

DMR Schedules Public Hearing



Written by Stephen Rappaport

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BLUE HILL — The battle over how Blue Hill Bay will be used, and who will do the using, is about to escalate. Last fall, a Mount Desert Island family that operates two mussel farms revealed plans to apply for a third shellfish aquaculture lease in the bay.



Dozens of blue and yellow buoys dot the waters of Blue Hill Bay on the lease site where Maine Cultured Mussels Inc. operates a 30-acre farm growing mussels on submerged longlines at Tinker Island (far left). The Brooklin Shore and Harriman Point are in the background. The company, owned by Susan Swanson of Mount Desert, and Swanson's son are proposing a 51.42-acre suspended culture mussel farm east of Long Island that could utilize more than 1,900 similar buoys. The same family owns and operates the existing mussel farm east of Hardwood Island.—STAFF PHOTOS BY STEPHEN RAPPAPORT

At a Maine Department of Marine Resources (DMR) "scoping session" last November, Erick Swanson told Blue Hill selectmen that the family wanted to establish a farm off the eastern side of Long Island to give his son, Spencer, a student at Maine Maritime Academy, a start in the family business.

The Swansons already own two mussel farms, one of 25 acres located east of Hardwood Island, the other of 30.4 acres located off the northeast corner of Tinker Island, both in Blue Hill Bay, through a pair of family-owned corporations.

The Long Island proposal drew immediate fire from the Friends of Blue Hill Bay, a local conservation group. Now DMR has scheduled an Oct. 11 public hearing on the Swansons' formal application for a 51.42-acre aquaculture lease off the Long Island shore.



On a frosty Tuesday morning, Blue Hill lobsterman Merle Pert Jr. tends his traps along the eastern shore of Long Island in the area where the Department of Marine Resources has been asked to grant a lease for a 51.42 acre mussel farm. Over the past 10 months, opposition to the Swanson's plan has clearly intensified.

Operating under the name "Mussel Bound Farm," Spencer Swanson and Maine Cultured Mussels Inc. want to grow mussels using longlines submerged below the water's surface. The application calls for placing 60, 300-foot-long "backlines" at depths of 20-50 feet. Water depths on the site range from 90-130 feet.

During June and July, backlines supporting longlines used to collect mussel spat (juvenile mussels) would hang just two feet beneath the surface.

Each backline would support a longline hanging in 45-foot deep loops on which the mussels would be grown. Each backline

would be supported by two large blue mooring buoys and either five clusters of smaller, 16-inch diameter yellow buoys or five large blue buoys.

With all the backlines in place, the 52-acre site would be dotted with at least 420 buoys, and there could be as many 1,920 in place.

The proposed lease site covers an area 1,400 feet wide and 1,600 feet long situated approximately 3,000 feet north off Dunham's Cove on Long Island's eastern side.

The farm's western boundary is, according to an application filed with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1,000 feet from the island.

Most of the island — more than 4,000 acres — is undeveloped, subject to a conservation easement held by the federal government, and administered as a part of Acadia National Park.

The eastern side of Long Island, at least five miles in length, is completely undeveloped from its northernmost tip to Fogg Cove at its southeastern corner.

There is a small, experimental mussel farming operation, not related to the Swanson operations, located near the northern end of Long Island.

DMR has scheduled a hearing late in October on an application to double the size of that lease site to six acres and to grant a 10-year commercial aquaculture lease.

The Mussel Bound Farm raises several issues of concern, according to Don Eley, president of Friends of Blue Hill Bay.

The "core issue," he said, was whether DMR has the ability to give aquaculture lease applications a fair and disinterested review.

At the November scoping session, Eley said, Swanson said he was going to apply for a 13-acre lease, but the application is for more than 50 acres.

"That's just a bait and switch," said Eley. "It's DMR's fault for not saying that's not what we're talking about."

Eley was also highly critical of DMR's environmental review of the proposed lease site. The site review reported little or no lobster fishing or recreational boating activity on the day DMR technicians visited the area but, Eley said, "conditions vary from day to day depending on the weather."

Speaking for the Friends, Eley was also critical of information provided in the lease application, which he described as a "word-for-word" copy of the Tinker Island lease application.

The total cost of the equipment required to set up the Long Island farming operation is estimated to be \$131,000, while the mussel harvest is estimated at 300,000-450,000 pounds annually. At current prices, that harvest would be worth approximately \$150,000-\$225,000.

"Those numbers don't make sense," Eley said. "If they do, this guy's a multi-millionaire."

Eley also said the Friend of Blue Hill Bay has concerns about the way Erik Swanson, listed in the new application as the manager of the Long Island farm, had managed the family's two existing farming operations.

According to Eley, the Coast Guard had not included the location of either the Tinker Island or Hardwood Island farm sites — both in operation several years, in its Notice to Mariners because "they're waiting for information" from Swanson.

Eley also said that an underwater inspection of the Hardwood Island site, which formerly operated as a salmon farm, disclosed that "nets and pipes" had been left on the sea bottom. That suggests, he said, that Swanson "is not a good steward" of the environment.

DMR has scheduled a public hearing on the Mussel Bound Farm lease application for 6 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 11, at the Blue Hill Town Hall.

The hearing is a formal, evidentiary proceeding at which anyone can ask questions or give testimony regarding the application. Anyone wanting to formally intervene as a party to the proceedings must apply in writing to the DMR at least 10 days prior to the hearing on a form available from the department.

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