

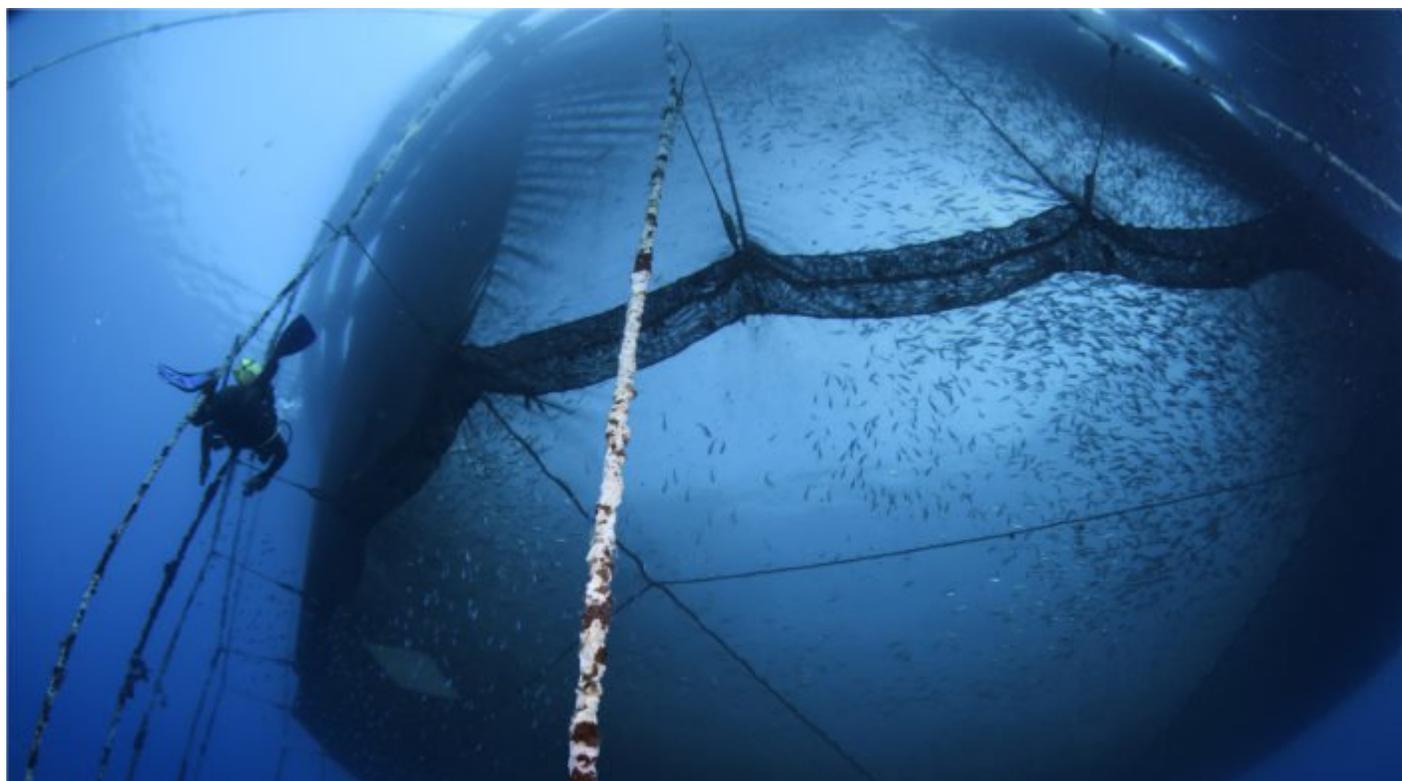
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# Wild fish harvesters rally to fight US aquaculture push in new Congress

By Jason Huffman

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The push to make it easier for the net pen aquaculture industry to gain access to US federal waters has resumed in the 116th Congress, but this time commercial fishermen are showing up in opposition.

A group of about 140 mostly small-scale harvesters and their regional trade groups have signed [a letter](#) sent to lawmakers in both the Senate and House of Representatives asking them to not support any new legislation that might advance the aquaculture cause.

“Marine finfish aquaculture pollutes the natural ecosystem, degrades and threatens wild fish stocks, and challenges the economic viability of commercial fishing.

