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# With Washington's net pen ban official, what's next for U.S. salmon farmers?

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By Lauren Kramer

**Tribal leaders, veterinarians and other salmon farming proponents decry decision to restrict net pen aquaculture in state waters**



A group of orcas in the San Juan Islands with Washington's Mt. Baker in the background. Washington's former Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz cited the protection of orcas in her decision to uphold a ban on net pen fish farming in state waters. Shutterstock image.

January's decision by the Washington State Board of Natural Resources to uphold a ban on commercial net pens for aquaculture has met with disappointment and a resolve to fight back by tribal leaders, veterinarians and the Northwest Aquaculture Alliance among others.

The DNR reported that approximately 80 percent of public comments supported the ban, which former Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz described as a "legal and moral responsibility."

Referring to the net pens, she stated: "No one can say these facilities don't have an impact. They do. There's a cost to our agency, there's a cost to our waters and our bedlands, there's a cost to our salmon and our orcas. I don't believe that cost is worth it."

Puget Sound was home to commercial finfish farming in marine net pens for four decades, and aquatic land leased from the DNR. Franz terminated the last leases for finfish net pen aquaculture facilities in November 2022 and the final pens were removed in 2023.



(<https://link.chtbl.com/aquapod>).

Ron Allen, chairman of the Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe, said the move shows a complete disregard for science. “The board has chosen to prioritize politics and misinformation over scientific evidence and collaborative stewardship,” he said. “Even more troubling is the disregard shown for our Tribe’s sovereign rights to utilize our marine resources in our own fishery for the economic betterment of the Tribe. This outright prohibition infringes upon these rights and undermines the government-to-government relationship that should guide decisions affecting Tribal interests.”

The tribe is moving forward with its plan to grow steelhead at the Salish Fish Project, an entity of the Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe, said Maria Smithson, the project’s government and public affairs strategist. “This is a regulatory hurdle, however, given that the rule-making process was so incomplete and so skewed to a biased outcome, we feel it can be challenged,” she said. The tribe had lease and permit applications ready to go before the regulation was passed.

“We don’t believe the board of the Department of Natural Resources wants to continue fueling climate change by importing fish we could be growing locally, at home,” she added. “It’s really frustrating that the board has voted to continue heavy importation of fresh fish on jumbo jets, at a time when LA is burning to the ground. The biggest threat to wild salmon is climate change, and this ban will fuel further climate change.”

At the Northwest Aquaculture Alliance (NWAA), Executive Director Jeanne McKnight said her phone and email were “blowing up with messages from people who want to help fight this unjust, frightening decision.”

“Everyone is reporting on this as if it’s a done deal, but I don’t see it as a done deal. Our job is to make cracks in this decision wherever we can and turn it around.” McKnight said the NWAA will explore legal options and that it has many potential allies in other industry sectors in the US, Canada and globally, who are watching the situation closely.



## Some First Nations are asserting their right to farm salmon, despite pending government closures

With salmon farm closures imminent, some First Nations are taking action to preserve ocean-based farming and assert Indigenous sovereignty.



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“The process of making this decision was rushed because Hilary Franz had some people who wanted her to deliver this decision before she left office on January 15. The Wild Fish Conservancy was Hilary’s big supporter. She spoke of this ban as if it is the will of the people in Washington state, when it’s not. General consumers here want locally grown fish as long as it’s done sustainably. And we know the sustainable part is already a done deal.”

As she watched the hearing where the ban was upheld, McKnight said she was struck by the pervasive lack of knowledge about aquaculture. “People’s vision of finfish aquaculture stems from the floppy disc era, when in fact we’ve moved on to AI and robotics,” she noted. “We have a lot of work to do to ramp up our education component and let the general public know how aquaculture really happens.”

Dr. Hugh Mitchell, an independent veterinarian based in Kirkland who specializes in epidemiology, called the decision egregious and a tragedy for US aquaculture. “The entire move was political, with little if any facts to support the ban,” he said. “Any true, real science shows that the net pens are benign. The extensions, that they endanger the wild salmon and hence the orca, are ridiculous, unfounded and even laughable – if the cancellation of the net pens wasn’t so tragic.”

Mitchell added that four decades of net pen operation have never shown a negative environmental impact. “The disease issue isn’t under DNR purview, but there’s epidemiological evidence to say that there’s no danger to wild fish from any pathogens contracted by farmed fish.”

While the politics that drove this decision are yet to be determined, Mitchell speculated that commercial, wild and tribal salmon protectionism and NGOs were among the drivers. “Net pens are an easy cause to rally against because they’re relatively new. The public doesn’t know anything about them, and any mental image you concoct isn’t easily verifiable,” he said. “Because it’s relatively new and people don’t know anything about it, aquaculture is very vulnerable to slander and misrepresentation.”

At the Maine Aquaculture Association, Executive Director Sebastian Belle said that while aquaculture industry members are not fearful about the future of their operations, they stand in solidarity with their peers in Washington State.

“This decision is tremendously disappointing to us all and yet another example of how resource management decisions are being driven by politics rather than by science,” he said. “Frankly, we’ll all suffer from it, whether we’re in the commercial fishing community, the environmental community or the aquaculture community.”

He added that in Maine, when there are objections to aquaculture leases, they tend to be from wealthy landlords for whom working waterfronts are undesirable. “The challenge we’re facing in America in general is that our coastlines are being gentrified by wealthy people who have no connection to working waterfronts.”

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