

Meeting on Blue Hill Bay Mussel Farm Attracts Large, Unhappy Crowd



Written by Stephen Rappaport

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BLUE HILL — Burr under the saddle? Thorn in the side? Pain in a lower portion of the anatomy?

Whichever description you chose, it would fit how most people attending a Department of Marine Resources (DMR) scoping session at the Blue Hill Town Hall last Wednesday evening feel about a proposal for another mussel farm in Blue Hill Bay.

According to DMR Aquaculture Policy Coordinator Samantha Horn Olson, scoping sessions are supposed to provide an opportunity for an exchange of ideas between someone considering applying for an aquaculture lease and the public. In theory, the aspiring fish farmer can take the public's comments into account before going to the expense of filing a formal, and difficult to modify, aquaculture lease application.

The purpose of last week's meeting was to give Mount Desert resident Erick Swanson a chance to describe his family company's plans to expand its mussel farming operation off the eastern shore of Long Island and to allow the public to question him about the proposal. According to Swanson, Maine Cultured Mussels Inc. wants a 36-acre lease to grow mussels from suspended ropes. The new site would be located about 1,000 feet off the shore of the island and the same distance south of the company's existing 51.4-acre mussel farm. Swanson said that, if the lease were approved, Maine Cultured Mussels would terminate its lease on 54 acres off Tinker Island in lower Blue Hill Bay.

According to Swanson, the Tinker Island site has the capacity for 60 submerged longlines on which mussels are cultured. The proposed site would have room for just 30 longlines. Despite the reduction in lease acreage, from 105 to 87, Swanson said the company would still have the capacity to harvest some 750,000 pounds of mussels annually.

"We've gotten more efficient and don't need as many acres as we thought we did," Swanson told the crowd of some two dozen town and National Park Service officials, fishermen and other people interested in the use of Blue Hill Bay.

Swanson said there was another reason why the company wanted to consolidate its operations farther up Blue Hill Bay. The Tinker Island site is extremely exposed during the winter and that makes harvesting operations difficult and dangerous. Last year one of the company's employees suffered broken ribs while working on the site, Swanson said. Also, large quantities of mussels fall off the underwater lines when work crews try to haul them aboard a rolling, pitching barge to be harvested.

Despite the prospect of a roughly 17 percent reduction in the number of acres under lease for mussel farming in Blue Hill Bay, Swanson's proposal drew no support from audience. There were a few questions about the specifics of the plan, but most of the crowd offered comments that were critical of the company's past operations, DMR, or the state's aquaculture leasing process.

James Schatz, a Blue Hill selectman and representative in the Legislature, read a letter expressing the town's opposition to the proposed lease. The letter sought to "encourage" Swanson to delay any future expansion in Blue Hill Bay "until strategies considering the role of aquaculture can be more clearly defined within the context of all the activity and conservation concerns of Blue Hill Bay."

Schatz voiced the concern, shared by many in the audience, that DMR was predisposed to approve aquaculture lease requests. In his view, at public hearings on aquaculture lease applications the agency refuses to consider testimony in opposition to a proposal.

That view seemed to have some weight after Swanson said, in response to a question, that he was "95 percent certain" that any lease application he filed would be approved. Swanson said his certainty didn't come from any bias on the part of DMR but because, as someone who had been in the aquaculture business in Maine for nearly 15 years, he was careful to file applications that met the legal criteria for aquaculture leases.

Horn Olson, the DMR coordinator, concurred.

"Mr. Swanson is a businessman," she said. "The lease application process is expensive and time-consuming. Why would anyone go to the expense and trouble if they weren't reasonably sure they would succeed?"

Several in the audience complained that aquaculture operations had an adverse impact on the value of nearby shorefront property. There were complaints about debris on the shoreline coming from an existing mussel farm in the Salt Pond bordered by Blue Hill, Brooklin and Sedgwick.

One of the most frequently voiced objections to Swanson's proposal was that aquaculture leases "privatize" state waters, giving

one individual benefits at the expense of the public at large. A corollary of that complaint was that owners of shorefront property paid high real property taxes, which the annual rent the state receives for aquaculture leases — \$100 per acre per year — was insignificant.

Horn Olson explained that the encouragement of aquaculture was one of the key elements expressed in the report of Governor John Baldacci's economic task force. As a part of the executive branch of the government, she said, DMR was obliged to follow the Governor's lead on policy issues.

Blue Hill lobsterman Dan Pert had less philosophical and more practical objections to the lease proposal. Pert, who said he had been fishing for 35 years, said that setting up a mussel farm on the proposed lease site would have a significant impact on fishermen who harvest lobsters along the shore of Long Island. According to Pert, when DMR checks for lobstering activities as part of the review of a lease application, agency investigators come to the area at the wrong time of year, so they don't get a true picture of the level of lobstering activity.

Pert also discounted the difficulties entailed in harvesting mussels off Tinker Island during the winter. He said the real reason Maine Cultured Mussels wanted to move its operations was because fishermen in the town of Tremont, where the company's Tinker Island site is located, had strong objections to the operation.

"They didn't want him in Tremont, so he's pushing everything up the bay to Blue Hill," Pert said.

After nearly three contentious hours, most of the crowd was prepared to go home. Swanson was too.

"I said I was 95 percent sure about this lease earlier," he said wearily. "It's probably 85 percent now."