

Public Criticizes Two Proposed Salmon Farms

By Aaron Porter

SOUTHWEST HARBOR—Department of Marine Resources personnel have in the neighborhood of 20 hours of taped testimony as well as questions and answers to consider as they weigh salmon farmer Erick Swanson's applications for a new farm lease and expansion of his old one.

The taped record, in addition to hundreds of pages of pre-filed testimony, serves to inform the eventual decision that Commissioner George Lapointe must make in the highly politicized affair.

Swanson's adjudicatory hearing, which spread over three days last week, wound up Aug. 6 at the Southwest Harbor American Legion Hall with testimony from the public.

Although less tumultuous than the two prior days, reserved exclusively for Swanson and intervenor testimony, the public session elicited little support for the proposed farms.

Objections to the salmon farms, planned for Blue Hill Bay, mostly centered on the concerns about possible displacement of lobster fishing by the farms. But comments ranged from shorefront homeowners' aesthetic objections to worries about possible environmental effects of feed and medication associated with salmon farms.

Swanson started the session off with an abbreviated restatement of the need for multiple salmon farms to allow for separation of variously aged fish and for rotating restorative fallowing of lease sites.

"Very similar to organic farming," he said. He repeated his willingness to "reduce the eye-catching appearance" of the 2-acre salmon pen arrays using paint and nets.

Robert Slaven of Blue Hill responded that the written application didn't show those proposed changes.

On top of that, Slaven raised concerns about conflicting uses of the public water that were echoed through the evening. He said he didn't want the possible economics of the farm to outweigh other considerations or other uses of the waters off Tinker and Hardwood islands where the farms are to be located.

Lobstering is one of those other considerations. Tremont Harbormaster Al Price and Selectman Scott Grierson expressed their concerns about Swanson's possible impact on the thriving fishery.

"There's a limited amount of area the lobstermen fish in. It's like farmland,"

Grierson said. By granting the extensive leases of nearly 50 acres each, Grierson argued, fishermen will be displaced.

“The site is located where it precludes fishing inside of it,” Price said.

“That’s a lot of traps that are going to have to be moved,” lobsterman Gene Lawson added.

Lawson said a lot of lobster gear has been fouled in the anchors and lines at Swanson’s existing Hardwood Island farm.

“You can’t get anywhere near the pens,” he warned.

“Nobody should kid themselves into thinking they can fish inside those pens once they’re there,” said lobsterman Anthony Ellis. He noted that service barge traffic to the cages would effectively prevent the setting of traps adjacent to the lease.

None of the lobstermen who testified fish immediately in the area where the Tinker Island farm is proposed. They testified that there is significant fishing in the area but sound, specific figures remained elusive.

Concerns about the future use of the Tremont town boat ramp in Seal Cove were raised. Swanson had earned the intense displeasure of many Tremont taxpayers by tying up the ramp for extended periods in the past, Price and others said.

“I know you plan to use it again because your manager came in and asked me about it today,” Price said. He added that the request was to be able to use the ramp to load the feed barge in rough weather when the trip across the Bass Harbor bar will be difficult for such a vessel.

Price and a number of the lobstermen agreed that the site off Tinker would present a hazard to navigation for vessels running between the can off Bar Island to the nun off Jim’s Point on Long Island.

Grierson also voiced his concern that long-term effects of the farms on the bay, specifically on the lobster fishery, remain too uncertain to go ahead with the project.

“I think we’re not at a point at this time that we should play Guinea pig in Blue Hill Bay,” he said.

The Tremont selectman wasn’t the only one to raise such concerns.

“It is time for Maine’s regulatory agencies to be brave enough, caring enough and concerned enough to insist that salmon aquaculture be put on hold until such time as the very serious and dangerous fallout from present practices can be

addressed,” said Dorothy Hayes of Brooklin.

Even Sebastian Belle, executive director for the Maine Aquaculture Association, sounded almost contrite about the history of salmon farming in the state as he supported Swanson’s applications.

“We have learned some painful lessons over the years,” he said. But he praised Swanson’s record of trying to work with community members and making improvements to his Hardwood Island farm.

Praise for Swanson also came from State Rep. Jeff Kaelin (R-Winterport) who does contract work for Heritage Salmon, Swanson’s salmon smolt supplier and fish buyer. He said Swanson, and salmon aquaculture in general, is a source of good jobs for fishermen and others in Maine.

Gierson had earlier questioned just how good salmon farm jobs are in the context of Mount Desert Island, saying, “\$8.50 an hour is not a good wage on MDI.” He didn’t rule out the possibility, however, that it might be a good job farther Downeast where economic realities are different.

Also speaking in Swanson’s favor was Evan Young who grows mussels adjacent to the Hardwood Island salmon pens. Young voiced his support for Swanson’s applications and noted that the crab fishery is booming around the salmon farm.

Some of the public comment focused on the Department of Marine Resources and questioned whether its current regulations best serve the public.

Ned Wharton of Seal Cove questioned the narrow criteria the department considers in making lease decisions.

“It seems that in these proceedings visual impact is not a criteria and I think it ought to be,” he said.

Kathryn Hachigan of Tremont said she is disappointed that the department is reactive rather than proactive when it comes to siting aquaculture projects.

Noting Swanson’s close working relationship with Heritage Salmon, owned by a Canadian-based multinational, Hachigan reduced her discomfort with the project to one question: “Why should Blue Hill Bay become essentially a septic tank for a Canadian billionaire?”

Departmental employees, and ultimately Commissioner Lapointe, will have to make some decisions as to what testimony it will accept.

For example, intervenor Maine Coast Heritage Trust argued Monday that laws prohibiting aquaculture interference within 1,000 feet of publicly owned land

should hold true in the case of Tinker Island where \$600,000 of Land for Maine's Future money was used to secure public access to 230 acres of the island. Commissioner Lapointe also serves on the Land for Maine's Future Board.

And if the public-land rule is deemed applicable then the noise and visual effects of the proposed farm would have to be assessed. The department would have to consider whether these effects unreasonably interfere with public use or enjoyment.

The department will also have to decide whether the new pens will constitute a navigational hazard, as alleged in testimony, and whether the farm would unreasonably interfere with fishing in the area, as alleged by lobstermen.

And it will have to decide whether Swanson's financial capacity information, questioned by intervenors, is germane to the lease granting decision.

Another consideration is just how Swanson's inconsistent past performance on his Hardwood Island farm should inform the decision to renew that lease and grant a new one at Tinker Island.