**NWX-DOC CONFERENCING**

**Moderator: ANDREW RICHARD**

**July 12, 2022**

**6:17 pm CT**

Coordinator: Welcome, and thank you for standing by. I'd just like to remind all parties that your lines have been placed in a listen-only mode until the public comment period of today's conference call. This conference is also being recorded. If you have any objections, you may disconnect at this time. I will now like to turn the meeting over to your host, Mr. Andrew Richard. Sir, you may begin.

Andrew Richard: Thank you. Welcome to this meeting this evening. The meeting will be starting soon. To listen to the meeting and provide comments, participants must call in by phone. The phone number to join the meeting is 800-857-5095, and the participant passcode is 9612327.

You'll join the call in listen-only mode. You do not need to mute your phone, as your phone line will be muted automatically by the operator and unmuted later if you decide to provide a comment. As a reminder, these phone lines are being recorded. Thank you for joining the meeting, and the meeting will start soon.

While you wait, please feel free to scan the QR code in the upper right-hand corner of the screen with your mobile device, and that will allow you to visit the Gulf of Mexico Aquaculture Opportunity Area Web site. We'll be starting here in just a second. Want to give a couple of minutes for people to continue joining the meeting.

All right, and we'll get started here. So, good evening, and thank you all for taking the time out of your busy schedules to join the meeting this evening. Tonight, NOAA Fisheries will host this third and final virtual public scoping meeting to solicit public comment that will inform the development of the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement.

The Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement will assess the impact of identifying one or more Aquaculture Opportunity Areas in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico, and siting offshore aquaculture in those potential locations. My name is Andrew Richard, and I'm the Regional Aquaculture Coordinator for NOAA Fisheries Southeast regional office, based in St. Petersburg, Florida.

I'm also the regional lead for the Gulf of Mexico Aquaculture Opportunity Area Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, and will be leading this evening's meeting. Tonight, I'll start off our meeting by providing a brief presentation with the information about the notice of intent to prepare the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement that NOAA Fisheries published in the federal register on June 1 of 2022.

This notice initiated a 60-day public scoping period where NOAA will be soliciting feedback from stakeholders, which these virtual public scoping meetings are a part of. Following the brief - this brief presentation, there will be an opportunity for the public to participate and provide verbal comments that will help inform the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement NOAA Fisheries intends to develop.

Before we get started, I'd like to remind everyone attending this meeting that the meeting is being recorded and will be considered part of the administrative record for the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, also known as the PEIS.

If you would like to provide public comments and don't feel comfortable with your comments being recorded, I'll provide instructions for how you can submit those comments in writing towards the end of this presentation.

Tonight, I'll start off my presentation by providing a brief background on the Aquaculture Opportunity Area Initiative and why NOAA Fisheries is undertaking this effort. Next, I will talk about our notice of intent, the preliminary plans for Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, what NOAA Fisheries is proposing, what is the intent of this planning process, what federal agencies are working with us to do this, what areas we are thinking about for identifying Aquaculture Opportunity Areas, and when the public will have an opportunity to provide their input into the process.

After that, I will detail the types of information and comments that would be helpful to NOAA Fisheries and how you can provide those comments. Last, and certainly not least, will be an opportunity for participants of this meeting to provide verbal comments.

And we'll share more information about how to do so towards the end of this presentation. If you're interested in receiving updates about the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement process, please reach out to the email at the bottom of the screen for more information.

Before we get started, I'd like to make a couple of important clarifications to emphasize the purpose of this public scoping period, and to help ensure the comments we receive during the scoping process are helpful for informing the identification of Aquaculture Opportunity Areas.

I would like to remind everyone that this virtual public scoping meeting being held this evening, is being held in attempt to inform the identification of Aquaculture Opportunity Areas in the Gulf of Mexico, which is a non-regulatory planning process to look for areas that may be suitable for future aquaculture development, which could include finfish, shellfish, seaweed, or multi-species aquaculture.

Individual proposals for aquaculture projects are separate actions from the identification of Aquaculture Opportunity Areas. NOAA Fisheries is not soliciting comments on specific aquaculture projects, including the Ocean Era Velella Epsilon pilot project.

The opportunities for public comments on that project have already occurred. And additionally, NOAA Fisheries is not responsible for the issuance of permits related to that project. While we welcome all comments, we just want to be clear on the purpose of this public scoping meeting to solicit public feedback.

In May of 2020, under section seven of the executive order promoting American seafood competitiveness and economic growth, the Secretary of Commerce, which oversees NOAA and its fisheries office, was directed to identify geographic areas suitable for commercial aquaculture, also known as Aquaculture Opportunity Areas, or AOAs.

NOAA was also instructed to complete a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, or PEIS, to assess the impact of siting aquaculture within those locations. In August of 2022 - or sorry, in August of 2020, NOAA Fisheries selected the federal waters off Southern California and in the Gulf of Mexico as the first two regions where AOAs may be identified based on a foundational work already completed to support AOA development, including siting analysis and previous environmental reviews, the maturity of inter-agency communication and collaboration, industry interests, and a history of engagement with stakeholders on aquaculture in those regions.

Since only federal waters are being considered in these first two regions to identify Aquaculture Opportunity Areas, we are specifically referencing offshore aquaculture locations for siting Marine aquaculture, as federal waters start from three to nine miles from shore, depending on the State in the Gulf of Mexico, and extend out to 200 miles to the extent of the US exclusive economic zone.

For some attending this meeting who may not be familiar with the term offshore marine aquaculture, offshore aquaculture is one method of guarding marine organisms, done so in an open ocean environment. Offshore aquaculture is not exclusive to just growing marine finfish. It also can include the cultivation of shellfish and seaweed. Pictured are examples of open ocean seaweed and finfish farms.

With a growing human population and globally stable wild capture fishery harvest over the last 20 years, there exists an unmet need for fresh and frozen seafood in the US that results in roughly 70 to 85% of the seafood we consume in the United States being imported. Of that amount, approximately 50% of that seafood comes from foreign aquaculture production. Pictured are examples of open water finfish and shellfish farms.

With the demand for seafood poised to continue to grow, wild caught fisheries alone simply cannot meet the domestic demand for seafood. Shellfish, finfish, and seaweed aquaculture are steady sources of safe, nutritious, sustainable seafood for consumers in the United States and worldwide.

Increase in seafood demand, food security considerations, and economic opportunities, highlight the need for increased domestic aquaculture production, of which offshore aquaculture can play an important role. Pictured is an example of a multi-tropic or multi-species aquaculture system where finfish, shellfish and seaweed aquaculture are grown together and utilized the output of the high tropic organisms for growth.

Earlier on, I mentioned the executive order promoting American seafood competitiveness and economic growth, directs NOAA to identify Aquaculture Opportunity Areas, or AOAs. So, what exactly are AOAs? An AOA is simply a defined geographic area that has been evaluated to determine its potential suitability for commercial aquaculture.

AOAs may be suitable for finfish, shellfish, seaweed, or multi-species aquaculture. NOAA Fisheries believes the combination of scientific analysis and public engagement to identify AOAs that may be environmentally, socially, and economically suitable for siting multiple commercial aquaculture operations.

AOAs may only be identified by NOAA Fisheries after the completion of a final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, and the issuance of a record of decision in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. So, why is NOAA Fisheries proposing to do the PEIS?

In the PEIS, NOAA Fisheries is proposing to identify one or more Aquaculture Opportunity Areas in the federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico. To do so, we will evaluate the impacts, both adverse and beneficial, of siting aquaculture in potential AOA locations.

