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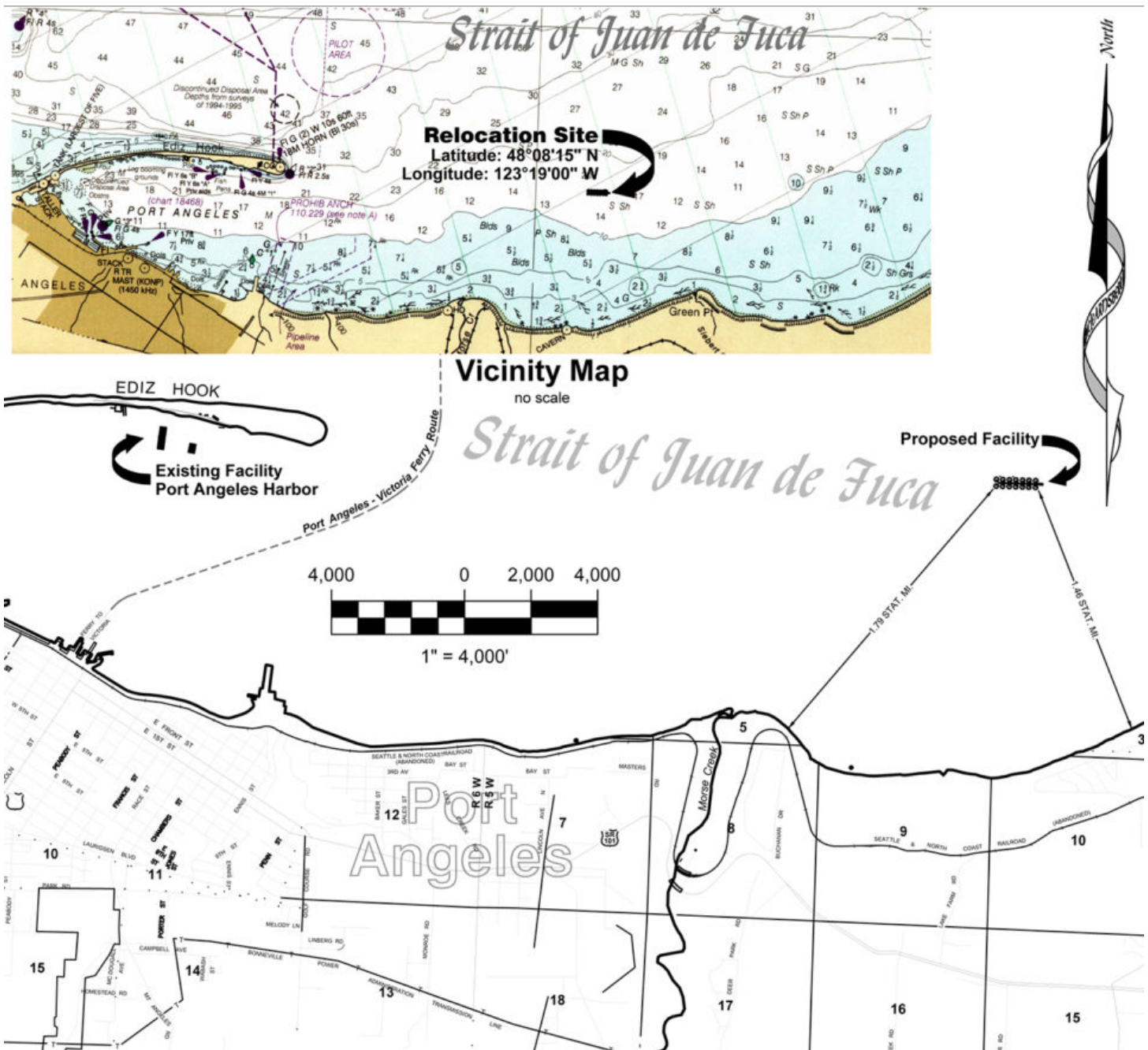
Relocation of salmon farm not so strait-forward



19 June 2017 Naomi Tomky



Cooke Aquaculture's site proposal in Strait of Juan de Fuca requires new permits, prompting delays



Maps of the Port Angeles, Wash., area shows the site where Cooke Aquaculture's current salmon farm is operating, and where it has proposed to relocate, further out into the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

Wild salmon is an iconic symbol of the Pacific Northwest, so last year when East Coast-based Cooke Aquaculture purchased Icicle Seafoods, which operated an Atlantic salmon farm outside Port Angeles, Wash., locals were already wary.

