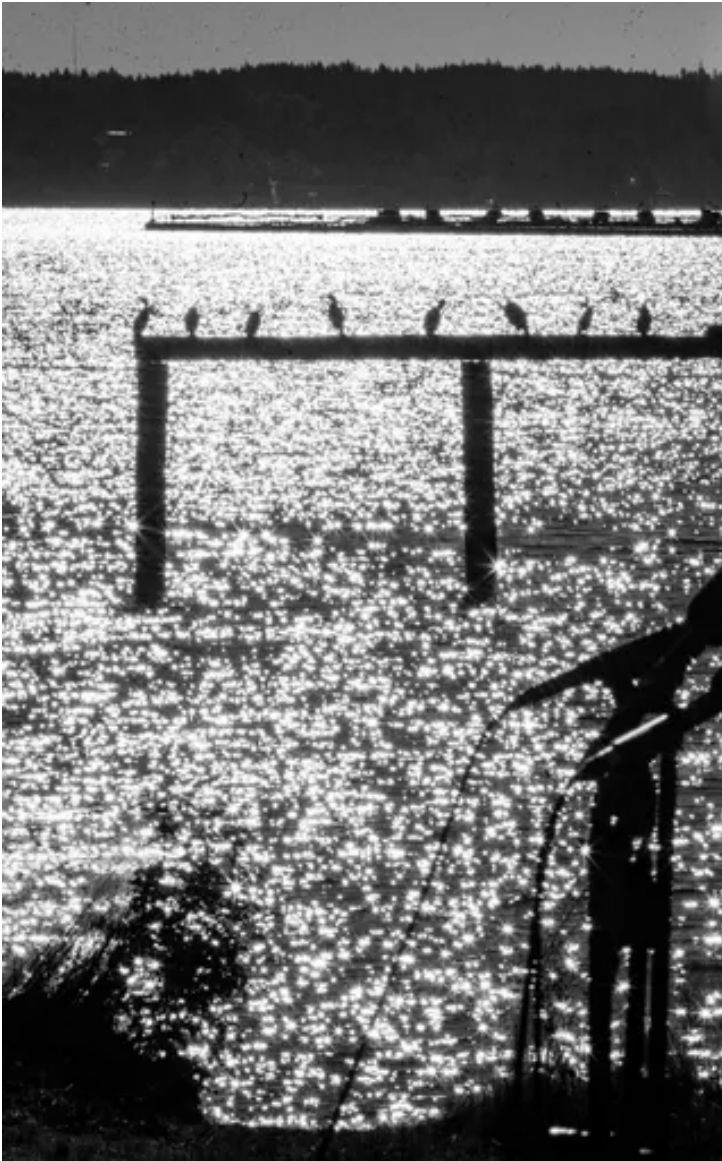


WA bans commercial net-pen fish farming in state waters

Nov. 18, 2022 at 11:30 am | Updated Nov. 18, 2022 at 5:32 pm



📷 **1 of 6** | Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz announces the end of net-pen leases for fish farming in state waters, during a Friday news conference in front of a remaining Cooke Aquaculture net off Bainbridge Island. (Kylie Cooper / The Seattle Times)

By Isabella Breda 🐦

Seattle Times staff reporter

BAINBRIDGE ISLAND — With some of the last net pens floating behind her in Rich Passage, state Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz announced an executive order Friday morning to end commercial net-pen farming of finned fish in Washington waters.

The order came after her agency's termination this week of Cooke Aquaculture's remaining Puget Sound leases in Rich Passage and near Hope Island.

“This is a critical step to support our waters, our fishermen and women, our tribes and the native salmon that we are so ferociously fighting to save and have so little time to do so,” Franz said.

Protesters, mostly Cooke employees, gathered with signs reading, “Science not Politics,” and “No Farms No Food,” at Franz's news conference at Fort Ward Park. Franz said the Department of Natural Resources has been promoting opportunities to continue to farm fish on land.

Net-pen fish farming has already been outlawed in California, Oregon and Alaska.