One major distinction between this effort and other aquaculture efforts ongoing in the Gulf of Mexico, is that identifying Aquaculture Opportunity Areas, is purely a planning process intended to inform future aquaculture development.

It is not a regulatory action. Identifying AOAs does not permit, lease, print permission, or authorize specific aquaculture activities to occur, nor does it change any permitting - existing permitting requirements that currently exist for offshore aquaculture.

All permitting and environmental review requirements would remain the same for aquaculture operations sited within or outside of an AOA. However, aquaculture operations sited outside of an AOA would not likely benefit from the scientific analysis and public engagement that went into identifying the locations and completing a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for AOAs.

And so, what is the goal of this effort? The first is to meet the directives of the executive order 13921. It's to utilize a science-based approach to inform the thoughtful planning of offshore marine aquaculture. It's to find areas that could be suitable for multiple future offshore aquaculture projects to address the interests and concerns regarding offshore aquaculture siting and the increased demand for seafood.

And last but not least, to promote American seafood competitiveness, food security and economic growth, while sustaining and conserving marine resources. I've mentioned our Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, or PEIS, several times now so far in this presentation.

So, what exactly is it, and what is it used for? A PEIS is a programmatic environmental review document conducted in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, which requires federal agencies to assess the environmental effects of their proposed actions prior to making decisions. A PEIS assesses the impact of proposed policies, plans, programs, or projects.

It considers impacts, both adverse and beneficial to, the human environment, including ecological, socioeconomic, cultural, and historical environments. It also considers impacts to public health and safety, climate change, and environmental justice communities, as well as cumulative impacts.

It also considers a range of alternatives, including a no-action alternative. And one thing I'd like to point out with respect to the no-action alternative in the context of the National Environmental Policy Act and this PEIS, is that the no-action alternative in this PEIS represents no action being taken or no change from the status quo, which would mean that the planning effort to identify Aquaculture Opportunity Areas would not occur, and not that aquaculture itself would not occur. It would simply continue on as it currently does, and that is an important distinction that I'd like to highlight.

NOAA Fisheries is working with a team of federal agency partners to develop this PEIS, with the US Army Corps of Engineers, US Air Force, the US Environmental Protection Agency and Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, serving as cooperating agencies.

The inter-agency team stands at 26 members, with representatives from regional and district offices throughout the Gulf of Mexico. This broad participation ensures that the PEIS will be useful in helping to inform future permitting and environmental review processes for aquaculture.

We are also receiving assistance from the US Fish and Wildlife Service and US Coast Guard with respect to their roles and expertise as it relates to aquaculture. On June 1 of 2022, NOAA Fisheries published in the federal register, a notice of intent to prepare a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for the identification of Aquaculture Opportunity Areas in the federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico, and to conduct public scoping meetings.

This noticed kicked off a 60-day public comment period, which will help inform the alternatives and scope of this draft PEIS. Public comment will be accepted until Monday, August 1 of 2022. Following the public scoping period, we'll publish a scoping summary and post it to the Gulf AOA PEIS Web site so the public can review a summary of the comments we receive.

After the public scoping period has ended, we will work closely with our federal agency partners to begin developing the draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement. Once the draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement has been developed, there'll be an additional opportunity for the public to provide input.

A notice of availability will be published to the federal register and a draft PEIS will be made available for public review, initiating an additional public comment period where stakeholders can provide their feedback and input. NOAA Fisheries will provide a response to comments received during that comment period. That response will be included in the final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement.

The main thing that I hope everyone takes away from this slide is that stakeholder input is critically important into helping shape the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, and that there are multiple opportunities and ways for the public to provide input into this process.

This graphic is a timeline and a representation of the process I just outlined. The publishing of the notice of intent and scoping period, which will extend through the summer of 2022, will initiate a two-year process where we are aiming to complete this Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement.

We anticipate having a draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement available for public review and for public comment sometime in the fall of 2023. We are targeting the spring of 2024 to publish the final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, and sometime in the spring of 2024, with a record of decision published in the summer of 2024.

In the notice of intent, NOAA Fisheries proposes considering identifying one or more locations referred to as Aquaculture Opportunity Areas, or AOAs, that may be suitable for notable future aquaculture projects in federal waters in the Gulf of Mexico, and to evaluate the general impacts of siting aquaculture in those locations, which could occur through future proposals and project level review.

The nine locations identified as AOA options in the National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science Aquaculture Opportunity Atlas for the US Gulf of Mexico, may be considered in the draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, in addition to the no-action alternative.

(NIMS) will determine the number and scope of alternatives explored and select the locations to be evaluated in the draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement by the best available science and comments received during this public scoping period.

For those who have not had an opportunity to review the Aquaculture Opportunity Atlas for the US Gulf of Mexico, I strongly encourage you to dive into this comprehensive peer-reviewed spatial mapping and data analysis to see how these potential options for AOAs were identified. The map on this slide shows the results of the atlas and the nine potential options that were identified.

Looking at those potential AOA options, you might see that some of those locations appear to be quite some distance from shore, and that's for a couple of reasons. First, the focus of identifying Aquaculture Opportunity Areas in the Gulf of Mexico was reserved for federal waters only, which actually avoids conflict with the busy nearshore environments, which are also demonstrated in the atlas.

Engineering and operational requirements for offshore aquaculture, also were drivers for pushing these potential AOA options offshore. For the aquaculture industry, indicating a minimum operational depth of at least 50 meters was preferred.

These potential AOA options range from 500 to 2000 acres in size, and are anywhere from five to 72 nautical miles from shore, with the average distance being approximately 50 nautical miles from shore, which would take several hours to reach by most vessels, and would not be visible beyond the horizon from shore.

Scale is also an important piece of information when envisioning these potential AOA options. NOAA Fisheries is considering identifying AOAs in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico make up an area approximately 242,000 square miles in size, or slightly smaller than the State of Texas.

I mentioned the AOA options range from 500 to 2000 acres in size. And so, this slide shows what that scale looks like for some areas that you may have visited or may be familiar with. 500 acres is equal to roughly 0.79 square miles, 379 football fields, roughly the size of Florida, Miami, or Universal Studios.

500 acres also represents 0.0003% of the Gulf of Mexico's federal water's total area. 2000 acres is equal to three square miles, or roughly 1,500 football fields, or two and a half Central Parks. 2000 acres also represents 0.001% of the Gulf of Mexico's federal water's total area.

Next, I'll go through each of the nine AOA options identified in the atlas, and share some basic information about those locations. If you are interested in learning more about these ocean spaces, how they were - and how they were identified, I strongly encourage you to read the Aquaculture Opportunity Atlas for the US Gulf of Mexico. We have links for this and other maps and resources on our Gulf of Mexico AOA PEIS Web site.

Option W1 is a 2000-acre area off of Texas that sits approximately 35 nautical miles east of Port Mansfield Channel, Texas. Option W4 is a 2000-acre area off of Texas that sits approximately 50 nautical miles southeast of Port Aransas, Texas. Option W8 is a 500-acre area off of Texas that sits approximately 58 nautical miles southeast of Freeport, Texas.

Option C3 is a 2000-acre area off Louisiana that sits approximately 72 nautical miles south of Pecan Island, with Morgan City, Louisiana, as the closest town with significant infrastructure. Option C11 is a 2000-acre area off Louisiana that sits approximately 41 nautical miles south of Port Fourchon, Louisiana.

Option C13 is a 500-acre area off Louisiana that sits approximately five nautical miles south of the inlet to South Pass, Louisiana. Option E4 is a 2000-acre area off Florida that sits approximately 58 nautical miles west of the inlet off Clearwater, Florida. Option E3 is a 2000-acre area off Florida that sits approximately 49 nautical miles southwest of the mouth of Tampa Bay.

