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Cooke Aquaculture Pacific employees rally in Olympia to defend farming livelihoods

(OLYMPIA, Washington) Cooke Aquaculture Pacific employees today testified before a state Senate committee against legislation that would ban Washington’s long-standing salmon farming industry and effectively terminate their employment.

“This bill will immediately cease the issuance of permits necessary to conduct normal operations at each of the four salmon farms in Washington,” said Troy Nichols, lobbyist representing Cooke Aquaculture Pacific.

“The bill will kill dozens of rural, family-wage jobs were it to pass, and it acknowledges as much.”

The ban effort is prompted by fears about potential impacts of salmon farming on native salmon and the marine ecosystem, fears which run counter to the current and best available science, as provided by the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife, Nichols noted. Until the early 1980s, the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife was purposefully releasing Atlantic salmon smolts in Puget Sound waters in an effort to establish naturally-spawning populations.

“These attempts were unsuccessful, which demonstrates that farming Atlantic salmon in our waters actually makes sense precisely because escapees do not intermingle with native stocks, are not predators and cannot survive in the Puget Sound,” said Nichols.

“Salmon farming is a viable enterprise, a sustainable enterprise, and one that is important to the people who make their livelihoods from it. Given the lack of environmental impact associated with farming Atlantic salmon in Washington waters, putting these folks out of work would be based solely on emotion, and is simply not justified.”

“We care about the environment,” said Tom Glaspie, the site manager of Cooke’s Hope Island Fish Farm near Anacortes.

Tom has worked at the farm for 13 years and was first brought to the farm when he was four-years-old by his father, an employee at the time.

“We are fisherman, our families have fished. We’re proud to be Washingtonians. We spend more time with these fish than we do with our own families. We do everything we can to make them the best product possible, and to make sure they’re sustainable.”

Glaspie said Cooke Aquaculture Pacific made significant investments upon acquiring the farm in 2016, including in new environmental monitoring and feeding systems, using the best technology and expertise from around the world.

“We’re worried about our jobs,” Glaspie told the committee, noting that he supervises 18 employees, each with families, kids and mortgages.

“I’ve been doing this my whole adult life. I invite all of you to come out and look at what we do before you judge it, and you’ll see how sustainable it is.”

“We do our best to be great stewards of the environment, and we work really hard together, almost like family,” said Randy Hodgkin, site manager at Cooke’s Port Angeles Fish Farm, who has worked at the farm for 31 years and supervises 10 employees with 25 total dependents.

“I have three adult daughters and have been able to put all three through college, which speaks to the family-wage nature of the jobs at our farm.”

Hodgin noted that the farm personnel have been very involved in the community over the years, including funding scholarships and making donations to the athletic department at Port Angeles High School, providing salmon for non-profit fundraising events, supporting the biology and natural resource-programs of high schools and colleges from around the region.

“Aquaculture has given me the opportunity to live in an area I love and to raise my family there,” said Brett Raemer, assistant manager at Port Angeles, who has worked at the farm for 29 years.

“Family-wage jobs in Port Angeles are hard to come by. We would appreciate if we had the opportunity to build upon our efforts with all our new company ownership has to offer.”

Joel Richardson, vice president of public relations for Cooke Aquaculture, noted that Cooke, a global industry leader which acquired the only operational salmon farms in the state in the summer of 2016, is prepared to make the investments needed to bring these facilities up to world class standards. Richardson said the effect of these investments is to provide economic activity and employment opportunities in rural communities.

Richardson said that Cooke can also provide valuable expertise, experience and resources to support existing state and tribal salmon conservation and enhancement efforts.

“We are fish people,” said Richardson. “We support net-pen aquaculture and the enhancement of open fisheries. We require clean water for our farms to prosper, and are committed to environmental protection and enhancement. We are some of the best in the world at what we do, and have received many recognitions for our industry-leading practices. We only recently acquired these Washington farms, and we can be strong partners in the fight to revive Puget Sound and reinvigorate native salmon runs. But passage of this bill would bring an end to that partnership before it could even begin, because it would make Puget Sound fish farming uncompetitive in the worldwide marketplace, and lead to the loss of many family wage jobs in communities that can least afford it.”

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