American commercial fishing and marine finfish aquaculture cannot coexist,” claims the letter, which was organized by Noah Oppenheim, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations & Institute for Fisheries Resources, in San Francisco, California.

The signatories represent seven of the US' fishery management regions, excluding the Caribbean, and harvesters of multiple types of species, including several types of groundfish, salmon and crabs, Oppenheim told *Undercurrent News* in an interview Tuesday. They include, for example, the Massachusetts Lobster Association, the Long Island Community Fishing Association, Wild Salmon Nation and the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance.



📷 Credit: Powerhouse Productions/Shutterstock.com

Oppenheim said he spent months, using social media and seafood conferences, to rally the harvesters to his cause and believes his effort is the first of any significant magnitude to represent commercial fishing interests in opposition to pro-aquaculture efforts in Washington.

## Wicker expected to make aquaculture priority in Commerce Committee

Senator Roger Wicker, a Mississippi Republican, introduced [S. 3138](#), the Advancing the Quality and Understanding of American Aquaculture (AQUAA) Act, in late June 2018.

The bill, which would streamline the permitting process for putting aquaculture farms in federal waters -- 3 to 200 miles offshore -- while also providing funds for research purposes, garnered one influential co-sponsor, Florida Republican senator Marco Rubio. But it was referred to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation where it died with the 115th Congress.

A companion bill, [HR 6966](#), also known as the AQUAA Act, was introduced by representative Steven Palazzo, also a Mississippi Republican, in the House in September. That bill, which was co-sponsored by representative Collin Peterson, a Minnesota Democrat, was referred to the House Agriculture Committee's panel on livestock and foreign agriculture where it also died with the previous Congress.

The legislation may have failed to survive the last session and the House has been taken over by the Democrats, but it has some things working for it this time.

For starters, all three lawmakers who supported the AQUAA Act are back and Peterson now yields more influence as the chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture. Also, Wicker is now chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce,

Science and Transportation, which has oversight of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.



📷 Senator Roger Wicker, a Mississippi Republican.

Washington, D.C., is currently afire with a battle over a wall to block immigration and a federal government shutdown. But Oppenheim believes Wicker will soon re-introduce his bill and also make aquaculture one of his top priorities in his new role. He also expects a broader coalition of lawmakers to be brought on from across party lines to support the measure.

But he also thinks pro-aquaculture legislation has a high wall to climb in the House.

Likely working against the bill is the ascendance of representative Raul Grijalva, an Arizona Democrat, to chair the Natural Resources Committee and Jared Huffman, a California Democrat, to chair the committee's panel on water, power and oceans. Oppenheim plans on talking to both lawmakers about the legislation, which he is convinced it will get a "double referral", meaning it will be forced to pass through both the agriculture and natural resource

committees.

"I don't see much of a future for the AQUAA Act in this divided Congress, but I've been surprised before and will still be bird-dogging and ensuring that the fishing industry's perspective is top of mind for any lawmakers seeking to [ease the permitting process for aquaculture producers]," Oppenheim told *Undercurrent*.

In particular, based on the letter, the fishermen will make the case that easing the path for aquaculture in federal waters will bar their access to miles of open ocean, pollute the environment and create cheaper competition for their products. The letter notes that aquaculture producers are not subject to the same seasonal limitations as wild harvesters.

"This emerging industrial practice is incompatible with the sustainable commercial fishing practices embraced by our nation for generations and contravenes our vision for environmentally sound management of our oceans," the letter warns. Federal aquaculture "operations are essentially underwater factory farms relying on natural currents to advect their waste and detritus to other parts of the ocean".

Oppenheim's group won't likely be alone in its opposition this time either. More than 100 organizations, including Friends of the Earth, the Center for Biological Diversity, Food & Water Watch and the Center for Food Safety, were among those to write against the Wicker bill last year.

## Pro-aquaculture lobbying group supported by big guns

Meanwhile, working in the AQUAA Act's favor will be a powerful coalition of at least 15 businesses. In June 2018, they formed a lobbying group known as the Stronger America Through Seafood (SATS).