Option E1 is a 500-acre area off Florida that sits approximately 56 to 58 nautical miles southwest from the passes of Fort Myers. And again, if you're interested in learning more about these locations, we have a link for the atlas and these maps, as well as other resources on our Gulf of Mexico Aquaculture Opportunity Area PEIS Web site.

The Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement will discuss the adverse and beneficial impacts of siting aquaculture in potential AOA locations, and will likely include discussion on topics including, but not limited to, animal entanglement, vessel strikes, habitat alteration, disease transmission, escape risk, and genetic impacts of escapement, water quality changes, including nutrients, contaminants, and harmful algal blooms, habitat displacement, habitat fragmentation, gear failures risks, including storm and operator error, marine debris, ecosystem impacts, noise, light and visual disturbance, environmental justice impacts, climate change, cultural and historical resources, tribal communities and resources, local ports, marinas, and communities, commercial and recreational fishing, tourism and recreation, public health and safety, transportation and navigation, communications infrastructure, domestic and international markets, energy development, and military preparedness.

NOAA Fisheries has also identified information and feedback that would be helpful for us as we develop our draft Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement. The list of these topics can be found in the notice of intent, as well as our Gulf of Mexico Aquaculture Opportunity Area PEIS Web site.

The list includes, the scope of the PEIS analysis, including the range of reasonable alternatives and how many, or which locations should be considered and evaluated, types of aquaculture, including finfish, seaweed, shellfish, and multi-species, ecologically, economically, and socially suitable species and gear, monitoring, reporting, and reporting requirements for owners and operators of aquaculture facilities that could mitigate impacts, potential adverse beneficial, neutral, or cumulative impacts to biological, physical, and ecological resources, potential adverse, beneficial, neutral, and cumulative impacts to the social, economic, and cultural environment, promotion of environmental justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion when considering alternative AOA locations, underserved communities, and underrepresented groups and/or regions, and communities that could either benefit or be adversely impacted by the siting of AOAs in the Gulf of Mexico.

The impact of climate change or changing environmental conditions, including storm intensity, sea level rise, water quality on siting and other aspects of aquaculture, current or planned activities in or near areas highlighted in this notice and their possible impacts on aquaculture development or the impact of aquaculture development on those activities, and other relevant topics to the proposed action and impacts on the human environment.

The public scoping period for this PEIS started on Wednesday, June 1 of 2022, and will continue until Monday, August 1 of 2022. Written comments may be submitted by mail or electronically. To submit written comments by mail, please write to Andrew Richard, Regional Aquaculture Coordinator, NOAA Fisheries southeast regional office, 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, Florida, 33701, with regard to Gulf AOA PEIS.

To submit comments electronically, please go to the regulations.gov Web site, enter NOAA-NMFS-2022-0044 in the search box, then click on the comment icon, complete the required field, and enter or attach your comments. If you do not wish to provide any personally identifying information, you can - you may put N/A in the personal information fields to remain anonymous.

Now there will be an opportunity to provide verbal comments during this meeting, please follow the four steps listed on the slide to join the queue to provide your comments. First, if you muted your phone, remember to manually unmute your phone. Your phone line will remain muted by the operator until it is your turn to provide comments.

Next, use your keypad to press Star 1 to join the comment queue. When prompted, clearly state your first and last name, and remain muted and wait for the operator to call your name, after which you may provide your public comment. Each commenter will have no longer than three minutes to provide their comments, in order to allow for as many participants as possible to provide their comments.

If your comments reach the three-minute mark, the operator will kindly ask you to conclude your remarks so we may move on to the next participant. If you have any additional comments you would like to provide, you may rejoin the queue by pressing Star 1 to provide additional comments. We'll keep the slide up on the screen for informational purposes and open the floor for public comments now. Thank you.

Coordinator: Thank you. We will now begin the public comment session of today's conference call. Again, if you would like to make a comment, please press Star 1 on your telephone keypad. Ensure that your line is unmuted, and record your name at the prompt. One moment for our first comment. Thank you. I believe the first commenter is (Bryce Claypool). Your line is open.

(Bryce Claypool): Am I unmuted?

Coordinator: Yes, ma'am.

(Bryce Claypool): Hi. My name is (Bryce Claypool). I'm 14 years old. I live in Manatee County, Florida, not far from one of the proposed spots for an offshore aquaculture facility. I am happy to see NOAA attempting to support sustainable aquaculture. However, I am highly concerned about the potential harm caused by fish farming.

I've seen the toxic algae red tide. I have watched dead sea turtles floating in the water because of this. I have seen mountains of dead fish on the beaches I love, and that's the same for marine life in the water our local fisheries depend on. The potential of intensive finfish farming to bring more fish misery to my community is not worth the benefit it will provide a few companies.

I would like NOAA to support truly sustainable aquaculture, such as multi-species farms, as well as seaweed farming. Unlike intensive monocultures of finfish, these farming methods will indeed help our communities and planet, and I look forward to their implementation. Thank you for listening.

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next comment comes from Kent Satterlee. Your line is open.

Kent Satterlee: Okay. Thank you very much. My name is Kent Satterlee. I'm the Executive Director of The Gulf Offshore Research Institute, and we are doing research on reusing and repurposing the offshore oil and gas platforms once they're no longer producing oil and gas.

We believe that they are ideal hubs and logistical bases for offshore aquaculture, and that can include finfish, shellfish, and micro algae. That research looks promising right now, and we certainly want this PEIS to look at some of the options of using the offshore platforms.

The primary comment that I've got with regard to the public hearing here is that the areas appear to be fairly locked in. In other words, they're pretty well-defined, and they don't necessarily corroborate or correlate with the locations of the offshore platforms.

We will provide comments to you by August 1 regarding the location of those available platforms nearby and the ones that we are working with the BOEM to repurpose. And our hope is that you can include, or perhaps expand, your PEIS review to include those platform sites. So, thank you very much.

Coordinator: Thank you. At this time, I'm showing no further of comments. Again, if you would like to make a comment, please unmute your phone, press Star 1, and record your name at the prompt. Again, that is Star 1 if you would like to make a comment. One moment for our next comment. Our next comment comes from Andrianna Natsoulas. Your line is open.

Andrianna Natsoulas: Thank you. Thank you for holding this public comment session. My name is Andrianna Natsoulas, and I am with Don't Cage Our Oceans. We are a coalition of national, local, regional nonprofit organizations and private businesses that oppose offshore finfish farming, and at the same time, we uplift and support community-based sustainable aquaculture systems.

We support the no-action alternative in which no AOA would be identified in federal waters in the Gulf of Mexico. We're concerned about a host of issues of moving forward with unsustainable types of aquaculture such as offshore finfish farming. There are legal issues. There's federal agency overreach. There is water quality concerns that impact coastal communities, that impact tourism, that impact fishing.

So, just to touch on a couple of them, you know, legally, the Fifth Circuit court case called Fisherman's Association, held that NOAA does not actually have the authority to permit or regulate aquaculture in US federal waters, and there's no congressional authorization to do so under Magnuson-Stevens.

So, we really do view this executive order as a mechanism to circumvent Congress and to circumvent true public input, because Congress represents the will of the people of the United States. Executive orders do not and federal agencies do not. Even if NOAAs permitting and regulating of aquaculture were to be legal, there are so many compelling reasons why this activity should not be allowed.

It does contaminate water with any of the chemicals and other antibiotics that are used to maintain a monoculture. So, a monoculture is when you take so many fish of the same species, cram them together in a cage, and grow them, for what purpose, I'm not sure, because from what we've seen, the finfish that are raised in these offshore facilities, don't make it to the local markets, and they do not feed the local communities.

