



DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[RTID 0648-XF420]

Notice of Intent to Prepare a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for Identification of Aquaculture Opportunity Areas in Alaska State Waters and Conduct Public Scoping Meetings

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice of intent (NOI) to prepare a programmatic environmental impact statement; request for comments.

SUMMARY: In compliance with Section 7 of the Executive Order, “Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth” (May 7, 2020), NMFS intends to prepare a programmatic environmental impact statement (PEIS) to evaluate alternatives for identifying Aquaculture Opportunity Areas (AOAs) in state waters within the Gulf of Alaska. The PEIS will be prepared in accordance with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), NOAA Administrative Order 216-6A, and NOAA’s Companion Manual. NMFS is the lead agency for this PEIS and the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Alaska Department of Fish & Game, Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will act as cooperating agencies. The PEIS will evaluate the potential impacts of identifying one or more AOAs in state waters of the Gulf of Alaska and will discuss the potential impacts of siting aquaculture facilities in those locations. The proposed action is a planning initiative and does not propose any aquaculture facilities or authorize any permits. This notice initiates the public scoping process for the PEIS.

DATES: The 45-day public scoping period begins on April 13, 2026, and finishes on

[*INSERT DATE 45 DAYS AFTER DATE OF PUBLICATION IN THE **FEDERAL REGISTER***]. NMFS will consider all written comments received by [*INSERT DATE 45 DAYS AFTER DATE OF PUBLICATION IN THE **FEDERAL REGISTER***].

Two virtual public scoping meetings will be held on:

- Wednesday, April 22, 2026, 2 p.m. - 3 p.m. Alaska Time
- Tuesday, April 28, 2026, 9 a.m. - 10 a.m. Alaska Time

ADDRESSES: You may submit written comments on this NOI identified by “NOAA-NMFS-2023-0113” using the following methods:

- *Electronic Submission:* Submit all electronic public comments via the Federal e-Rulemaking Portal. Go to <https://www.regulations.gov> and type NOAA-NMFS-2023-0113 in the Search box. Click on the “Comment” icon, complete the required fields, and enter or attach your comments.
- *Mail:* Submit written comments to Jon Kurland, Regional Administrator for Alaska Region, NMFS, Attn: Records Office, P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802-1668.

Verbal comments will be accepted during the two virtual public scoping meetings described under **DATES**. Information on how to join these meetings is found at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/aquaculture/identifying-aquaculture-opportunity-areas-alaska>. The virtual meetings are open to the public and free to attend. Comments sent or provided by any other method, to any other address or individual, or received after the end of the comment period, may not be considered by NMFS. All public comments received are a part of the public record and may be posted for public viewing on <http://www.regulations.gov> without change. All personal identifying information (*e.g.*, name, address, *etc.*), confidential business information, or otherwise sensitive information submitted voluntarily by the sender will be publicly accessible. NMFS will accept anonymous comments (enter “N/A” in the required fields if you wish to remain

anonymous).

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Alicia Bishop, Alaska Regional Aquaculture Coordinator, telephone: 323-366-5659; or email: *alicia.bishop@noaa.gov*.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

The purpose of the proposed action is to apply a science-based approach to identify AOAs in state waters of the Gulf of Alaska. The goal of identifying AOAs is to promote American seafood competitiveness, food security, economic growth, and to support the development of domestic commercial aquaculture, consistent with sustaining and conserving marine resources and applicable laws, regulations, and policies. The proposed action is needed to meet the directives of E.O. 13921 to address the increasing demand for seafood, facilitate long-term planning for marine aquaculture development, and address interests and concerns regarding marine aquaculture siting.

Preliminary Description of Proposed Action and Alternatives

The proposed action is to identify one or more locations (referred to as AOAs) in state waters of the Gulf of Alaska that may be suitable for multiple future aquaculture projects. The PEIS will evaluate the potential impacts of identifying AOAs and of siting aquaculture projects in those locations. The PEIS will not consider finfish aquaculture, as it is prohibited by state law.

An AOA is a geographic area that has been evaluated to determine its potential suitability for commercial aquaculture. NMFS will use a combination of scientific analysis and public engagement to identify AOAs that may be environmentally, socially, and economically suitable for commercial aquaculture. AOAs identified through this process may be considered suitable for aquaculture for shellfish, seaweed, or a combination of these species. AOAs may only be identified by NMFS after completion of a final PEIS and issuance of a final decision document. The proposed action is a long-

term planning effort. It is not a regulatory or permitting action, and does not propose to authorize any specific aquaculture-related activities or individual aquaculture projects.