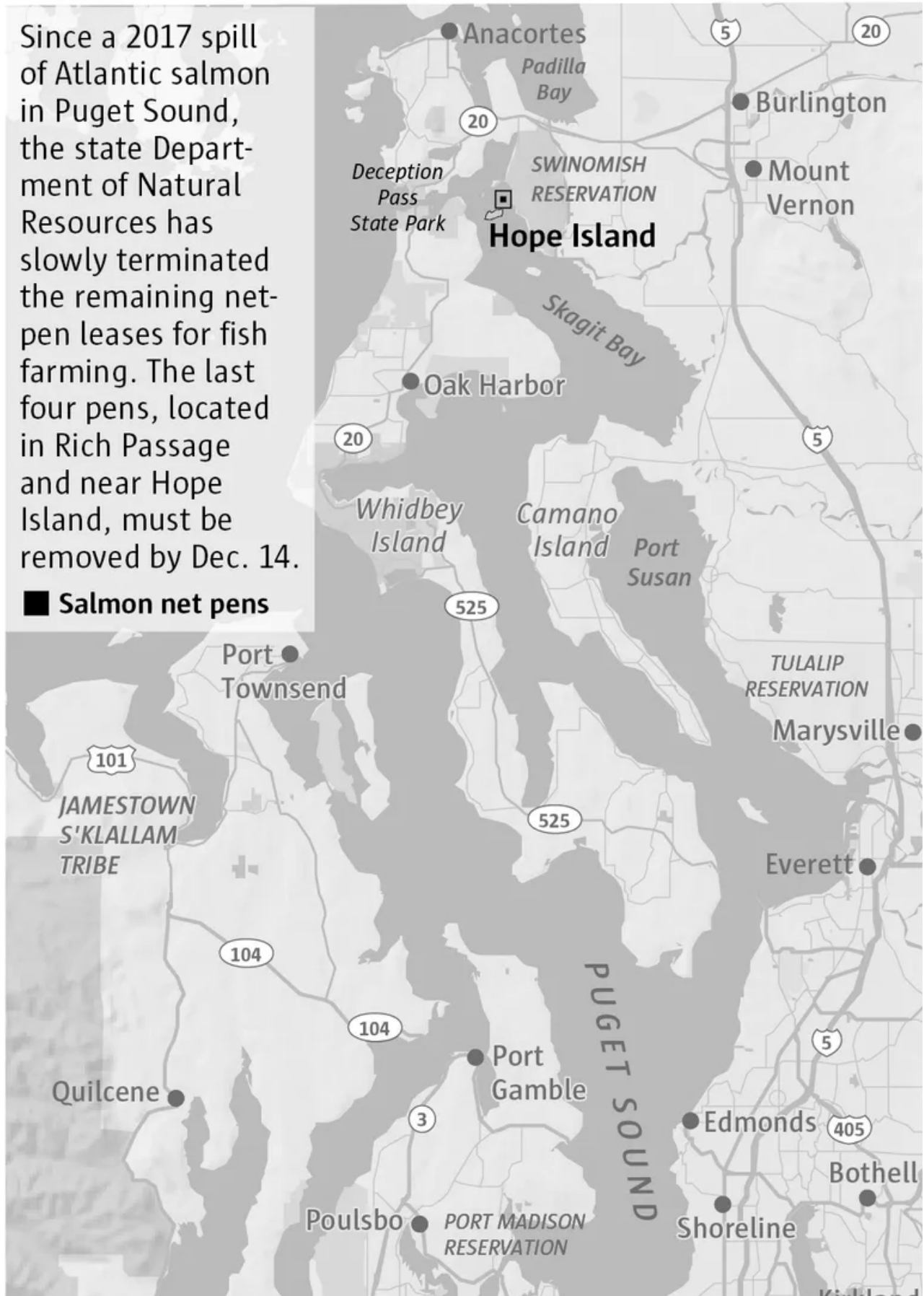
In an interview this week, Lummi Nation Chair Tony Hillaire recounted his feelings during the 2017 Cooke Aquaculture net-pen collapse that released some 260,000 nonnative Atlantic salmon into the sea.

“Our health and well-being is undeniably bound to the health and well-being of the native salmon stocks — it's our culture. It's our way of life,” he said. “As you can imagine for many, many people with culture and values when there's any threat to it, our hearts and minds are consumed by the uncertainty of what's happening.”

Washington's last net pens to be removed as fish farming ends

Since a 2017 spill of Atlantic salmon in Puget Sound, the state Department of Natural Resources has slowly terminated the remaining net-pen leases for fish farming. The last four pens, located in Rich Passage and near Hope Island, must be removed by Dec. 14.

■ Salmon net pens





Cooke
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Resources terminated the lease, and inspections of the company's facilities elsewhere ramped up.

