

# Proposed fish farm permits on hold pending EPA review

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A proposed fish farm in federal waters off Sarasota's coast hit a snag March 24 when a federal appeals board put a hold on the company's permits.

Ocean Era, a Hawaii-based company, plans to raise 88,000 pounds of almaco jack fish each year in a single net pen in the Gulf of Mexico about 45 miles southwest of Sarasota. If approved, it will be the first aquaculture facility in federal waters.

Neil Sims, co-founder of the aquaculture company, has said there is a pressing global need to expand food production in the U.S., and his facility will create opportunity.

"We are scientists and conservationists," he told the Naples Daily News in 2019. "There is an economic incentive to drive the ecological imperative: We need to be getting more food from the sea."

A cohort of environmental groups, including Friends of Animals, petitioned the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to further review Ocean Era's permits, which are needed for pollution discharges into waters of the United States.

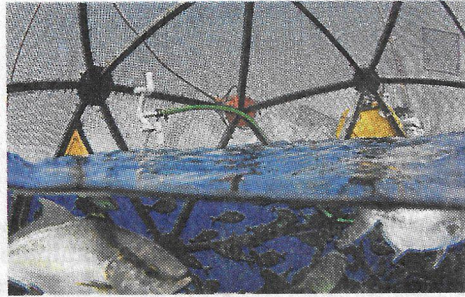
"We filed the petition because we were concerned about the facility and thought the government had not done a thorough review," said Jennifer Best, the assistant legal director for Friends of Animals. "We're concerned that the aquaculture facility in the gulf could harm or kill marine life, as well as really be detrimental to the environmental and coastal communities."

Environmental advocates have argued since 2019 that Ocean Era's facility will feed harmful algal blooms, present dangers to the genetics of native species if the fish escape and degrade the nearby ecosystem by polluting the Gulf with fish waste and pharmaceuticals.

The EPA's environmental appeals board granted a 60-day stay so the agency can further review two permits for the facility.

The board's environmental appeals judge Katie Stein granted the hold on the permits until June 1.

Arguing for the delay, Paul Schwartz,



**A view from inside the Velella Beta-test net pen in Kona, Hawaii, with the fish in the foreground, the Aquapod net pen frame, and the attendant vessel, the S.S. Machias, attached to the net pen array.**

JEFF MILISEN

general counsel for the EPA region overseeing Florida, wrote that Ocean Era's fish farm is novel and presents "issues of national significance." His request also cites President Biden's executive order directing all executive agencies to review actions taken during former President Trump's time in office.

The 60-day delay is meant to give the EPA "an opportunity to review this first-of-its-kind permit..." Schwartz wrote in his request.

Sims pushed back against claims about environmental degradation, saying any nutrient discharge from the pens will be quickly assimilated into the ecosystem.

The farm will have monitoring requirements if approved. The company will need to test monthly for nitrogen and phosphorus levels, among other discharges, around the pen. Sims said graduate students from the University of Miami will work to monitor the surrounding waters.

He says the delay will keep the pens out of the water for now but he remains optimistic.

"I am greatly comforted by the assurances of the new Biden administration that they will allow their decision-making to be driven by the best-available science," he wrote in an email.

"There is overwhelming evidence, from modeling and monitoring studies, that offshore aquaculture - even at commercial scale - has minimal impacts on substrate ecology and water quality."