Could the Great Lakes be used even more to satisfy the U.S. demand for seafood? There is no question that U.S. consumers seem to have an insatiable appetite for it. In addition to the production of $9 billion worth of edible fish in 2015, we imported more than $20 billion worth. And as a result of decades of overfishing, natural fisheries cannot meet global demand — about half of all seafood is farmed fish from China, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam.

In Michigan, state agencies have received concept proposals to establish privately owned net-pen operations (where fish are raised in an underwater net) in the Great Lakes. And various bills were introduced this year to modify state law on aquaculture.

Michigan currently allows net-pen aquaculture on private waters; some state legislators want to sanction it in the Great Lakes and regulate it under a newly established Office of Aquaculture Development. Rep. Triston Cole, a sponsor of the legislative package in the House (HBs 5166-5168), says fish farming in the Great Lakes would be a natural expansion of the rainbow trout production already taking place in states from Idaho to North Carolina.

After Michigan received the proposals about net-pen fish farming, three state agencies formed a work group to explore topics ranging from the proper siting of these facilities and their economic impact, to ecological concerns such as higher levels of nutrients and the potential introduction of fish diseases.

According to the group’s findings, lessons from the poor fish-farming practices of the past have led to greater protections for water quality and habitat. However, most public comments that the state received about allowing fish farms in the Great Lakes opposed the idea (110 of the 128 comments received). This, along with the expected cost of regulations and environmental uncertainties, led the agencies to come out against the net-pen proposal.

Meanwhile, Sen. Rick Jones has introduced legislation (SB 526) to prohibit fish farming in the Great Lakes as well as in any waters that lead to them.

“It would be insanity to endanger the waters of Michigan for a few companies to grow fish,” Jones says.

But while it appears unlikely that fish farming will be allowed anytime soon on the U.S. side of the Great Lakes, it already is happening in Ontario. Twelve facilities in Lake Huron have been producing about 10 million pounds of rainbow trout annually since 1988. They are now seeking to expand and experiment with production of walleye.

This summer, Ontario released a new draft policy focusing on long-term environmental sustainability for commercial-scale, open-net production. After a 90-day public comment period this spring, the province is now considering the final rules.

The proposed rules would limit the size of operations based on the amount of fish feed (2,755 tons of
low-phosphorus feed annually) rather than the number of fish. Ontario’s draft regulations also require applicants to provide ongoing monitoring of the ecosystem.

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