In Port Angeles, investigators found inspections that apparently weren't in accordance with manufacturers' recommendations or industry standards. DNR terminated that lease for failing to maintain the facility in a safe condition and operating in an unauthorized area. Cooke challenged the decision in court, and a Thurston County Superior Court judge ruled in favor of state regulators.

The state Legislature in 2018 passed a law effectively phasing out net-pen farming of exotic species in Washington waters. Cooke has since pivoted to raise steelhead — a fish native to the region.

Cooke officials said that with the decision to end their leases, "Commissioner Franz is forcing Cooke Aquaculture Pacific to kill 332,000 juvenile steelhead that were planned to be stocked at Rich Passage and Hope Island in 2023." And they argued her decision won't save wild salmon.

Tribes and environmental advocates say all fish farming poses a threat to wild species.

"It's about the disease vectors and how that can escape into wild populations," said Todd Woodard, natural resources director for the Samish Indian Nation. "When you say, 'We're raising native fish,' native fish are not raised and reared in those kinds of concentrated environments."

A 2018 report revealed that a virus reported in farmed Atlantic salmon from an Iceland hatchery was found in most of the sampled fish that escaped the Cypress Island pens.

"When I think about the risks of this industry," said Emma Helverson, executive director of the Wild Fish Conservancy, "I think about what is at stake. And I think that's really the important question. Here, where we have species threatened with extinction, this risk is just not acceptable."

Several studies in the 2010s found that young sockeye salmon from B.C.'s Fraser watershed were infected with higher levels of lice after swimming past sea farms. And in

March, an audit revealed sea lice counts at about five times the legal limit at a farm in Clayoquot Sound. The lice can affect salmon growth, and cause death, in severe cases.

After the state terminated the remaining leases, Cooke released a statement detailing reports that pointed to the contrary.

Earlier this year, a report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration suggested raising fin fish in the marine environment wouldn't "jeopardize the continued existence" of many native species, like Chinook salmon, Hood Canal summer-run chum or Puget Sound steelhead.

But, according to the report, the fish farms were indeed found to have potential adverse affects on the species and critical habitat.

DNR determined that Cooke's operations could pose risks to the state's natural environment. Feeding fish in concentrated areas releases nutrients and organic matter that can contribute to algae production, state officials wrote. And fish poop can degrade the environment on the ocean floor.

There's also a risk of attracting and trapping wild populations, and the risk of escapes is a reality of fish farming, the state wrote.

"This is a big victory for everyone who values the Puget Sound ecosystem," Suquamish Chair Leonard Forsman said. "This action eliminates a harmful impact in our ancestral waters. The Rich Passage net pens have long been a threat to our salmon fisheries, both through their threats to our genetic stocks, the pollution associated with their care and feeding, and the physical obstruction to our treaty fishers. They have blocked and polluted our fishing grounds for too long, and we are relieved to know they will be removed, restoring our waters back to a more natural state."

Opposition efforts to the net pens began years ago, but didn't ramp up until the 2017 spill, said Tom Wooten, Samish tribal chair.

The escape threatened the state's already weak stocks of native Pacific salmon and treaty fishing rights, a 2017 statement from the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission said.

"We're concerned about our traditional territory," Wooten said. "We're going to continue to fight for what we believe is right."

Commissioner Franz said the ban will specifically affect commercial fish farming on state-owned waters. But she said she would continue to support tribes' treaty rights.

“We will continue to work with them to make sure that we are promoting the furtherance of salmon, always,” she said. “And respecting those tribal treaty rights. But on state lands we will not be continuing and furthering net-pen operations.”

It's unclear what that means for the Jamestown S'Klallam tribe, who recently entered a partnership with Cooke on the Olympic Peninsula. Their permit application for a joint steelhead farming project is still active.

“There are tribes who are opposed to farming,” Jamestown S'Klallam Chair Ron Allen said, “but there's tribes who are supportive, and ours is one of them.”

Allen said he sees the farming as “part of our charge to preserve.” Growing the fish takes some of the pressure off the wild runs, he said.

While California, Oregon, Alaska and now Washington have banned net-pen fish farming, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called for companies to phase it out by 2025.

Salmon aquaculture is among the fastest-growing food production systems in the world, according to the World Wildlife Foundation. It accounts for about 70% of the market. In 2018 the World Resources Institute released a report that said the industry needs to more than double by 2050 to meet the seafood demands of 10 billion people.

Net-pen fish farming has existed in Puget Sound for more than three decades, according to NOAA.

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