

Aquaculture Ad Misrepresents Issues

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The Sept. 20 full page ad by Friends of Blue Hill Bay (FOBHB) regarding the aquaculture scoping session is helpful insofar as it provides additional public notice about a scoping session for a mussel aquaculture lease proposed by Erick Swanson.

However, some statements in the ad misrepresent the aquaculture leasing program and its history in Blue Hill Bay. These statements merit correction in order to provide folks with factual information on which to base an informed opinion about the proposed aquaculture lease, the leasing process, and the Department of Marine Resources (DMR).

The ad states that the DMR sees Blue Hill Bay as an “untapped resource that is theirs to give away with complete disregard for the issues raised by the local community.” This is simply untrue. The department doesn’t think any of Maine’s resources are “untapped” and ours to give away. To the contrary, the department knows that Maine’s marine resources belong to all the people of the state. The department believes in shared, sustainable use of Maine’s marine resources — a belief based on our statutory mission.

The DMR isn’t advocating for the lease in question. The scoping meeting is a requirement of law where members of the public can learn more about the lease in question and the formal leasing process before it begins, and where the public can suggest to the DMR what potential conflicts should receive extra attention during the site evaluation. What the DMR is advocating for at the scoping session is an informed citizenry and informed decision-making.

The ad implies that people should tell DMR that they won’t accept our “mandates.” The DMR doesn’t mandate aquaculture leases. It follows a process mandated by the state legislature, a process that includes a scoping session, site review, comments from the public and other municipal, state and federal agencies, and a public hearing.

The ad states “The DMR sees no limit on the total number of acres in Blue Hill Bay it will privatize for the exclusive use of aquaculture.” While there is no statutory limit on the acreage in Blue Hill Bay, or elsewhere, the leasing process is designed to address concerns about impacts on the environment and other human uses, and requires the commissioner to take into consideration the number and density of aquaculture leases in an area. Recall that the DMR has in the past denied two salmon aquaculture leases in Blue Hill Bay (Long Island, Bartlett Narrows), one primarily for environmental reasons and the other primarily because of navigation concerns.

The leasing process will assess whether the proposed aquaculture lease will have detrimental impacts on commercial fishing and navigation. FOBHB have already clearly given their opinion; the leasing process provides a legal forum for other views to be heard, including from folks who can’t afford full page ads in local newspapers.

The ad states that the proposed lease will restrict access to the National Park easement property on Long Island. The DMR will consider any evidence offered about restriction of access and will evaluate that evidence fairly. If the evidence shows that there are unreasonable impacts, then the lease will be denied. However, there isn’t even a formal application filed yet, so it is impossible to know if there will be restricted access. To make that charge in the absence of an application seems premature and irresponsible.

The ad states “Aquaculture can and should play a role in the healthy future of Blue Hill Bay...” but I don’t recall an instance where FOBHB have taken a stance supporting any lease application in Blue Hill Bay.

Concerned people should contact the DMR or come to a future meeting about the proposal. We want the public to have information from which they can make up their minds based on the facts rather than an ad from an advocacy group.

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