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Australia incentivizing innovation in aquaculture

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By James Wright

DFAT's Blue Economy Challenge to reward sustainability solutions

Nearly 19 million people around the world were employed in the aquaculture sector in 2012, according to the United Nations' **Food and Agriculture Organization** (<http://www.fao.org/3/a-i3720e.pdf>). Ninety percent of these fish farmers are identified as small-scale producers in developing countries, mostly in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Many of these fish farmers lack access to the latest technology and best practices, slowing progress for sectorwide sustainability. The Australian government's **Blue Economy Challenge** (<http://theblueeconomychallenge.com>) (BEC), which launched in February, aims to improve productivity and ocean health in the Indian Ocean.

"As much of the world's aquaculture is taking place in developing countries, it is essential that these farms are productive, economically and environmentally sustainable and that farmers can benefit from the latest technological and scientific advances," said Stephanie Kimber, BEC program manager and innovation officer at innovationXchange, a program of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.



Farmed shrimp from Bangladesh. Photo by Yusuf Tushar, courtesy of World Fish.

The challenge — also supported by the World Wildlife Fund and conservation technology organization **Conservation X Labs**

(<http://www.conservationxlabs.com/home>) — has already attracted global interest, with \$3 million (AUS) in prize money up for grabs. There will be three major challenges: Rethinking Feed for Aquaculture, New Ocean Products and Sustainable Design. Kimber expects many more applicants as the June 30 deadline for submissions approaches. But what's more important than the size of the field is the “transformative nature” of the ideas, she added.

“We are really looking for those ideas that will have maximum impact in a developing-country setting,” Kimber said, citing examples like Bangladesh, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Comoros and Indonesia.

The organizers are looking for something greater than incremental improvements. With a growing global population expected to swell to more than 9 billion by 2050, aquaculture can play a significant role in producing enough protein for the planet —the industry already produces roughly half of the seafood that consumers eat around the world.

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The Blue Economy Challenge is looking for novel approaches to meet increased demand, protect environmental resources, contribute to the elimination of destructive fishing practices and provide food and economic security in regions where many people rely on fish for the majority of their animal proteins.

Grants of up to \$750,000 (AUS) each will be rewarded to winners, which will be determined on quality and ability to transform aquaculture practices. Kimber said feed is a critical issue, based on input from global experts in aquaculture.

“To an outsider, it seems an obvious question: Why are we using wild fish to feed captive fish? It cannot be sustainable in the long run,” said Kimber. “But we need to ensure that any replacements that are developed will match the nutritional quality, cost and production scale of existing products.”

The New Ocean Products category provides an incentive to create new markets for diverse food or other consumer products, while the Sustainable Design category encourages applicants to “fundamentally rethink many of the constraints around aquaculture systems,” said Kimber.

Winners of the contest will be announced in late 2016.

@GAA_Advocate (https://twitter.com/GAA_Advocate)

Author



JAMES WRIGHT

Editorial Manager
Global Aquaculture Alliance
Portsmouth, NH, USA

james.wright@gaalliance.org (<mailto:james.wright@gaalliance.org>)

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