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Rules Guiding Fish Farming in the Gulf Are Readied

By [CORNELIA DEAN](#)

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said Thursday that it would draft a national policy on fish farming in federal waters but in the meantime would allow aquaculture rules for the Gulf of Mexico to go into effect.

The gulf rules, the first in the nation for aquaculture in federal waters, were developed by the federal fishery management council with jurisdiction over the area. They would establish permit requirements, what species could be farmed and where, and other standards. In a telephone news conference, Jim Balsinger, the acting administrator of the agency's Fisheries Service, said that in the absence of a federal policy for saltwater fish farms, the agency had no grounds to block the gulf plan.

But environmental groups, citing marine aquaculture's record, said that allowing the proposal to take effect set a bad precedent.

"We need a national plan," said George Leonard, who heads the aquaculture program at the Ocean Conservancy, an advocacy group. He said the gulf plan "lacks enforcement standards for the risks we know accompany this kind of farming" and added that region-by-region regulation ran contrary to the Obama administration's pledge to develop a regulatory framework for coastal waters generally.

Christopher Mann of the Pew Environment Group called it "a recipe for disaster."

Dr. Balsinger said a national aquaculture framework was of "urgent" priority and predicted it would be drawn up within months, before permits were issued for the gulf. Still, he conceded that the gulf guidelines now have the force of law.

Fish farming accounts for only about 5 percent of fish produced in the United States, most of it freshwater plant-eating fish like tilapia. Saltwater aquaculture has been largely limited to shellfish grown in state waters.

Elsewhere in the world, though, marine aquaculture is a huge industry, and many experts call it the only answer to the world's growing appetite for fish. Most fish consumed in the United States is imported, and about half of that is farmed.

Among other environmental problems, saltwater fish farms incubate microbes and parasites that threaten wild stocks.

For many experts, though, the biggest objection to the farming of fish-eating saltwater fish like [salmon](#) is that they must be fed — typically with meal pellets made from herring and other fish. It takes more than a pound

of wild fish to produce a pound of farmed fish, an issue Dr. Balsinger said should be addressed in the national guidelines.

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