The group is led by Kathryn Unger, the managing director of Cargill's North American aquaculture nutrition division, and employs, as its campaign manager, Margaret Henderson, a 14-year lobbying professional. Henderson served as the VP of government relations for the National Fisheries Institute (2005 – 2009), and as executive director of the Gulf Seafood Institute (2013-2017), a trade association that represents fishermen, processors, distributors, restaurants and their customers.

Henderson couldn't be reached for comment by *Undercurrent* at press time.

Cargill is the nation's largest privately held business and headquartered in Peterson's home state of Minnesota, one of the country's largest producers of soybeans, a key ingredient in many aquaculture feed options.

If that wasn't enough, other companies in the coalition include High Liner Foods, Red Lobster Seafood, Pacific Seafood Group, Sysco, Taylor Shellfish, Fortune Fish & Gourmet, Blue Ocean Mariculture, Pontos Aqua Advisory, Protein Products, Woods Hole Group, Harvest Select, InnovaSea, Pentair and Beaver Street Fisheries.

Red Lobster is the US' biggest seafood restaurant chain and Sysco, a publicly traded \$55 billion company, is one of the US' largest foodservice distributors.

The lobbying group's mission would seem to be in line with that of the current administration, where secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross has suggested that further developing aquaculture could help to balance the US' seafood trade deficit. The country imports about 90% of the seafood it consumes.

As Cargill's Unger noted in [an earlier interview with \*Undercurrent\*](#), despite the US having the largest exclusive economic zone in the world -- 3.4m square miles of ocean, nearly as large as the combined land area of all 50 states -- it is not even in the top four markets for her company's aquaculture feed sales.



📷 Kathryn Unger, managing director of Cargill's North American aquaculture feed division. Photo from Stronger America Through Seafood website.

One of the challenges to putting an aquaculture facility in federal waters is that there are numerous overlapping federal, state and local jurisdictional issues and the absence of an efficient or affordable permitting process, SATS has argued.

The AQUAA Act would've established an Office of Marine Aquaculture within NOAA that would be charged with coordinating the permit process. It would give federal aquaculture permit holders "the security of tenure necessary to secure financing for an aquaculture operation," while maintaining environmental standards and funding research and extension services.

Such a change would be good for the US economy, proponents of the bill had argued, since a 2008 NOAA study suggested doubling US aquaculture production to about 1 million metric tons could create as many as 50,000 direct and indirect jobs.

The last time such a strong push was made to better enable federal aquaculture was in 2009 when representative Lois Capps, a California Democrat, introduced legislation that would've similarly given the secretary of Commerce the authority and broad discretion to promote offshore aquaculture in consultation with other federal agencies. The bill was referred to the Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans, and Wildlife where it died.

Capps' bill was similar to one introduced in 2005 by then Senate Commerce Committee co-chairmen, Ted Stevens, an Alaska Republican, and Daniel Inouye, a Hawaii Democrat, which similarly failed to get out of committee.

The previous legislation and Peterson's support of the more recent bills shows that aquaculture is not necessarily a partisan issue.



Members and friends of the Stronger America Through Seafood coalition at a reception in Washington, D.C. From left to right: Michael Kelly (Woods Hole Group), Sarah Brenholt (Henderson strategies); Donna Lanzatta (Manna Ocean Foundation); David Kelly (innovaSsea); Chip Kunde (Sysco); Amy Hammer (Hubbs SeaWorld Institute); Tony Dal Ponte (Pacific Seafood), Kelly Lucas (University of Southern Mississippi), Kathryn Unger (Cargill), Don Kent (Hubbs SeaWorld Research Institute), Max Holtzman (Pontos Aqua Advisors) and Margaret Henderson (Henderson Strategies).

"Feeding our families healthy seafood, bringing jobs to the United States, having real transparency into what's being produced and where, the questions of local, sustainability, these are not partisan questions," Unger told *Undercurrent* in June.

If not successful in getting independent federal aquaculture legislation to advance in the 116th Congress, Unger's group could try attaching such changes to a Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) reauthorization bill.

That's a concern that Oppenheim's group also addressed in its letter.

"But the AQUAA Act is not the only threat on the horizon – there is the possibility that an amendment to permit industrial ocean fish farms could be

tacked onto [an MSA] reauthorization package. Regardless of the legislative avenue, permitting this new industry would devastate ours," the group warned.

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