Background Information

E.O. 13921 directs NOAA to lead a multi-agency planning effort to identify AOAs. NMFS published a request for information (RFI) on October 23, 2020, identifying the first two geographic areas for AOAs and asking the public to comment on what areas should be considered for future AOAs (85 FR 67519). NMFS received letters of support from individuals, industry, Alaska Native organizations, Alaska state agencies, and the Alaska state legislature to begin the AOA process in Alaska state waters. NMFS announced the beginning of the process to identify AOAs in Alaska state waters in partnership with the State of Alaska on June 1, 2023. On October 19, 2023, NMFS published a second RFI, specific to Alaska, and held public listening sessions on the identification of marine spatial planning study areas, and requested data and analyses relevant to the AOA identification process in Alaska state waters (88 FR 72046). NOAA's National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science (NCCOS) in collaboration with NMFS and the State of Alaska, initiated a marine spatial planning process to aid agency decision makers in identifying areas that may be suitable as AOA options. NMFS, NCCOS, and the State of Alaska hosted a two-part workshop series to collect information for a marine spatial planning study (see August 14, 2024, workshop summary report at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/s3/2024-08/Alaska-AOA-Spatial-Planning-Workshops-Report.pdf>). On April 23, 2025, NMFS published a Notice of Availability (90 FR 17051) requesting public comment on the preliminary results of a marine spatial planning study developed by NCCOS in collaboration with NMFS and the State of Alaska, including the identification of draft AOA options in Alaska (<https://cdn.coastalscience.noaa.gov/page-attachments/MSP/Report-for-Notice-for-Comment-for-Alaska-Draft-Final.pdf>). The notice requested public comment on the 97 draft AOA options that had high suitability

scores relative to the planning goals to identify up to 4,000 acres (1,519 hectares) per study area for subtidal shellfish and seaweed aquaculture, and up to 100 acres (40.5 hectares) per study area for intertidal shellfish aquaculture. NMFS hosted two, public virtual listening sessions to explain the draft AOA options and receive comments.

NMFS, NCCOS, and the State of Alaska received new information through the public comment process which allowed NCCOS to make improvements to the spatial planning model before finalizing the results. NCCOS updated the model-based comments that highlighted missing, authoritative spatial data sources and information that supported improvements to scoring and data processing for existing data sets. NCCOS used this information to develop the Alaska Atlas - a technical document providing peer-reviewed geospatial planning information. NCCOS published the NOAA Technical Memorandum, *An Aquaculture Opportunity Area Atlas for the Gulf of Alaska (Atlas)*, on February 19, 2026 (NOS NCCOS 365. Beaufort, NC. 986 pp.; *available* online at: <https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/72440>). The Atlas used a precision-siting, scoring, and ranking process to narrow the suitability analysis results to 77 final AOA options that have high potential suitability for an AOA across the 10 marine spatial planning study areas depicted in Figure 3.64 on page 10 of the Atlas. The final AOA options represented a 26 percent reduction in total acreage from the draft option areas in the marine spatial planning study. The 77 final AOA options resulted in 13,031 acres (5,273 hectares) identified across Southeast, Southcentral, and Southwest Alaska study areas. Southeast has a total of 53 AOA options (44 subtidal and 9 intertidal) depicted in Figure 3.131 on page 298 of the Atlas. Southcentral has a total of 9 AOA options (all subtidal) depicted in Figure 3.93 on page 238 of the Atlas. Southwest has a total of 15 AOA options (13 subtidal and 2 intertidal) depicted in Figure 3.65 on page 184 of the Atlas.

The Atlas may be used as one source of information to assist the agency in

identifying one or more AOA within state waters of the Gulf of Alaska. The Atlas does not reflect any agency decision to identify specific AOA or foreclose the agency's ability to evaluate alternate locations for consideration as AOA.

Alternative Framework

The PEIS will analyze and discuss the potential impacts of a no action alternative (Alternative 1) and the potential impacts of identifying one or more AOA in Alaska state waters (Alternative 2). In **Alternative 1** (No Action), NMFS would not identify AOA in Alaska state waters. Aquaculture projects could still be sited in state waters of Alaska. The no action alternative will serve as the analytic basis (*i.e.*, baseline) for comparison of the proposed action. In **Alternative 2**, NMFS would consider identifying AOA in one or more of the 77 AOA options described in the Atlas. NMFS will determine the number and scope of alternatives and areas explored and select the locations to be evaluated in the draft PEIS based on the comments received during this public scoping period.