They're quite expensive, if they are actually successful in raising fish that is edible. And if that does happen, they often go to white tablecloth restaurants far away from local communities, and often are exported. So, the argument that this meets the trade deficit in seafood has not been proven to be true.

I can go on and on about the harms and the dangers and the concerns about offshore finfish farming and the fact that it does not feed local communities. It only lines the pockets of companies that already have well-lined pockets. And especially now in a time of inflation and rising gas prices and food prices, this is most definitely not a solution.

A solution is to invest in actual aquaculture that supports local communities, that supports local mom-and-pop shops and operations, that builds on coastal economies and strengthens waterfronts. Specifically in the Gulf of Mexico, I am really concerned about some of the siting, and specifically C13 and C11, which look to be within the Gulf dead zone.

So, you know, we will submit more detailed comments, but I'm just wondering how you can use science and site two of these opportunity areas within the dead zone. And fish waste contains nitrogen, which is just going to elevate the issues that create dead zones.

And not to mention, you know, you're talking about beautiful marine mammals that exist in these waters, and these facilities have been proven to cause harm to them. And there have been incidences where these do exist, of deaths of monk seals and negative interactions with bottle-nosed dolphins.

And so, we, again, do not see how this is going to benefit the people. Cargill, Merck, Cisco, they're all behind this, and they support it, but I don't see the local communities, I don't see the people of Florida or Texas or Louisiana, really benefiting. So, thank you for taking my comments, and we look forward to submitting more detailed comments in support of the no-action alternatives. Thank you.

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next comment comes from Antonio Tovar. Your line is open.

Antonio Tovar: Thank you for this period of comments. My name is Antonio Tova from the National Family Farm Coalition. We are a membership organization of 32 groups, including the North American Marine Alliance. And we also are in favor of no-action, because we are very concerned.

We - our organization that is promoting sustainable agriculture and also food sovereignty, one of the issues that we see in the fish industry is that it was said that a lot of the seafood that North American consumes is imported, and what is happening is that many of the fishes that is fished in our water is going to processing plants in other countries, and then come back.

That it's not being fair for our communities. The fishery folks on our organization are not being supported, and we find this process very similar to the gas oil industry, in which the industry are not the farmers, so in this case, the fisher folks, are going to benefit from this industry.

It is risky in terms of the pollution that they create. I'm resident of Florida, and I have an additional concern in terms of the impact that it's going to have in our coast and also in the tourist industry. Florida depends heavily on tourism. And a previous comment was mentioned about the contamination that we already have in our waters for seasons.

This is only going to aggravate those risks. One of the areas has - was also mentioned in the Mississippi Delta, it's going to be not suitable for this kind of industry. We find it very problematic, and in general, we will favor no-action. We will submit a more specific comment, but I thank you for the opportunity to offer these comments.

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next comment comes from Neal Schleifer. Your line is open.

Dr. Neal Schleifer: Hi. I'm Dr. Neal Schleifer, representing the nonprofit SKCC with over 100 member associations and over 7,000 households on Siesta Key, Florida, where opportunity AOA E3 is located. And we also do not support - we also support a no-action option, and we believe that our area, the Sarasota area, E3, and other local areas, are not suitable for Aquatic Opportunity Areas.

A fish farm in this area would not go build opportunity and economy, but instead endanger it. The amount of revenue the farm could produce would be dwarfed by the millions Sarasota could lose in tourism from red tide, which could be exacerbated by fish farm pollution that's lost hundreds of millions in the past.

Fish discharge waste and food could increase red tide blooms. Pollution and chemicals to prevent sea lice and disease could affect the marine environment. Sarasota and other Gulf communities financial risks from the possible effects of offshore farms, such as increased red tide and marine environmental degradation, is much greater than their limited potential revenue.

The cages could break, loosen in hurricanes. Fish escapes could affect native ecology and debris boating traffic. There's ample evidence this type of fish farm contributes to algal blooms, and that inevitable fish escapes decrease native species. E3 is offshore Sarasota, as I mentioned, where the Velella fish farm is proposed, and where red tide zones often originate.

E4, also near us in the Tampa Bay Clearwater area, had a recent spill from the Piney Point phosphate spill, and a recent USF study indicated that contributed to a massive red tide outbreak. The E1 in the Fort Myers area is also susceptible to red tide, and all the areas are vulnerable to hurricanes, and the cages would be as well.

Our constituents are frustrated that government agencies refuse to take no for an answer despite the massive public outcry and scientific evidence provided at every hearing. There are more sustainable ways to produce food than offshore fish farms that usurp public waters for corporate profit.

Unfortunately, NOAA is not impartial, but a promoter of industrial farms, and in fact, a supporter of Velella Epsilon through a former substantial grant. We ask that NOAA consider the cumulative effects of the proliferation of farms planned by proponents throughout the Gulf.

Sarasota and neighboring areas aren't suitable for AOAs because fish farms would endanger the mostly tourist economies and the quality of marine life that both residents and visitors value highly. So, again, we're for a no-action option. Thank you for listening.

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next comment comes from (Brian Bobbin). Your line is open.

(Brian Bobbin): Hi, I'm a local rod and reel fisherman here in the Clearwater area. And my biggest thing is, is that what made the EPA decide that they go from reasonable degradation to non-reasonable degradation? Like what's the difference there to get the permit for the waive permit for them in the beginning of June?

The stuff of this has been expedited extremely fast. There is no room for this off our beaches. We already looked at the red tide causes. There's plenty of, you know, examples of the salmon farming in Norway, these fish getting disease. They're going to get out of the pens. Like no matter which way you cut it, they're going to get out.

We are in one of those volatile gulfs. The hurricanes come ripping through here. They're going to break loose. The fish are going to get out. And what made you all decide that these locations are a good location? If you don't believe that this is going to have any effect on water quality, I have two great locations for this, the Steamboat Lumps, or Madison & Swanson.

It's an already protected area where nobody's allowed to get in there, but why wouldn't it go there? I don't understand why it needs to be an area that people, recreational, commercial, and charter fishermen regularly fish. You know, we're talking almost three and a half square miles of zones that are up to five different businesses can occupy.

This is starting with one small, you know, pen and next thing you know, it's going to landslide in a more and more and more. I don't really understand what the end goal is here. I understand healthy competition in the business. Aquaculture is a great thing, but it needs to be done on land where the water can be pumped through recycling facilities and be recirculated through the different tanks.

But you look at, you know, the money it costs, it's what needs to be done. There's no reason to put our gulf in risk of potential red tide when you can do this on land. There's just - there's no exception. We, as commercial fishermen, are required to carry turtle gear, which we get harped on. You have to have a net and this and that.

And I understand for the benefit of the turtle, but what about the other sea life that this is going to cause, you know, damage to? When these fish get infected, when they get parasites, which they will, you're going to have to treat them with antibiotics and different steroids. What about the water around these pens?

When an algal bloom happens offshore, it's a lot different than inshore. If these things migrate into the middle grounds or wherever the currents are blowing, you're going to see dead loss everywhere. It's just - it's a disaster, and I don't understand why we're putting corporate America over the health of our oceans.

I mean, I do this, not out of, you know, I need this to survive. I'm a college graduate with a bachelor's degree. I'm a young guy. I commercial fish because I love it. I do it in a sustainable way. I don't long-line. I don't withdraw. I do it rod and reels like anybody else going out fishing.

