

Nordic Aquafarms project: How local and state governments are failing our communities

A year ago my reaction was favorable when I read that Nordic Aquafarms planned to purchase land from the Belfast Water District to construct a land-based salmon farm, and was going to preserve the popular nature trail on the north side of the Little River.

After all, MBNA and the Front Street Shipyard had been successful beneficial economic developments for Waldo County. When I saw a map, however, that seemed to preclude a direct entry to the trail, I requested a copy of the contract and found that not only was there no written guaranteed right-of-way, there was no provision for the city of Belfast to have any say in a future resale of the property, no provision for an escrow account for restoration of the property when NAF eventually closed — 30 years, according to NAF (and were it not for MBNA, the derelict poultry plants might still be standing in Belfast), and no surety bond required to protect the city or its citizens.

Subsequently others pointed out that the city had failed to follow its own Comprehensive Plan in rezoning the property and had requested an accelerated approval process from the DEP, claiming there was no public opposition to the NAF project. The Belfast City Council and NAF continue to falsely insist that there are only a few noisy radical environmentalists against the fish farm, but if one thing has been abundantly clear during the "informational" public meetings hosted by NAF and the City Council, there is in fact a large group of engaged, knowledgeable citizens who have factually contested almost every purported "benefit," from the projected tax revenues, CO2 reduction, energy consumption, water usage from local aquifers and other environmental impacts

Nothing has highlighted the reasons for growing public concern as much as the proposed pipeline for the discharge of the NAF effluent into Belfast Bay, initially 1.5 miles out into "deep ocean currents," then reduced to 1 mile, and now but a half-mile or so into only 35 feet of water at mean low tide, across private properties in the littoral zone of both Belfast and Northport and ending within the boundary of the town of Northport only a mile or so from the beaches and swimming dock of the Northport Village of Bayside. How "clean" and environmentally safe the 7.7-million-gallon-per-day discharge will be for lobsters, humans, aquatic plants, endangered wild

Atlantic Salmon, and other living things in and around the bay has been a matter of debate. But what is admitted by NAF is that it will take at least 14 days for the discharge to clear the area at the end of the pipe, meaning that at any one time there will be about 100 million gallons of static effluent present.

Similarly, there has been debate about where the discharge will eventually go, some indicating that the Belfast shore and harbor are at risk at times. There is also concern about the disturbance of mercury in the seabed. The City Council and NAF claim the salmon farm will be of great economic benefit. The amount, however, has been publicly challenged. The potential negative impacts of diminished property values, resultant reduction in tax revenue and monies lost from a decrease in summer residential use and visitors have not been assessed.

The problem with the debate so far is that the public meetings have not allowed for a balanced and respectful dialogue. NAF, its hired consultants, the Water District and the Belfast City Council all have a vested interest in the project and are thus inherently biased. On the other side, citizens who have reasonable and informed opposing arguments have not been able to effectively present their own credentials and scientific information.

Since NAF has to gain approval from the Maine State Department of Environmental Protection, a public hearing would have been the appropriate venue for the presentation of the best available scientific evidence and opinions, following which the DEP could have made a credible ruling or request further studies. At the very least, public concerns would have been much more effectively addressed and suspicions allayed.

Unfortunately, at the end of December the DEP rejected multiple requests for such a hearing. In doing so, the DEP violated its own rules by incorrectly concluding that the NAF project was wholly within the city of Belfast, would have no impact on Northport or Islesboro, and was not a matter of public concern, all of which are criteria for which the DEP should conduct a public hearing.

Yes, one of the roles of a representative government is to promote the economic well-being of its community; but of even greater importance is to protect its citizens by due diligence, open objective evaluation, and by following its own established rules.

It would be appropriate for the new leadership at the DEP to reconsider a public hearing; and I recommend Northport and Islesboro be allowed and encouraged to become more fully engaged in the process.

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