, please be on the lookout on the website, as well as the NOAA Fisheries Office of Aquaculture Listserv.

You can find that online by googling NOAA Fisheries, Office of Aquaculture Listserv and signing up for alerts.

Thank you all for attending and we will be sending out invitations for a 3rd Listening Session in the coming days.

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