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## MARICULTURE

# Fish-farm advocates finally hook president

After years of prodding by marine biologists, the Bush administration has backed a plan for turning idle Gulf of Mexico oil platforms into fish farms.

BY CAIN BURDEAU

Associated Press

**NEW ORLEANS** - Thousands of oil and natural gas platforms in the Gulf of Mexico could be converted into deep-sea fish farms raising red snapper, mahi mahi, yellowfin tuna and flounder, under a plan backed by the Bush administration.

For years, marine biologists and oil companies have experimented with using the giant platforms as bases for mariculture, but commercial use of the platforms as fish farms never advanced because of the federal government's reluctance to open up the oceans to farming.

Yet in December, President Bush proposed making it easier to launch fish farms off the nation's coasts. That could be done by resolving a "confounding array of regulatory and legal obstacles," the White House said.

## STATE JURISDICTION

Fish farming in the rough-and-tumble ocean, done by enclosing thousands of fish in submerged pens serviced by scuba divers, is limited commercially to waters within state jurisdiction, where permits have tended to be easier to get. Moi is grown in Hawaii, and cobia is farmed near Puerto Rico. Salmon farming is common, but it takes place mostly in the calm waters of fjords and bays.

But, fish farmers say, the future is rosy and fast-approaching.

"In Asia, they're starting to creep off into the open waters; there's a lot of talk of doing it in Ireland. In the Mediterranean, they are now looking at moving out into open waters and experimenting with new cages," said Richard Langan, who heads the University of New Hampshire's Open Ocean Aquaculture program. He is experimenting with a variety of species -- cod, Atlantic halibut, haddock, summer flounder and mussels.

With seafood now accounting for about \$7 billion in the nation's foreign trade deficit, advocates of deep-sea farming say mariculture would bolster American seafood production and provide much-needed employment to coastal communities harmed by the eclipse of traditional fishing.

"Aquaculture is an issue that is here, and now we're already in the middle of it and how is the U.S. going to play in the game?" said Michael Rubino, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's aquaculture coordinator. "It's already being done in a big way in Korea, Taiwan and China. In the U.S., we'd like to start small, prove the concept and learn by doing."

The U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy recommended in its report last year to move forward with offshore aquaculture, but to hold it to high environmental standards. In a response to the commission's report, the president, in his "Ocean Action Plan" listed offshore farming legislation as a priority this year.

The new frontier is federal waters, Rubino said. "There's no good framework in terms of where this should be done, how it should be done, how the rules of the game should be applied."

## **RIPE GULF**

The Gulf could be just the place to develop a framework.

Oil and gas platforms function as barn-like bases: They're big enough to store feed, their deck winches and cranes can lift and drop pens in and out of the water and, if needed, fish farmers can spend the night onboard. Unlike many in Florida and California, the people along the coasts of Louisiana and Texas by and large welcome the offshore industry.

There are an estimated 3,500 idle platforms in the Gulf -- and each one of them could be a fish-farm candidate.

It costs about \$2 million to bring a platform ashore. Converting one into an artificial reef costs about \$800,000.