

State approves Cooke Aquaculture plan to farm native fish in Puget Sound

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State wildlife regulators have approved a plan by Cooke Aquaculture to raise native fish in the company's net pens in Puget Sound, including in pens off Bainbridge Island.

The state's Department of Fish and Wildlife announced last week that it has approved a five-year permit for Cooke's proposal to raise all-female, sterile rainbow trout/steelhead at its existing net pens in Rich Passage and in Skagit Bay. The agency noted that the approval "may later extend to three other net pens owned by Cooke."

"We heard from a huge number of stakeholders on this issue, and we appreciate everyone who took time to make their voice heard as part of this process," WDFW Deputy Director Amy Windropo said in a statement. "This permit was approved based on scientific review and is contingent on Cooke complying with strict provisions designed to minimize any risk to native fish species."

During the agency's public comment period for the permit, it received more than 3,500 comments, it said.

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FILE PHOTO – A worker at Cooke Aquaculture's Rich Passage net pens watches the fish splash behind him on Friday, August 31, 2018. (Photo: Larry Steagall / Kitsap Sun)

The company has been angling to shift its operations away from farming nonnative Atlantic salmon over the last year after a state ban on those operations went into place in 2018. That move was prompted by the collapse of one of the company's net pen operations, at Cypress Island. The failure of that facility in 2017 allowed thousands of the site's Atlantic salmon to stream out into Puget Sound and prompted activists to call for the removal of the farming operations from state waters.

State officials went on to approve the ban on nonnative fish farming operations, but that ban doesn't prohibit Cooke from raising native fish, Fish and Wildlife's fish health manager Ken Warheit noted in a document supporting the agency's approval this week.

More: [After nonnative fish farming ban, Cooke Aquaculture plans a shift in Puget Sound \(/story/news/2019/10/25/cooke-aquaculture-plans-raise-native-fish-puget-sound/4090855002/\)](/story/news/2019/10/25/cooke-aquaculture-plans-raise-native-fish-puget-sound/4090855002/)

Warheit wrote that the agency considers the overall risk of disease transmission from the net pen fish to wild fish to be minimally different from the danger that Atlantic salmon have posed, calling the overall risk "relatively low."

Warheit noted that Fish and Wildlife's regulations don't allow its director to deny an aquaculture permit "based on economics, social, political, or other concerns, nor is the decision subject to a vote of the people. The director's concerns here are limited to significant genetic, ecological, and fish health risks."

The company is required to follow a set of requirements along with the approval, including having an escape prevention and response plan, having biennial inspections of its net pens to check for structural integrity and having annual fish health evaluations.

Fish and Wildlife also noted that the company will also have to update pollution discharge permits with the state's Department of Ecology and obtain a transport permit from the Fish and Wildlife before any fish can actually be placed in the pens.

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