

Environment & Energy

Washington State Prohibits Net Pen Aquaculture in Public Waters

By Zach Bright

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- Order aligns with Pacific Coast states fish policy
 - Restores public and tribal access to 130 acres
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Washington state is banning commercial farms of salmon, steelhead, and other finfish in the state's public aquatic lands under a state official's order on Friday.

The action, from Washington Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz, will make the Evergreen State align with net pen salmon aquaculture policy in place in Alaska, Oregon, and California.

"We, as a state, are going to do better by our salmon, by our fishermen, and by our tribes," Franz said. "Commercial finfish farming is detrimental to salmon, orcas and marine habitat."

The state Department of Natural Resources will also restore public and tribal access to more than 130 acres of Puget Sound that was previously restricted by the aquaculture industry's commercial operations for more than four decades.

Environmentalists Pleased

A coalition of environmental, tribal, and public health advocates who pushed for sea pen closures in Puget Sound call Franz's order a big win.

"It's clear this victory for wild salmon, orcas, and Puget Sound belongs to no one person or group," said Emma Helverson, executive director of the Wild Fish Conservancy.

With large quantities of farmed fish come daily discharges of untreated pollution and risks of interbreeding and infecting wild salmon and steelhead stocks, according to the Wild Fish Conservancy. Threats to the wild salmon population affect the population of nearby species such as orcas, whose diets consist mainly of the fish.

Franz on Nov. 14 didn't renew two leases for Cooke Aquaculture, a global seafood corporation, that were the last net pen leases on state-owned aquatic lands. The company has until Dec. 14 to finish its operations, begin removing its facilities, and remediate any environmental damage.

“Regulators and policymakers must responsibly follow the science and judicial precedents in making key decisions regarding marine aquaculture, which we do not believe was the case in this instance,” Cooke Aquaculture said in a statement.

The company also said it would explore “available options for our operations and investments in Washington with the best interest of our employees, and their families at top of mind.”

In 2017, the company was found responsible for a net pen collapse of more than 200,000 virus-infected Atlantic salmon.

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