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UNH Open Ocean Aquaculture Project Explores Fish Farming in the Gulf of Maine

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CICEET and CINEMAR

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DURHAM, N.H. -- The national debate over fish farming in the open ocean heated up last week when the Bush Administration introduced a national offshore aquaculture bill to Congress. The proposed legislation would grant the Secretary of Commerce authority to issue permits for marine aquaculture operations in federal waters, from three to 200 miles off the coasts of the United States. The bill's proponents cite the growing consumer demand for fish and the inability of wild fisheries to meet this demand, while critics voice concern that fish farms can be a source of pollution.

The University of New Hampshire's Open Ocean Aquaculture Demonstration 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) and in partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, this interdisciplinary project combines innovative engineering design, progressive fish husbandry techniques, advanced communications technology, rigorous environmental assessment and extensive community outreach.

Six miles off the New Hampshire coast, project researchers are raising blue mussels and native finfish species such as halibut, cod, and haddock in the extreme, high-energy environment of the North Atlantic. To date, the project's environmental monitoring program has detected no measurable effect on the surrounding ecosystems.

The project's first technology transfer took place this spring, when mussel lines licensed to the Yankee and Portsmouth fishermen's cooperatives were seeded for commercial harvest. Spring 2004 marked the project's first pilot finfish harvest of Atlantic halibut. Researchers will harvest pilot crops of cod and haddock this summer.

Richard Langan, director of the Open Ocean Aquaculture Demonstration Project, is available for comment on the state of current research in offshore aquaculture technology. To reach him for comment, please send an email to rlangan@cisunix.unh.edu. Or, contact Dolores Leonard, the project's public relations specialist, at (603) 862-3685.

Rollie Barnaby, an outreach educator with UNH Cooperative Extension and New Hampshire Sea Grant, also is available to discuss the mussel technology transfer to New Hampshire fishermen.

To reach him for comment, send an email to rollie.barnaby@unh.edu.

UNH's Open Ocean Aquaculture project is part of CINEMAR, the Cooperative Institute for New England Mariculture and Fisheries. A joint institute between UNH and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), CINEMAR provides regional leadership and integration for research, development, education, and outreach to support the use, management, and preservation of New England fisheries.