SalishFish
JAMESTOWN S'KLALLAM TRIBE

February 26, 2025

Members of the Committee,

My name is Maria Smithson, and I work for Salish Fish, a project of the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe in Washington. We are working to develop a multi-trophic farm on the Olympic Peninsula, preparing to grow steelhead, sea cucumbers, and kelp; a very conservation-based approach to sustainable aquatic farming. I am writing in strong opposition to HB 2965. I have included a list of peer-reviewed scientific studies, reports, and articles in support of my position.

Although my work is up north on the Salish Sea, I live in Eugene, am a seventh-generation Oregonian, and am proud to have served as the First Vice Chair of the Democratic Party of Oregon, from 1999 to 2004. I am a conservationist who grew up trout and salmon fishing in Oregon's lakes, rivers and streams. I am also a Mom who worries how we will continue to provide nutritious seafood to our hungry planet of eight billion and growing, when our wild fish - especially salmonids - are disappearing due to overfishing and habitat destruction.

I held an intensely negative view of fish farms – until I had the opportunity to visit one. I saw firsthand how safe, spacious, and impressively clean a modern fish farm is. I spent a great deal of time reading peer-reviewed scientific information before coming to the firm conclusion that sustainable aquaculture is the most environmentally friendly way to produce nutritious animal protein for a planet rapidly running out of wild fish. So, I left politics to take up the cause of promoting sustainable aquaculture.

My biggest reason for dedicating my life's work to advocating for net-pen farming is simple: pound for pound, net-pen farmed fish produces the lowest amount of carbon of any form of animal protein production.

Local fish farming takes pressure off decimated wild fisheries and reduces our embarrassingly large carbon footprint caused by our dirty habit of importing more than 80% of the seafood we consume, which in absence of local farms must be flown and shipped here from overseas. When Washington's steelhead farms were shut down, big grocery retailers here in the Pacific Northwest started flying fresh, farmed steelhead in from Norway. Other local distributors are buying from China and countries with abysmal environmental and food-safety regulations.

HB 2965 is built on a false narrative, pushed by animal rights activists who use regulatory battles and litigation – not as tools for conservation - but as fuel for fundraising. The driving force behind this legislation is not sound science or environmental protection, but rather political opportunism.

Much of this misinformation stems from a 2017 fish escapement incident on the coast of Washington, an event that has been grossly mischaracterized and its impacts dramatically exaggerated. To be clear, all of those fish were either recovered immediately, or rapidly failed to thrive in absence of regular feeding within the farm environment. The fish were all sterile and could not reproduce. They were not diseased. They have not been found in any estuaries, rivers, or the Puget Sound area itself since shortly after the incident. Unfortunately, those facts have not stopped activist groups, and one very vocal Washington politician, from exploiting that unfortunate incident for political purposes.

Another fallacy you've now heard is "Washington banned fish farming completely!" This is also not accurate. Following the 2017 escapement incident, the Washington State Legislature took deliberate action and passed legislation to ban non-native species aquaculture, while expressly allowing for well-regulated farming of native fish species in Washington's aquatic lands, a very measured and thoughtful response, rooted in science—not politics.

Unfortunately, that clear legislative authority was arbitrarily ignored by former Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz, who seized on the escapement as campaign fodder during her failed bids for both Governor and Congress in Washington's 2024 election cycle. She politicized the issue and overstepped her authority, improperly using an agency rulemaking process to shutter all farms in Washington. The validity of that decision is now under significant scrutiny, is certainly not a settled issue, and that rulemaking is likely to be overturned. Please note, during her eight years in office, Commissioner Franz never once visited a fish farm.

The most recent peer-reviewed research and scientific analysis (linked below) clearly shows that well-regulated, native-species net-pen farming does not have serious negative impacts on aquatic environments. The World Wildlife Fund, NOAA, The Nature Conservancy, Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch, and the UN all support well-regulated net-pen aquaculture of native species, taking the position that well-regulated local aquaculture is a critical tool for saving threatened and endangered wild fish, and mitigating climate change.

Although Oregon does not have a large net-pen farming sector, and our state's aquatic geography is not ideal for most types of net-pen farming, passing HB 2965 sends the wrong message that Oregon is no longer committed to good public policy that supports local solutions to global environmental problems. Our state, our region, and our world need science-based, local sustainable aquaculture to support food security, carbon mitigation, Tribal communities, and our rural economies.

Net pens are not damaging our aquatic environments – but climate change is. Net-pens are not hurting wild salmon – but climate change is. Banning seafood production in Oregon only further supports the out-of-control carbon pollution which is warming our planet past the tipping point.

I urge you to review the peer-reviewed science and articles I have provided below and reject this horribly ill-informed bill.

Thank you for your dedicated public service to our state,

Maria Smithson
Eugene, Oregon

Supporting Peer-Reviewed Research, Analysis, and Articles on Net-Pen Aquaculture

2022 NOAA Puget Sound Biological Opinion
"In this opinion, we conclude that the proposed action is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of PS Chinook salmon (Oncorhynchus tshawytscha), PS steelhead (O. mykiss), Hood Canal summer-run chum (HCSRC; O. keta), PS/Georgia Basin (PS/GB) yelloweye rockfish (Sebastes ruberrimus) or PS/GB bocaccio (S. paucispinis). Further, we conclude that the proposed action is not likely to result in the destruction or adverse modification of the designated critical habitats for any of the listed species."
Full Report:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mPef6Qw6hSIykZB3T5JrdfqHWSAfEPl3/view?pli=1

Macdonald Laurier Institute
***The Case for Salmon Fish Farming in British Columbia,* February 2025**
"The ban on West Coast salmon farming exemplifies the dangers of special interest driven decision-making. Canada has time to get it right, but the nature of the federal decision has allowed emotion to override effective policy-making."
https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/swimming-against-the-tide-the-case-for-salmon-fish-farming-in-british-columbia/?fbclid=IwY2xjawIlmD5leHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHSPXVkSPCGhQMqSVlo7B8wu1XR4gMb0ac3kL4-GDXzghDjcK6Fde8ZlExw_aem_G6tdXJ9j8Sx4zDr-CC-4Ug

American Fisheries Society
Letter to State of Washington Department of Natural Resources, January 2025
"There is a lack of scientific evidence to support either a partial or full ban of net pen aquaculture in the State of Washington or elsewhere in the United States. Aquaculture faces a number of persistent, troubling falsehoods regarding the environmental footprint of net-pen aquaculture, perhaps particularly so in the State of Washington. We seek to provide you with the most up-to-date scientific information."
Full Letter: AFS.pdf

NOAA Fisheries
Aquaculture Supports a Sustainable Earth
September 30, 2020
"A recent study from the UN shows that aquaculture can improve food security and nutrition by increasing the amount of seafood available for people to eat. If done correctly, aquaculture increases food production, boosts economic growth in coastal and rural areas, and can help keep waterways clean."
Full Article: If done correctly, aquaculture increases food production, boosts economic growth in coastal and rural areas, and can help keep waterways clean. | NOAA Fisheries