We love our oceans. We want to keep them the same way they are. We don't want to have the risk of a giant kill-off because we got executive orders saying, okay, let's bring aquaculture business to our coast. This company that's coming in now to raise these almacos, has had a rebranding and name change, coming from the Pacific to over here to raise these almacos.

I don't understand why this is happening so fast. There needs to be more research done about locations. There needs to be more research done about the degradation of the water, the water quality. The EPA board needs to figure out why they decided to change their mind and grant this permit when before, this permit was not granted.

What changed overnight to make this happen? You know, with the quota fishery that's been installed since, you know, the mid 2000s, you've already basically privatized the public resource. This is everybody's water. You know, you might let's say federal, where it's owned by the country and the nation.

It's everybody's water. We pay the taxes here. Why do you let private business come in like this with large sums of money to farm our oceans, when we are one of the most healthiest gulfs in the whole entire world. There are more fish out there than we know to do with, but instead, we're relying on our ocean to farm fish.

If you want to farm fish, it needs to be done on land, and there shouldn't be any kind of exception. I go back to, you know, the salmon industry in Norway. You look at these fish that have gotten salmon life. They get out of the pens. And when they start breeding with the, you know, native species, it's a recipe for bad news.

When the Atlantic salmon got brought to the Pacific coast, and they escaped out of there, the scientists said, oh, there's no way they're going to survive. They did research. They went through all these different streams, the feeder streams that go into the ocean. They found these Atlantic salmon in all these streams.

They're, of course, going to survive. They're going to mate with a native stock, and they're going to pollute the stock. It's just there's so many things that are going against this, that if you have the EPA grant this waive permit to get this stuff rolling, at what point are you going to say that the juices are worth the squeeze?

We're all - I'm all for aquaculture. Most of my friends, everybody who fishes, they're not against aquaculture when it's done the right proper way. And the proper way is done on land, in tanks, where the water can be recycled through a filtration system and repurposed, not where all the waste can just be dumped into the ocean.

20,000 fish is what - I think what they're estimating. Let me go back here. I think 20,000 fish and the growth is going to be up to four and a half pounds. That is a ridiculous amount of waste. There's no reason for it. So, I'm going to leave it at that. I hope to see some kind of different comment come back, because I've been to the gulf council meetings, and it's kind of just blank stare in the face.

There's no response. There's no data on the waste that's provided from these fish. It's just very vague, and it's been sprung upon a lot of people, and a lot of people don't even realize what's going on right before their own nose.

This is a slippery slope, and before you know it, there's going to be farms all over the coast, if you all let this go through. So, thank you for the time, and I appreciate letting people make comments. Thanks.

Coordinator: Thank you. At this moment, there are no further comments. Again, if you would like to make a comment on today's conference, please press Star 1. Please ensure your line is unmuted and record your name at the prompt.

Andrew Richard: I will just chime in here too real quickly while we have a little bit of a lull here in the comments. If you are not comfortable providing verbal comments this evening - and well, first of all, thank you all for everybody who's commented so far this evening. But if you aren't comfortable providing verbal comments through this virtual public scoping meeting, you can - there's two different ways that you can submit written comments.

The first is by mail. And so, you can send that, you know, any letters or comments that you might have to Andrew Richard, Regional Aquaculture Coordinator at NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, Florida, 33701, in regard to the Gulf AOA PEIS. You can also log on electronically to www.regulations.gov, and enter NOAA-NMFS-2022-0044.

And you put that in the search box, then you click on the comment icon and complete the required fields to either enter or attach your comments. And if you don't want to leave any personally identifiable information, you can just fill in the spots with your name and other information as NA, to remain anonymous.

So, you're able to provide comments through that method, through both of those methods. And we will be accepting those public comments until Monday, August 1 of 2022. So, even after of this meeting, there's still a couple of weeks here to be able to provide comments to help inform the identification of Aquaculture Opportunity Areas.

Coordinator: One moment for our next comment. I do have a person that cued up for a comment. However, I don't have your name. You're the only person in the line. I've opened your line. Please state your name,

(Jeff): Hey. (Jeff), sustainability professional.

Coordinator: Thank you. Your line is open. Go ahead and proceed, sir.

(Jeff): Thank you. Local resident of Sarasota, and a sustainability professional. I would also encourage, no-action. I have some serious reservations about this proposal, and especially the lack of research that should be done in conjunction with it. So, thank you for taking my comments, and please listen to everyone on the call today.

Coordinator: Thank you. Again, if you would like to make a comment, please ensure your phone is unmuted. Record your name at the prompt when - after you press Star 1. Again, that is Star 1 if you would like to make a comment.

Andrew Richard: Again, just a reminder, this is our third of three virtual public scoping meetings. So, this will be the last opportunity to provide verbal comments through these virtual scoping meeting platforms. So, if you're interested in doing so, first, unmute your phone if you've muted yourself, press Star 1 on your keypad to join the comment queue, and then when prompted, state your first and last name, and remain on unmute and wait for the operator to call your name.

You'll be able to provide some comments. As I noted before, if you do not wish to provide verbal comments, we still are accepting written comments up through August 1, and that can be done via mail or that can be done virtually through the regulations.gov Web site. We will have the slide deck from this presentation posted up on our Aquaculture Opportunity Area PEIS Web site, along with the recording of this presentation, as well as a transcript of the call.

And you can also look at that and the previous meetings that were held, the other two meetings. We have all that information posted up on our Web site, as well as information about the Aquaculture Opportunity Area Initiative, and how to access the Aquaculture Opportunity Atlas that shows all the maps and more in-depth location than we're able to - or more in-depth information about the locations identified in the Aquaculture Opportunity Atlas than we're able to provide in this presentation.

And likewise, if you do have any question about this, my contact information is on the Web site, as well as this last slide here. I'm happy to answer any questions anyone may have about Aquaculture Opportunity Areas, or the Aquaculture Opportunity Atlas. And again, if you wish to provide comments, press Star 1. You'll be able to join the queue. Remain on the line and you'll be able to provide your comments.

Coordinator: One moment for our next comment. Our next comment comes from (Thomas Surprise). Your line is open.

(Thomas Surprise): Yes. Thank you. I don't think there should be any action taken. I do not think that this is the place for your experiments, reason being that E1 dumps right into Cape Coral and Fort Myers. And already down there, they have records of intrusion from invasive fishes.

They already have the king - the Mayan fish and the arapaima, which are destruction in mass to an area they go in. And they have - they already show that E1 empties right into Fort Myers, where they're at. They found a dead one of this arapaima, and it reaches 10 feet long. It's the largest invasive fish in the world, one of the largest ones in the world, and it weighs several hundred pounds.

It eats everything. It eats birds. It can jump out of the water and grab birds. It eats clams. It eats fish. It eats anything and everything. And it - that's one of the bad ones. The lionfish is bad enough, but this makes the lionfish look like a beginner. The other thing that's in danger is the fact that I live on Siesta Key.

In Siesta Key, we have these - one of the two largest concentration of king - of horseshoe crabs and - in the world, and they've been around for 200 million years, and their population is dwindling. They're being used as - their blood is being used to - for medical purposes to test for COVID. They're using them for other things.

The fish farms that are coming in are bringing fish in from outside, which can bring in infections. And these horseshoe crabs are very infection-prone. They catch infection very easily, and we're having a problem keeping the populations up as it is. We don't need them to be caught either going in or going out.

I live on Siesta Key. This arapaima is an animal that is a fish that eats anything and everything. We also have shore bird nesting and turtle nesting, which the little turtles go back in, and they will not make it far with these invasive fishes running around. I don't think that it's - they say that they're not going to have any pollution. That is not true.

