



Boats gather Sunday to protest a proposed salmon farm in Frenchman Bay. Photo Courtesy of Hewlitt Kent

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“Save the Bay Flotilla” draws more than 100 boats

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GOULDSBORO — An estimated 125 watercraft — from lobster fishermen to kayakers and sailors — Sunday morning paraded in a great arc and filed past the packed Bar Harbor municipal pier to express opposition to American Aquafarms’ proposed \$250 million salmon farm in Frenchman Bay.

Converging at 9:30 a.m. off “The Hop,” a tiny island in the vicinity of one of the Norwegian-backed company’s two proposed 15-net pen sites, vessels joined the “Save the Bay Flotilla” organized by Hancock innkeeper and restaurateur Leslie Harlow. She said the parade was intended to show “solidarity” with the local lobster industry and small-scale oyster, mussel and seaweed farmers who see the 120-acre fish farm as a threat to their livelihood and the health of the 7-mile-wide inlet.

On board her husband's fishing boat, devOcean, South Gouldsboro resident Diane Potter declared it felt good to demonstrate on the water, where the vessel's captain Jerry Potter has lobstered, shrimped and harvested other seafood for decades. "I don't think these guys [American Aquafarms] have the fishermen's best interests," she said. "I feel the natural resources would be taken out of here and not kept local."

Gouldsboro, Winter Harbor, Sorrento, Hancock, Lamoine, Sullivan and Bar Harbor were among the home ports of the commercial fishing boats participating in the parade that proceeded across calm waters thick with lobster buoys to the Bar Harbor waterfront. The flotilla filed past the municipal pier packed with cheering, sign-bearing opponents of the proposed salmon farm.



For many of the fishing boats in attendance, Sunday's event was a family affair. Accompanying the Potters on devOcean was their daughter Stephanie Scott as well as neighbors who oppose the industrial-scale fish farm.

"I think it's a disgrace the fishermen are up against something like this," Scott said. "This has been a sustainable fishery for centuries."

Sitting in the stern, South Gouldsboro resident Colleen (MacGregor) Wallace says her late father and grandfather both fished for a living in Frenchman Bay. She attended the village's tiny schoolhouse. After a banking career, she and her late husband retired to South Gouldsboro. She co-founded Friends of Schoodic Peninsula, one of the first opposition groups to form.

"I live where I swam as a kid every day," said Wallace who is concerned about the potential project's environmental impact and the quality of life in Frenchman Bay towns. "This will certainly affect our children and grandchildren."

Quality of life — in the form of well paid, full-time jobs — is among the benefits American Aquafarms says it seeks to bring to the Downeast region. The company's founder Mikael Roenes has pledged to create 60 salaried jobs ranging from engineers and technicians to boat captains and crew. He and the other company executives have sought to forge ties with Maine technical schools and provide aquaculture curriculum to train students.

Maintaining water quality in Frenchman Bay has been a major concern of American Aquafarms' critics. The company is touting a new generation of fish-farming technology using semi-closed pens. Designed by Norway's Ecomerden, the floating Eco-cages, each measure about 125 feet wide, are fitted with polymer-membrane cloth sacks in which fish waste (faeces and feed) collects at the bottom. The waste is

pumped to and filtered in an attached but contained unit. The compressed excrement would be transported to the mainland and potentially used for commercial applications such as biogas and fertilizer.

In its application to the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, however, the company is seeking permission to discharge a total of 4 billion gallons daily of filtered water into Frenchman Bay, releasing 2 billion gallons daily (23,775 gallons per second) at each of the 15-pen sites. The concern for opponents of the project is the possibility of the filtered water degrading the inlet’s current water quality and threatening lobster and other marine resources. Among the many other concerns are potential gear conflicts with lobster fishermen and greater boat traffic with existing commercial and recreational watercraft.

Sunday’s flotilla set the stage for an expected visit Labor Day weekend from American Aquafarms’ founder Mikael Roenes, Vice-President Eirik Jors and Technology Director Erling Kristiansen who will be in town to meet with local residents about the project among other things. The COVID-19 pandemic has prevented them from visiting Maine since they unveiled plans to farm fish in Frenchman Bay. A public meeting has been tentatively scheduled for 6 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 7, at the Gouldsboro Recreational Center.

As it stands now, American Aquafarms’ wastewater discharge permit application is under review by the Maine Department of Environmental Protection. The application was deemed complete June 9. On Monday, Aug. 30, DEP spokesperson David Madore said the state agency plans to hold a public meeting to hear public sentiment about the project but has not scheduled that yet.

American Aquafarms’ 20-year lease application has not yet been deemed complete by the Maine Department of Marine Resources. If and when that happens, the state agency’s scientists will conduct their own fieldwork and a formal public hearing will be scheduled. DMR spokesman Jeff Nichols says such a hearing is unlikely to be held this year.

 Bio

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