

Jeanne McKnight

As someone who has worked in the seafood industry for more than 35 years, with the past 30 years focusing on the global aquaculture sector, I would like to comment on Cooke Aquaculture Pacific's application for a permit to raise all-female, sterile steelhead in lieu of Atlantic salmon—which the state of Washington banned when it passed HB 2957.

More than ever, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that we need to develop our own food resources in this country, to prevent disruptions in supply as we have seen.

What is the potential here?

I have seen first-hand aquaculture's promise fulfilled in the country of Chile (where I worked for more than 15 years, representing the salmon farming industry in the US market), and I believe, optimistically, that it just might be possible to see Washington state become an important player in all forms of aquaculture—including freshwater, marine, offshore, and land-based—shellfish, finfish, and so-called "sea vegetables."

In Chile today, aquaculture (largely salmon farming and mussel cultivation as well as the services and support sector) is a US \$4B industry, employing some 60,000 people in aquaculture-related direct and indirect jobs; further, Chile's aquaculture cluster, linking industry and academia, focuses on innovation and continuous improvement of the sector.

It could happen here if we can move beyond the mythology and focus on the science.

Opponents of aquaculture would like people to believe otherwise, but aquaculture today has advanced tremendously from where it was in the early days.

This is largely due to the marketplace demands (from retailers and foodservice), which challenged industry to adopt responsible, sustainable practices and recognition by the producers themselves that to maintain their social license to operate, they needed to embrace principles of environmental sustainability, animal welfare, social justice, and food safety and quality. It is a continuous process, helped by ongoing research from both the public and private sectors—as well as continued dialog with stakeholders.

The phenomenon of retail supermarkets working with environmental NGOs in determining how and what to purchase, has led to the widespread industry adoption of various third-party certification programs such as Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) and the WWF-sponsored program, the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC). Companies such as Cooke that sell to international markets also have met the very stringent British Retail Consortium (BRC) standard and others.

The important point to remember is that for salmonid marine aquaculture, all of these certification programs have very rigorous (and auditable) standards in place. When you tally the numerous

regulations in place all over the world, from Norway to New Zealand to Scotland, Chile, Canada, and the United States, it is clear that to even enter this sector, an aquaculture company needs to be committed to meeting and, in most cases, exceeding these standards in order to produce certified products consumers will buy.

Does Washington aquaculture have the potential to produce the volumes of farmed fish as Chile? Not likely due to geographic and oceanographic conditions. However, the potential exists to make water farming as important to our state's economy as apples, cherries, potatoes, and wine.

So, what will it take?

I personally believe that we need to encourage a company like US-based Cooke Aquaculture Pacific and its parent company, Cooke Aquaculture, Inc., to continue operating here—not attempting to push them out. (And for the record, I am not employed by Cooke.)

Cooke is a family-owned entrepreneurial company with 35 years' experience in seafood that started with one farm site in 1985, growing to where it is today: a company that is a world leader not just in farmed seafood but also in the Alaska wild capture fishery.

Cooke is now a major seafood employer, creating jobs for 3,800 essential farming, fishing, food production, transportation, and supply chain workers in 19 states that have welcomed them as a good employer and corporate good citizen.

What I know from working for the seafood industry—both the commercial, wild harvest side as well as the farming side—is that those who make it to the size of a Trident, Pacific Seafoods, and Cooke truly deserve our respect. These family-owned, privately held companies do more than create "jobs"; they give back to their communities, innovate new products as a way of competing in the market, and cultivate new generations of leaders who care about this wonderful industry sector and they care about feeding the world with a high-quality protein that contributes to better health.

And while Cooke has been in the spotlight and under the microscope, I believe that the company is committed to embracing best aquaculture practices and becoming a leader in this sector in Washington state. I say let's give Cooke Aquaculture Pacific a chance to show Washington why they have been named one of Canada's "Best Managed Companies" 15 years in a row by approving their permit modification to raise steelhead at its Hope Island, Fort Ward, Orchard Rocks, and Clam Bay net pen facilities.

Doing so will be a very important step toward building a food secure future in our region.

Furthermore, I sincerely believe that, with all of the safeguards and planned improvements in place that the state will require (and Cooke will implement), this company can continue to provide healthy and sustainable seafood today and for generations to come.

Thank you.

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