The fish farm out there itself may not have much, but if they're talking 30 to - 50 to 100 farms out there, and you take a little bit and multiply it by 50 or 100, and you're going to get pollution. You're going to get additional - the fish come from outside, you'll get an additional inspection you can get from them to bring it in if we're not used to. I can go on and go on but I only got three minutes so I've had to readjust my things to pick up some other things.

These farms when you start bringing 100 in, the disposable items coming out of there is going to be great. I think that one, I don't know where two is, but three and four, those four, if there is a two, E-1, E-3 and E-4 and if there is a two, E-2, should not be placed in there.

They are exposing areas to things that are just not good for the ecosystems or anything else. I can get along if I have time enough where I can sit down and go through organized. I tried to get everything in. I'm only getting part of what I have to try to get everything in.

If I had time, I could bring out a lot more things but they're just - oh we have also, and I didn't mention the manatees. We're having a problem with manatees dying because they're being starved to death. They are being starved to death from pollution.

Pollution comes in and keeps the sunlight from the seagrass and it kills off the seagrass and there's nothing for the manatees to eat so they die of starvation. It's a whole thing. E-1 through E-4 is just not conducive to this area. There are things to dump out. There are currents that are built at the levels - if the currents come in, they come in to meet with the red tide.

And one of them, there was a dead arapaima that was found and it's right where the tide from (Guachochi) came down river. It comes into the coast area and there it turns north. That was the first one. E-1 was the first one and then it goes north. E-3 and E-4 are also involved in it.

So you're ending up you're killing off a lot of things that have been around here for a long time. And we do not need a list to miss them.

I'd like to be able to call somebody and talk to them a little bit how I can get together with you and lay out everything. I'm only breezing over the top of things and I'm not doing it in a good order.

I talk about the arapaima to give you an idea of the few things that it eats. It eats birds, small mammals, crabs, lizards, other fish and little turtles. And our turtle nesting area will be such that it won't be able to - they won't be able to survive and any birds or anything gets near it, the animal can jump right out. This fish 10 feet long.

So I think - go ahead. I'm sorry.

Coordinator: This is the operator. I was just going to let you know you're running past you're allotted time, sir.

(Thomas Surprise): Okay. Is there a way that I can go through by maybe emailing Andrew Richard and see if I can set up a time when I can get some real information not just over here in three minutes.

Andrew Richard: Yes. This is Andrew. Sure. This is Andrew. That would be great. You can absolutely set up a time to chat. I'd be more than happy to do that.

(Thomas Surprise): Okay. Thank you. I will do that route because I'm usually more organized than this, but I had planned on having a little more time and my time has run out. I only started to scratch the surface of everything I've got against it. Thank you for the time.

Andrew Richard: You're very welcome. And yes. My email address is on the Web site. It's on slide deck here, phone number, all that stuff. So just feel free to reach out. I'm happy to chat with you.

(Thomas Surprise): Okay, I will try to contact by email so that I can get on the phone and maybe we can work out some place where I can bring some of the information and show it to him. Thank you.

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next comment is Andrianna Natsoulas. Your line is open.

Andrianna Natsoulas: Hi. Thanks for taking my comment again. I figured since we had some down time and we still have another hour left. I just want to make one comment. Because these atlases and these actions that are being taken are based on this executive order that was signed in May of 2020.

And thinking about this executive order that directs NOAA to take this action nearly 180 organizations and private businesses sent a letter to the Biden administration in April. Over 100 - nearly, I should say nearly 180 organizations and private businesses sent a letter to the Biden administration in April asking President Biden to revoke this executive order because it does not promote seafood for American people, for this country, for the people who live in this country.

Those organizations and private businesses included all of the Gulf of Mexico states. They represent over 8 million people in the United States. They represent over 250,000 U.S. businesses. They represent over 70,000 food producers from every single U.S. State. And they represent over 5,000 fishing businesses from every coastal state.

And I'm saying this because this atlas, this movement to open up our oceans to a polluting industry, confined animal feeding operations at sea, is not supported by the people of this country. And this letter is just one small effort to indicate and to show, to demonstrate, that this is not supported by the people of this country.

And again there should be no action taken. There should be no aquaculture opportunity areas identified because this is not sustainable for people, for nutrition, for nutritious food, for the environment, for our wildlife, for our fish populations, for our local economies.

So I just wanted to add that. Thank you very much since we have some time.

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next comment comes from (Fritz Janicke). Your line is open.

(Fritz Janicke): Yes. Hi. Can you hear me?

Coordinator: Yes, sir.

(Fritz Janicke): Yes. Hi. My name is (Fritz Janicke). I've been involved with domestic aquaculture for over 40 years. And I very much applaud the NOAA for taking this action to look at aquaculture opportunity areas.

I think it's high time that the U.S. takes a proactive approach to expanding domestic aquaculture production. And that involves on land and in the ocean. And I believe that the programmatic environmental impact statement, which involves all these multiple agencies should adequately address the impacts and concerns voiced on this webinar by several of the people.

I also plan to submit written comments. Thank you very much.

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next comment comes from Kent Satterlee. Your line is open.

Kent Satterlee: Okay. Thank you very much. Again my name is Kent Satterlee. I'm the executive director of the Gulf Offshore Research Institute. And this is my second opportunity to comment tonight.

I wanted to comment again because except for one other comment other than myself, I believe all the verbal comments have recommended a no action alternative, which is a concern for me. It doesn't make much sense to me.

All of the concerns addressed by those commenters will be addressed by the PEIS. There is going to be a lot of work that goes into that. Every one of those concerns will be addressed by the PEIS. So I applaud the efforts to do this work ahead of time.

The other things that I wanted to comment on is I mentioned previously that we're doing research on repurposing the offshore platforms. And Wild Catch is going to continue to be very important in the Gulf of Mexico. It provides seafood to our local economies, to our local restaurants.

But the problem is that the United States is currently importing 85% of all the seafood that we consume in this country. And as we've seen over the last several months, the cost for that seafood has increased substantially. We're now having to pay probably 30% and even north of that now for the seafood that we consume, both in the grocery stores and in the restaurants.

And the FAO of the UN is now predicting food shortages around the world that have been promulgated in part by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. So we're literally facing a food crisis in this country.

So it's a bit of a no brainer to move forward with this P.E.I.S. The United States has, I believe, close to 300 million people, not just 8 million as one of the previous commenters commented. But we've got close to 300 million people in this country to feed.

And with importing 85% of our seafood, it just really doesn't make much sense particularly with the supply chain problems that we've encountered over the last several months. We have a vulnerability in this nation with regard to our food supply.

In my opinion it's a national security issue. And the PEIS should go forward. And the alternatives that are on the table, the options that are on the table are very good options and they should proceed.

Coordinator: Thank you. At this time I'm showing no further comments. Again if you would like to make a comment, please ensure your phone is unmuted, press star 1 and record your name at the prompt. One moment for our next comment.

Our next comment comes from (Bryce Claypool). Your line is open.

(Bryce Claypool): Hi. This is (Bryce) again. I've noticed that all of the commenters but two have been opposed to this plan because of the negative effects it could have on my community and our environment.

I've noticed many of them are from our area of Sarasota, Florida. And I just want to recommend again that NOAA pursue truly sustainable aquaculture alternatives to offshore fin fish farming. Thank you.

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next comment comes from (Thomas Surprise). Your line is open.

(Thomas Surprise): Yes. Can you hear me?

Coordinator: Yes, sir.

(Thomas Surprise): Okay. Well I'll be a little calmer this time. I had quite a bit done because I didn't know I'm going to cut to three minutes but basically what I wanted to say was the fish farm alternative, the number one dumps, it's effluent and everything is waste into the first E-1 position. And it dumps it right in there where the red tide goes.