Although the purchase went through, it became necessary to move the farm – or close and re-open in another location, depending on whom you ask – because of the construction of a U.S. Navy pier. That move still has not happened yet.

Icicle – now part of Cooke, but still operating under the Icicle name – operates all eight fish farms in Puget Sound, including the salmon farm slated to close soon – though a date is not set yet, as the timing will depend on the permitting of the new site.

Icicle was founded more than 30 years ago and employing some 350 year-round employees plus 2,000 seasonal workers. Nell Halse, VP-Communications of Cooke, says that the company is invested in the community Icicle has operated in as it works to move the farm to a more suitable location.

“The whole process of looking for a new location involves a lot of science,” she said, underscoring their priorities. “It needs to be good for salmon, their migration and sensitive habitats.”

However, the proposed location has rankled others in the area.

The Strait of Juan de Fuca is the waterway that connects the Pacific Ocean to Puget Sound and the rest of the Pacific Northwest’s Salish Sea. The current location of the salmon farm, at Ediz Hook just off Port Angeles, is close to shore and in protected water. The proposed new site is four miles away, but most significantly, it is one-and-a-half miles farther out into the mouth of the strait. This new, larger operation would be the first with anchored net pens in many years and would increase salmon production by 20 percent.

From Cooke’s perspective, according to Halse, this a relocation: The Navy’s pier construction has already impeded the aquaculture operation (forcing the company to harvest fish early), and as it slogs through the permitting process, it may need to restock the pens there again, as permitting issues continue to delay the new site.

Cooke considers this a straightforward move. Halse lists the advantages of the new spot, explaining that it will keep both the humans and fish safe from construction issues, but also provide the opportunity to run a more high-energy farm in the open water, using technology already successfully in place on the East Coast – an advantage over the very closed and contained current location. Cooke works with third-party certification to monitor their farms, does regular external audits, and is committed to the community. Halse mentioned meetings with community groups and local tribes to keep them updated.

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The new location has been identified as non-sensitive habitat, meeting navigational requirements and avoiding conflicts with fishing and shellfish habitats. However, the Wild Fish Conservancy, among other stakeholders in the area, has requested additional specific information and data, before approval from governing bodies, on how Cooke would prevent the spread of disease from the farmed fish into the wild population.

Many of the group’s concerns stem from issues with Washington’s neighbors to the north. The strait is part of the border between the state and the Canadian province of British Columbia, where the salmon aquaculture industry – which boasts more than 70 farms to Puget Sound’s eight – has been the center of controversy for as long as it’s operated there.

It should be noted, however, that this isn’t Cooke’s first rodeo – its Maine salmon farms have even achieved a coveted yellow, or good alternative, designation from the [Monterey Bay Aquarium’s Seafood Watch](#) program. The company has successfully implemented robust procedures there and in Atlantic Canada, which bodes well for the new/relocated farm in the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

Curt Hart, of the Shorelands and Environmental Assistance program at Washington’s Department of Ecology offers some background: Basically, from the bureaucratic view, this is an entirely new farm, not a simple move of the old one. There is a whole slew of permits that a new farm needs to acquire, and Cooke is still going through the comment and approval periods for some of those, including the environmental review/impact statement being done by Clallam County, and the Section 10 permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The current operation, added Hart, is permitted with its national pollutant discharge permit, but once the environmental review is complete, Cooke will need to re-apply for the new location.

As each level of government solicits comments and Cooke gets the opportunity to respond, Halse expresses frustration that the many permits force such a lengthy process.

“If it all went smoothly,” she said, “we would already be moving the farm.”

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