NH Sea Grant Extension Educator Works To Advance The Field Of Offshore Aquaculture

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DURHAM, N.H. -- On April 6, Congress will hold a hearing to consider the National Offshore Aquaculture Act of 2005. One man paying close attention to the fate of that fish-farming legislation will be Rollie Barnaby, an aquaculture expert with NH Sea Grant and University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension.

The U.S. currently imports 70 percent of its seafood, and 40 percent of that comes from aquaculture. Demand for seafood continues to grow, and harvesting from wild fish stocks can't keep pace with demand. Farming fish in the U.S. could help to fill the gap, according to Barnaby. Most inshore waters are already overcrowded with other users. "The logical next step in marine aquaculture," he says, "is to move offshore."

To that end, Barnaby works closely with the Open Ocean Aquaculture Project (OOA), a partnership between UNH and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The Project is exploring the environmental soundness, technological feasibility, and economic viability of farming finfish and shellfish in the Gulf of Maine. Founded in 1998, with support from Senator Judd Gregg (R-NH), this interdisciplinary project combines innovative engineering design, progressive fish husbandry techniques, advanced communications technology, rigorous environmental assessment and extensive community outreach.

In the decade that Barnaby has worked with the OOA, he's seen the field of offshore aquaculture begin to blossom. He's worked closely with fishermen and co-ops in the state, helping them get permits and grants to venture into offshore shellfish farming. Currently, Barnaby and OOA shellfish operations manager Forbes Horton are helping New Hampshire fisherman Andy Lang to begin farming blue mussels offshore. Lang plans to harvest his first crop this year.

Barnaby has also paid close attention to the efforts of other open ocean aquaculture sites around the world. He recently spent a six-month sabbatical visiting commercial offshore fish farms to check up on the progress of the industry. He was encouraged by what he saw.

Barnaby believes the industry has a bright future. For that to unfold, offshore aquaculture companies and projects such as the OOA must continue to find ways to overcome the technical hurdles of growing fish in the extreme environment of the open ocean. Establishing a formal regulatory process, he says, will also be a step in the right direction. "With clear legislation in place that safeguards sustainable practices," he says, "we have an incredible opportunity to provide our citizens with needed protein in a safe, sustainable and environmentally responsible way."