

## Ignore the lame excuses: What 300,000 escaped salmon prove about factory fish farming

*Sustainable-food advocates want to love aquaculture – yet it comes with so many risks.*

By [Nancy Matsumoto](#) - September 2, 2017 | News Analysis



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As excuses go, it was one of the more laughable ones offered by a corporation trying to shirk the rap for another [environmental disaster](#).

After a net pen holding more than 300,000 Atlantic salmon collapsed in Washington’s Puget Sound on August 20, releasing hundreds of thousands of farmed fish and threatening endangered wild Pacific salmon, a spokesman for [Cooke Aquaculture Pacific](#) blamed “exceptionally high tides and currents coinciding with [the] solar eclipse.” This defense lands several notches above “the dog ate my homework” in creativity but a shade below pinning the blame on Kim Jong-un.

Any connection between the salmon breakout and the widely celebrated eclipse was [quickly debunked](#) by oceanographers and tidal experts, but that still left the [Lummi Nation](#) trying to purge their territorial waters of the invasive fish and the state putting [a hold](#) on any new fish farms in the sound. Cooke, depending on which reports you believe, had either slated the net for repair, knowing it was defective, or had recently made repairs that turned out to be inadequate. Either way, they look incompetent. The company is also aided and abetted by a poor set of state fish farm regulations, some dating back to the 1980s.

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Aquaculture – the farming of aquatic species including shellfish, crustaceans, and fish – as an industry and a concept is one that sustainable food advocates want to love, yet it comes with so many risks. It’s like the adorable puppy at the rescue shelter with a hidden chronic disease. We know that many of the world’s fisheries are heading toward extinction (faster than we think, according to [some research](#)) and that wild fisheries are not enough to feed the world. Well-regulated fish farms, like so many entrepreneurial ideas, seem good in theory.

But as an industry, aquaculture is far from being adequately regulated in the United States, as the recent Puget Sound net pen collapse demonstrates, and it’s far worse in other countries, for example, China. Fish farm collapses are regular occurrences around the globe: In 2013, a Cook Aquaculture fish farm off the coast of Newfoundland lost over 20,000 caged salmon. That time as well the company cited high tides and strong currents.

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When an industry is well-regulated, however, corporations look to expand to other countries more lax on oversight. That’s how Norway, [facing stringent aquaculture regulations](#) off its own shores in the late 1980s, set the stage for British Columbia’s [hugely profitable farmed salmon](#) industry, worth [754 million Canadian dollars](#) (\$640.9 million).

As we struggle to come to grips with these nearshore farm disasters, the domestic farmed fish industry is poised to get much larger. After pouring \$100 million into aquaculture over the past 10 years, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has opened up a controversial permitting system in the Gulf of Mexico. The [jury’s still out](#) on whether the agency’s efforts will succeed.

Meanwhile, we can learn from the disasters at hand.

“When we look at what happens nearshore,” says Jillian Fry, director of the [Public Health & Sustainable Aquaculture Project](#) at Johns Hopkins University, “it gives us a good idea of what will happen offshore.” From her perspective, which takes into account the aquatic ecosystem, public health, and workers’ rights, she considers both near- and offshore fish farming “very risky” and “not very well-regulated.”

Prime risk factors in a poorly regulated industry are its use of chemicals and antibiotics, the accumulation of contaminants from the fishmeal used in feed, and pollution. Then there’s the concern of escaped farm populations – which have been selectively bred to grow rapidly – spreading disease and competing with wild populations for food.

NOAA and advocates such as the [Ocean Stewards Institute](#) defend offshore fish farming, saying that swiftly flowing tides and lots of open ocean will reduce problems like overcrowding and disease. But Fry points out that the health of our entire aquatic ecosystem is already precarious because of chemical runoff and climate change-related acidification. Rising water temperatures are also increasing disease prevalence among sea life. Even in offshore farms, she says, “my concern would be the impact veterinary drugs and their breakdown products” have on surrounding aquatic life, not to mention the risk of caged fish escaping.

As we witness [the devastation of Hurricane Harvey](#) and compare it to far milder tides that routinely cause fish farm nets to collapse, the offshore proposition in the Gulf of Mexico seems even more alarming.

Then there’s the matter of what those offshore farms are going to look like. Patty Lovera, assistant director of [Food & Water Watch](#), says the analogy to agribusiness is apt in the size and scale of feed, veterinary medications, and fish

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waste products involved. As fish farmers try to reformulate fish feed to use less fish protein and more grain, large-scale agricultural farmers, says Lovera, stand to gain by selling commodity (and often GMO) corn and soy crops to large-scale aquaculture farmers.

“This is not an artisanal, small-farm model,” Lovera says, “It’s big, expensive, and capital-intensive.”

So what’s a concerned (and anxious) consumer to do? Look for small-scale, land-based, [closed-](#)

[containment aquaculture businesses](#), for one, where water is recirculated and antibiotics, chemical treatments, and waste are minimized. [Eat farmed oysters, mussels, and clams](#) (local where possible), which are [highly sustainable](#) and some of the [less-loved, more-abundant](#) denizens of the ocean.

Remember when canned tuna was marketed as “Chicken of the Sea”? Let’s find an updated slogan to shore up our at-risk oceans: How about “Farmed oysters, the sweetbreads of the sea”?

*Nancy Matsumoto wrote this article for **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.** Nancy is a freelance writer and editor specializing in the areas of sustainable agriculture, food, sake, and Japanese culture in the Americas. Her articles have appeared in Civil Eats, The Wall Street Journal, Saveur, Food and Wine, and NPR’s The Salt, among other publications. Headshot by Jennifer Rowsom.*