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NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NOAA05-070
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 7, 2005

BUSH ADMINISTRATION RELEASES NATIONAL OFFSHORE AQUACULTURE BILL *Legislation Grants NOAA Authority to Permit Marine Aquaculture Facilities in Open Ocean*

Today, the Bush Administration sent its national offshore aquaculture legislation to Capitol Hill for Congressional action. The President pledged to propose this bill in the 109th Congress as part of his U.S. Ocean Action Plan, which outlines near-term and longer-term actions to protect our oceans and marine resources. This legislation is consistent with the recommendation made by the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy in its final report.

The bill grants the Secretary of Commerce authority to issue permits for marine aquaculture operations in federal waters, which cover about 3.4 million square miles from three to 200 miles off the coasts of the United States.

"Today's action will create jobs and revenues for coastal communities and U.S. businesses by allowing for the expansion of an underutilized industry," said Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez. "This legislation fulfills a promise President Bush made to the American people in his Ocean Action Plan, and we urge Congress to take action in support of this bill."

Currently, the United States does not have a regulatory structure in place to allow aquaculture operations in federal marine waters. While other countries have continued to develop aquaculture, the United States has fallen behind – resulting in a swelling seafood trade deficit as Americans increasingly rely on the supply of imported, farmed seafood products to meet the domestic market demand.

"Our goal is to develop a sustainable aquaculture program that balances the needs of fishermen, coastal residents and visitors, seafood consumers, the environment, and the aquaculture industry," said retired Navy Vice Adm. Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr., Ph.D., under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator. "Today's announcement starts a public process through which all our stakeholders and constituents will have an opportunity to provide guidance as we begin developing the guidelines and regulations for offshore aquaculture ventures."

Seafood is a critical source of protein globally, and the USDA recommends that Americans eat at least two servings per week for a heart-healthy diet. Projections are that global seafood demand will more than triple by 2025. Since wild-caught fisheries will not be able to meet future market demand, the increase in global seafood supply will most likely come from aquaculture – either imported or domestically produced. The U.S. imports over 70 percent of the seafood that Americans eat, and at least 40 percent is farmed overseas. With the seafood trade deficit and increased demand for seafood in the United States, this bill will allow for the growth of a sustainable U.S. offshore aquaculture industry.

After a decade of commitment to offshore aquaculture policy development and research, NOAA – an agency of the Department of Commerce – is positioned to carry out the mandates in the Act.

In addition to complementing wild catches to meet the growing demand for seafood, aquaculture can be used in hatcheries to enhance stocks of wild fish and shellfish for the benefit of commercial and sport fishermen and for endangered species restoration. The bill will spur development of innovative technologies for environmentally sustainable offshore aquaculture at home and abroad.

Aquaculture involves raising and harvesting aquatic species in a similar manner to agriculture with terrestrial species. Today, the primary production of commercial aquaculture in the United States is in freshwater species, such as catfish. Most commercial marine aquaculture in the United States is currently shellfish – including oysters, clams, and mussels, although potential exists for farming other marine species, such as finfish and aquatic plants. Offshore aquaculture is distinguished from other forms of marine aquaculture by the location in open ocean waters that are exposed to wind and waves, not sheltered in bays or coves closer to shore.

There are numerous advantages to offshore aquaculture. For example, the characteristics of offshore sites – including water depth, current flow and water quality – are attractive reasons to locate a facility offshore. Also, balancing multiple uses is a challenge closer to shore. Through public rulemaking, NOAA will establish criteria for aquaculture sites to avoid conflicts with shipping and other uses and to minimize impacts on the environment.

Research funded by NOAA over the past decade shows that offshore aquaculture can work well. Currently, aquaculture pilot projects – using submerged cages for finfish and submerged longlines for mussels off New Hampshire, Hawaii and Puerto Rico – are showing good production and environmental results. The projects demonstrate that proper placement of sites can minimize environmental concerns.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of the nation's coastal and marine resources.

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On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

NOAA Fisheries Service: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>

The U.S. Offshore Aquaculture Act Information: <http://www.noaa.gov/aquaculture>