

Evergreen Islands

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Comments on WA Department of Ecology's
National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Permit Review for
Cooke Aquaculture's Application: Raising Sterile All-Female Triploid Rainbow Trout/Steelhead at
Existing Marine Net Pen Sites

There are unacceptable risks associated with industrial-scale open water salmon/trout net pen aquaculture.

Evergreen Islands submits these comments in regard to the proposal to grant a NPDES permit to Cooke Aquaculture Pacific, LLC (Cooke) to raise biologically altered Steelhead Trout in net pens in locations within Clallam, Kitsap and Skagit Counties.

The State Environmental Protection Act (SEPA) requires a threshold determination of whether an action is likely to have a "significant adverse environmental impact." The State's current threshold determination of Mitigated Determination of Non-Significance (MDNS) for this project proposal is inadequate as an environmental review and fails to address many well-documented risks associated with farming salmonids in these pens. Large scale open water finfish aquaculture is known to pose significant environmental risks. The transition from Atlantic salmon aquaculture to rainbow/steelhead trout aquaculture adds significant risks that cannot be adequately mitigated as well as unknown risks not worth taking.

The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) referenced for this proposal was signed in 1990. That is 29 years ago. This can hardly be ripe for reference since there is much more science published on the subject over the last 3 decades.

The State should withdraw their mitigated Determination of Non-Significance, issue a Determination of Significance, and draft an EIS or supplemental EIS to assess the full impacts of this proposed industrial use using best available science.

ISSUE #1 Significant Impact: This project is likely to result in significant adverse impact on the environment. Relying on a Mitigated Determination of Non-Significance (MDNS) does not meet the requirements of the Statewide Environmental Protection Act (SEPA). Furthermore, incorporating by reference the 30-year-old Programmatic EIS: Fish Culture and Floating Net Pens (January 1990) is woefully inadequate since there have been substantial changes in the scientific literature, knowledge and practice over 30 years. While the narrative in the current package references research conducted more recently, this information should be part of an integrated analysis.

A decision on this proposal requires a comprehensive EIS which includes a no action alternative.

ISSUE #2 Water Quality Protection: Finfish aquaculture in open water pens is known to produce high amounts of untreated fecal matter, nitrogen loading, phosphorous and other concentrations of pollution from the artificially crowded conditions as well as contributing to poor water quality from the use of antibiotics to prevent and treat viral and fungal diseases that occur when fish are crowded together. These chemicals flow freely out of the net pens, affecting the greater marine

environment, leading to antibiotic resistant bacteria in marine animals. In addition, fish fecal matter settles to the bottom, altering the benthic environment directly under the pens.

The State of Washington Department of Ecology has pledged to take action to strengthen water quality permit requirements for net pen operations knowing that we must protect our waters and native endangered salmon from environmental risks. How can we assure that these regulations will be followed, operations monitored, and regulations enforced? While our State may do a good job passing regulations: the funding, monitoring, reporting and staffing can be inadequate.

The permit holders should pay the costs for monitoring and reporting water quality. Water quality tests should be done by the Department of Ecology or the Department's certified contractors.

ISSUE #3 Diseases: Pollution, pathogens and parasites flow freely through the net pens as water circulates and small, native fish swim in and out of pens. Native salmon and Southern Resident Orcas are endangered in these waters. We cannot take the risk of introducing new pathogens, more pollution and sea lice to devastate these marine populations currently at risk of extinction. For all practical purposes, these net pens are open environments, exposing resident marine life to diseases, pollution, antibiotics and other stressors in a system already compromised.

A comprehensive SEPA analysis should examine the risks to these protected species from raising biologically engineered steelhead/rainbow trout in these net pens, and develop appropriate mitigation measures in consultation with federal, tribal, and international co-managers. That analysis should include an assessment of disease transmission to predator species, as well as the effects of these diseases on wild fish.

ISSUE #4 Net Pen Design, Management and Maintenance: Existing net pens may not be adequate for the marine conditions in the Puget Sound. Certainly, net pen design and/or maintenance contributed to the collapse of Cypress Island 2. Why would you consider re-permitting such structures? What is to prevent such an ecological catastrophe from happening again? Will underwater video cameras of the net pens be required?

ISSUE #5 Bycatch: When finfish are harvested in industrial net pen operations, huge suction hoses are used. The result is the removal of everything contained in the pens, including salmon smolt and forage fish that swim in and out of the nets. Understanding the native salmon populations at risk in the Puget Sound, how will the operator prevent the mortality or "taking" of threatened and endangered species during the harvest? This was not clear in the NPDES package.

CONCLUSION

Why is Department of Ecology considering this application which capitalizes on an obvious loophole in the law recently passed to prohibit finfish net pens in Puget Sound? How does Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Ecology and Department of Natural Resources work together to assure proper oversight?

Please accept these comments and include Evergreen Islands as a party of interest. Based on past performance, we do not trust Cooke Aquaculture to protect the environment. We do not want industrial open water finfish farms in the Puget Sound. There are too many unknowns and the risks outweigh the benefit.

Marlene Finley, President
Evergreen Islands