Summary of Expected Effects

NEPA requires federal agencies to evaluate the potential environmental effects of any major planned Federal action, and to promote public awareness of the potential impacts, by preparing a detailed analysis of proposed actions that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The PEIS will evaluate the potential impacts of identifying one or more AOA in state waters of the Gulf of Alaska and will discuss the potential impacts of siting aquaculture in those locations, should projects be proposed, as informed by the Atlas and best available information. The proposed action is a planning effort and does not propose to authorize or permit any specific aquaculture-related activities or individual aquaculture projects, however the PEIS will discuss the potential impacts of siting aquaculture in those locations as directed by E.O. 13921. The PEIS will consider potential impacts on the administrative environment, physical and biological environment, socioeconomic environment, and the cultural/historic

environment.

The PEIS will consider potential stressors associated with shellfish and seaweed aquaculture or a combination of these types of farms, including stressors associated with pre-construction, construction, operations and maintenance, and decommissioning of shellfish and seaweed aquaculture. Biological and physical resources potentially considered may include: affected ecosystems, fish, invertebrates, aquatic vegetation, seaweeds, mammals, birds, and special status habitat. Potential impacts to these resources that may be considered include: potential physical disturbance and strike stressors, acoustic and light disturbance, ecosystem stressors, effluents and emissions, entanglement stressors, ingestion stressors, disease and pathogen transmission, and other changes in water quality. Socioeconomic resources potentially considered may include: existing aquaculture, fishing, seafood markets and regional food systems, transportation and navigation, aesthetic quality, tourism and recreation, community/regional infrastructure and ports/working waterfronts, energy and public services, and public health and safety. Cultural and historic resources potentially considered may include: Alaska Native resources, cultural practices, and archaeological resources.

Wherever possible and supported by the best available science, the PEIS may highlight potential mitigation strategies to address impacts associated with aquaculture siting and development in the proposed AOAs.

Anticipated Permits and Other Authorizations

The proposed action to identify AOAs is a planning process. Neither the final PEIS nor final decision document will authorize any specific aquaculture activities or approve any individual aquaculture projects. Any future aquaculture operations within an AOA would be required to comply with all applicable Federal and state laws and regulations, including but not limited to the Clean Water Act, Rivers and Harbors Act, Endangered Species Act, the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management

Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act), Marine Mammal Protection Act, and National Historic Preservation Act. Compliance may include Endangered Species Act, Essential Fish Habitat (Magnuson-Stevens Act), and National Historic Preservation Act consultations, and Marine Mammal Protection Act authorizations. Additional NEPA analysis may be required as part of permitting and authorization processes. Cooperating agencies may adopt the PEIS and utilize the information to support their permitting decisions.

Schedule for the Decision-Making Process

The PEIS is expected to take two years from the date of this notice. The draft PEIS is tentatively scheduled for publication in winter 2027. The draft PEIS will be released for public comment, and all public comments will be considered before issuing a final PEIS. The final PEIS and associated final decision is tentatively scheduled for publication in spring 2028.

Public Scoping Process and Meetings

This notice initiates the scoping process, which guides the scope of environmental issues, potential impacts, alternatives, and potential mitigation measures that could be included in the draft PEIS. Comments will be accepted until [*insert date 45 days after date of publication in the **FEDERAL REGISTER***]. Interested parties may submit public comments according to the instructions described in the **DATES** and **ADDRESSES** sections above.

Request for Identification of Potential Alternatives, Information, and Analyses Relevant to the Proposed Action

NMFS requests data, comments, views, information, analysis, alternatives, or suggestions on the proposed action from the public; affected Federal, State, Tribal, and local governments, agencies, and offices; the scientific community; non-governmental organizations; industry; and all other interested parties. Specifically, we are soliciting information and feedback on:

1. The scope of the NEPA analysis, including the range of reasonable alternatives and the number of and locations of areas that should be considered and evaluated.
2. The types of aquaculture (*e.g.*, species or gear) that are ecologically, economically, and socially of interest or concern, and could be analyzed in a proposed AOA location.
3. Information related to technologies and strategies that could increase opportunities for or mitigate risks of aquaculture development.
4. Potential impacts to biological, physical, and ecological resources, including potential interactions with marine mammals and other species protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act or Endangered Species Act, Essential Fish Habitat designated under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, and other sensitive, managed, or protected habitats in the Gulf of Alaska.
5. Potential impacts to the social, economic, and cultural environment, including but not limited to fishing sectors and industries, and Alaska Native and coastal communities.
6. Current or planned activities in or near the areas highlighted in this notice and their possible impacts on aquaculture development or the impact of aquaculture developments on those activities.
7. Other topics relevant to the Proposed Action and its impacts on the human environment.

Authority: E.O. 13921.

Dated: April 7, 2026.

Danielle Blacklock,

Director, Office of Aquaculture,

National Marine Fisheries Service.