This is a very bad situation. And any effluent they say that they're not getting any trash or effluent from those, that's not true. You've got to have the experiment maybe you don't. But when they're starting to build 50 or 100, you're going to have a lot of trash during construction and after construction and during operation.

I know they mean well. But there's going to be trash. I live in Siesta Key. We are well-known all over the world for our clean beach. It won't be clean beaches for very long.

I'm concerned about the horseshoe crab because of the fact that not only the invasion, you know, and the (unintelligible) fish will give it a problem, infection is a big thing. And bringing in non-native fish and other things will end up giving a good chance of having them catch - the horseshoe crab will catch an infection and die. And they're doing a good thing working with medical people on that and also trying to get the populations back up where they're falling.

The pollution kills the seagrass. Well that in turn kills the seagrass because the sun can't get through that kills the manatees. We're having a problem with the manatees. It's going to be a thing that in the experiment you probably won't have a lot of effluent stuff coming out of there.

But when you get 50 to 100 times that then you really got it and it's not doing it away. It's going directly in to where the red tide stuff flows. It excites it and we have a real problem with red tide. We had one that usually lasts a couple of weeks. Here a couple of years ago we had one that lasted 18, 19 months, something like that.

And these lion fish and this arapaima, they are two fish that eat everything. They show no prejudice against anything. They eat anything. They can go in and destroy everything. And the fish farms will draw them because there's such a collection of fish that will draw them and from there they'll move out and get what's - when they wipe that out, they will get whatever else they can.

Oh I think I've hit most of the main ones there. I have a couple others but I think I'll let them - the main thing is that infection is going to go up and the pollution and the invasive fishes, the big things. That it's not to the advantage of the people who live along the Gulf Coast to have them in there. And they will ruin our economy in addition to everything else that's been already proven in places.

And the biggest thing - another big thing is that was slightly mentioned, but you've got several countries plus Alaska that are getting out of the fish business and going - they're raising fish, but they're raising them on land. Canada, Denmark, Alaska and a few others are just completely getting out of it because it has caused so many problems to their environment, they don't want to fool around with it anymore.

So I think that those are about the mean topics that I have a lot of backup on. And I don't have time enough to tell it here, but I can go in deep to these and I have sources and everything else. So it's not just something out of my mind. And I have some long-term things that are things that have happened and they were experiments and turned out very bad. And they started 30 years - three decades ago and they're not solved.

So there are many things going on. And it isn't that we don't want the fish industry to expand and make money. We're not against that, but we don't want to ruin things that have been here for millions of years and ruin them in a few days, you know, or a few months or years or whatever. But doing something like that for such a long time, I think that's the main highlight that I have. I'm a little more calm now than I was because I tried to throw everything in in a short period of time.

I think what I'll do is I'll leave it at that for right now and I'll call or I'll email Andrew Richard and see if maybe I can discuss some way of getting more information to him over the phone or coming up to see him. I thank you for talking to me again. Have a good day.

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next comment comes from Neal Schleifer. Tour line is open.

Dr. Neal Schleifer: Hi. Dr. Neal Schleifer again. I just wanted to address a couple of comments from the people of the offshore aquaculture community.

Generally whenever there is testimony like this as someone pointed out the vast majority of it, and certainly all the residents of the area oppose the fish farms in the federal waters and are against it. There's been a huge outcry. As I said, the constituents that I represent over 7,000 households oppose this.

And, you know, generally, you just get a couple of comments from the proponents of the fish farms who benefit from it, who support it. But there's vast evidence, the idea that it can be answered yet can be talked away. But when you look at the evidence, and I'm not going to - you know, I will also submit written comments with some evidence, but all of these things in terms of fish escapes, the decrease of native species, there was just a recent study on that.

And there are various countries that are shutting down the farms because of the type of problems. The algal blooms happen all over. And, of course, in Florida the red tide is a big issue.

One other thing that I so - and there's a lot of scientific evidence about the harm that the fish farms can do. So it can be like in the EPA hearing, if you look at the EPA, at the evidence, you look at all the testimony, and, you know, somebody earlier said, what is the difference between degradation and significant degradation and who decides that?

So, you know, even the EPA found there would be degradation, but to what degree is that degradation? And, of course, the fish farms, you know, that's why there are all these AOAs. But even the proponents who in the beginning didn't specify now, they're specifying at least 16 to 20 fish farms. So you have the cumulative effects of all the extra waste and other problems that are going to be in the Gulf, which isn't that large a body of water compared to, you know, the whole planet.

So one other thing I wanted to address and that's the kind of misleading fallacious statistics on the seafood deficit. One of the men who is a fisherman from the fishing industry addressed that.

But I want to reiterate that first of all the worldwide food problem and the current problem in Ukraine that was alluded to is about grain. It's not about fish. It's a lack of grain, which is a much more certainly basic food.

The idea that these fish farms would solve the food crisis in the world I think is ludicrous. There are much more sustainable ways to provide food. And the fish that are proposed in the fish farms like Velella Epsilon are not really the type of fish that the average person here is going to eat.

As a matter of fact, the U.S. has a fairly large catch, much of which is exported. And the man from the fishing industry pointed out that a lot of it is reimported after processing by China and other countries. But those fish are counted as being imported when they are really American catch.

And the vast majority by far statistically, and NOAA statistics show it, of imported seafood to America is inexpensive shrimp from Asia. So certainly that's not going to solve the worldwide crisis. And nobody is addressing that with these fin fish farms anyway.

So those are just kind of false and misleading arguments that are made. And in terms of what the people want, what we need for federal waters, the rights of the people in terms of the laws, Andrianna earlier talked about some of the legal issues and how we got to where we are so those certainly will play out.

But certainly you know, the mass of the public does not want these fin fish farms. They're very cognizant of the dangers which are not alarmist but very real. And what happens, you know, I alluded to the Piney Point phosphate spill.

And when that spill first came about, we were told that is not going to affect the red tide. And then, of course, there was massive red tide outbreaks. And a study by the University of South Florida showed that yes, that spill did contribute.

And the same thing will happen with the fish farms. Wherever fish farms are, these type of farms, there have been out algal outbreaks. And we're in an area in the Gulf that's very susceptible to red tide blooms. And they do a tremendous amount of damage both to the fishing industry, to the tourist industry.

And so the dangers that this causes in terms of quality of life, in terms of loss of even hundreds of millions, as I alluded to in the economy, are not worth the risk just for the profits of a few. So again thank you for listening to me.

Coordinator: Thank you. At this time I'm showing no further comments. Again, if you would like to make a comment, please press star 1 on your telephone keypad. Please ensure your line is unmuted and record your name at the prompt.

Andrew Richard: I would just like to remind everybody who has stuck it out with us or maybe joined the call here a little bit later, in addition to the opportunity to provide verbal comments here this evening during the virtual public scoping meeting, you can also submit written comment through two methods.

One of those is by mail. You can write, handwrite a letter or type up a letter and send that by mail to Andrew Richard, Regional Aquaculture Coordinator, NOAA Fisheries, Southeast Regional Office at 263 13th Avenue South, Saint Petersburg, Florida 33701, with regard to Gulf AOA PEIS. Or you can go on to the Internet and go to www.regulations.gov and enter NOAA-NMFS-2022-0044.

You put that in the search box and then you'll see the docket that will pop up for the notice of intent. And then you can click on the comment icon, complete the required fields to enter your comments into the text box or you can attach a PDF or whatever documents you might have onto your comments there.

If you wish to include your personal information on there you can, but if you don't you can put N/A in any of those box fields there and that will allow you to provide comments without providing that information.

And again if you would like to provide verbal comments here this evening, you can unmute your phone if you muted it. Type into the keypad on your phone star 1. That will allow you to join the comment queue. Once prompted, you can clearly state your first and last name and wait for the operator to call your name. You'll be able to provide additional comments.

We will hang on here on the line until about 9:15 if we're not going to get any more comments. I want to make sure that folks have the opportunity to do so.

I will cycle here to kind of the last slide here, which does have some contact information, an email address that you can send any questions you might have about that process to as well as the QR code you can scan and that will take you to the Gulf of Mexico Aquaculture Opportunity Area PEIS Web site.

That has all the information about how to provide public comment, information about the Aquaculture Opportunity Area Initiative, the Notice of Intent, the proposed aquaculture opportunity options that we showed you this evening as well as links to the Aquaculture Opportunity Atlas so you can go into all the different data layers.

The information that was incorporated that went into the identification of this atlas is truly an incredible comprehensive document there. You can actually look into each of those locations and what considerations were given to each of those locations.

And then also you can see here on kind of the left side of the screen there. It's just a reminder that public comment will remain open until August 1 and you will be able to provide written comment up until that August 1 deadline through those two methods I talked about, either written, mailing it to the mailing address that is listed on the slide deck, or you can log on to the regulations.gov Web site to provide comments electronically.

And again if you'd like to provide any verbal comments, press the star 1 on your keypad and that will prompt you to state your first and last name and then you can join the queue there and provide any verbal comments you might have. Thank you.

Again, we'll keep the meeting here open up until 9:15 Eastern Time, 8:15 Central Time just to make sure that we give folks an opportunity to provide comments if they'd like.

Again if you're all commented out and you do plan on sending written comments, you can look at the slide deck here and see the two methods that we have to providing these written comments.

Likewise if you have any questions about how to provide comments or things like that, or just questions about the general AOA process or aquaculture in general, you can feel free to reach out to me, the Aquaculture Coordinator for the Southeast Regional Office, which covers from Texas up through North Carolina and also includes U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. So lots of lots of aquaculture that goes on across that entire Southeast Region.

But happy to answer any questions you might have about the process or how to provide comments and feedback that will help to inform our identification of aquaculture opportunity areas in the Gulf of Mexico.

Coordinator: And as a reminder if you would like to make a comment, please ensure your line is unmuted, press star 1 on your telephone keypad and record your name at the prompt. Again, that is star 1 if you would like to make a comment.

Andrew Richard: Again, just a reminder, we'll hang on the line here for about another 10 more minutes. If anybody joins the call later, if anybody would like to provide some comments, feel free to chime in or if you'd like to provide written comments, check out our Aquaculture Opportunity Area PEIS Web site and it lists directions on how to do that as well.

Coordinator: We do have a comment from (Thomas Surprise). Your line is open.

(Thomas Surprise): Yes. You were listing the different sites and you go E-1 to E-3. What happened to E-2? Can you hear me? Hello?

Andrew Richard: Yes, Mr. (Surprise). We're not responding to any comments during this forum, but I definitely would be happy to follow-up with you and we can definitely talk about why there were only Options 3, 4 and 1 in that location.

(Thomas Surprise): There is no E-2.

Andrew Richard: Apology, 3, 4 and 1.

(Thomas Surprise): Okay. Thank you. Bye-bye.

Andrew Richard: Bye-bye. We have about another seven minutes. We'll hang on the line here for an opportunity for folks to provide a comment. Again if you do wish to provide verbal comments, the first step is to unmute your phone, user your keypad to press star 1 and join the comment queue.

Once prompted you can clearly state your first and last name, remain unmuted and wait for the operator to call your name and that way you'll be able to provide your comment.

And again if you do not wish to provide comments or you've already provided comments and are considering providing written comments, we encourage all stakeholders to do so. And you may provide your comments in writing via mail sending it to Andrew Richard, Regional Aquaculture Coordinator at NOAA Fisheries, Southeast Regional Office, 263 13th Avenue South, Saint Petersburg, Florida 33701 with regard to Gulf AOA PEIS.

Or you can go on to the Internet and provide comments electronically. To do so you go on to regulations.gov enter noaa-nmfs-2022-0044. You put that in the search box and then you click the comment icon. You complete the required fields and enter any information you need to move forward with providing your comments. You can attach your comments there.

And if you do not wish to provide any personal information there, you can put N/A into those fields and it will allow you to also provide your comments or attach any comments you may have. And again we'll be accepting those comments up through Monday, August 1, 2022.

We will remain here on the line for another five minutes so until 9:15 Eastern Time, 8:15 Central Time here just in case we get any latecomers or anybody has any thoughts that come to them here before the close of the meeting here. But we will hang on the line here for a little bit longer.

Again, if you'd like to provide any verbal comments press the star 1 buttons on your phone there. You will be able to join the comment queue. State your first and last name and wait for the operator to call you and you will be able to provide any comments you have.

If you do have any questions or information, you're interested in learning about the Aquaculture Opportunity Area Initiative, there's contact information on the last slide here as well as our aquaculture Web site that we have for the Southeast Region and for our Aquaculture Opportunity Area Web site. That will be the contact information for me so that we can have a chat and potentially answer any questions you might have or get you pointed in the right direction if we don't have the answers.

So I appreciate everybody sticking here on the line and staying with us as long as they have. We'll wait here another four minutes on the line before we call it a night if we don't have any comments. Thanks.

I'd also like to remind everyone that you can log on to the Aquaculture Opportunity Area PEIS Web site under the get involved link. We also will have links to recordings of all three of our virtual public scoping meetings as well as transcripts for each of those meetings. So those will be available online.

We also have some additional one-page documents that show some information about the Aquaculture Opportunity Area process for more information there as well. But it'll be a little bit after this last meeting before we get the third meeting up with the transcripts as well as the slide decks.

The recordings for virtual scoping meetings one and two, which were held back in June, those are already up on the Web site there. They are very similar to this presentation that was given here today.

We'll hang on the line here for another two minutes a minute and a half, two minutes. And if not, we'll conclude this meeting. But again if you'd like to provide your comments, please press the star 1 button on your phone here and wait for the operator to call your name, and you will be able to provide your comments. Thank you.

All right. Well we have reached a quarter past the hour here and I don't think that we have anybody in here. So we'll just conclude this virtual scoping meeting that we are holding here tonight.

So again I just want to thank everybody for taking the time. If you're still on the call and listening, kudos to you. We really appreciate you hanging around through the whole thing to listen. Really, really appreciate that.

And so this was the third and final virtual public scoping meeting that will take place during this public scoping period. And then - so this public scoping period will continue on through August 1 and there will still be an opportunity to provide written comment through the two methods that I had spoken about either electronically or through mail.

So you can go to regulations.gov if you'd like to provide comments electronically or you can snail mail any comments or thoughts you might have to the address that was listed on the previous slide there. For more information or detail on how to provide public comment, you can visit our Notice of Intent in the Federal Register or you can go on to the Gulf of Mexico AOA PEIS Web site for more information.

And as I noted a couple times here, please don't hesitate to reach out to me by phone or email if you happen to have any questions or have any trouble accessing any of this information.

I'll just confirm with (Calvin) here real quickly, we don't have anybody else left in the queue?

Coordinator: That is correct, sir. No other comments in the queue.

Andrew Richard: Awesome. Perfect. Alright. Well, thank you all again for joining us this evening for this meeting. I hope everybody has a great evening and this concludes our meeting.

Coordinator: Thank you for your participation. You may disconnect at this time.

END