

Decision Document for the Identification of Aquaculture Opportunity Areas (AOAs) in U.S. Federal Waters off of Southern California Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS-006-48-1WC-1728044280)

This decision document was developed by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) in compliance with decision-making requirements, pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended, and documents NMFS' decision regarding the proposed action.

I. Description of Action

The proposed action is to identify one or more locations (referred to as Aquaculture Opportunity Areas, or AOAs) in Federal waters off of southern California that may be suitable for multiple future offshore aquaculture projects. The Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) evaluates the impacts of siting aquaculture in those locations. The action is a planning effort and does not propose to authorize or permit any specific aquaculture-related activities or individual aquaculture projects.

NMFS prepared the PEIS to comply with NEPA and Executive Order (E.O.) 13921, *Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth*. The PEIS was prepared in accordance with the June 2025 NOAA Policy and Procedures for Compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act and Related Authorities, Companion Manual for NOAA Administrative Order 216-6A. The cooperating agencies on the PEIS are the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Los Angeles District, the United States Coast Guard (USCG) District Eleven, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 9. Cooperating agencies may utilize the PEIS to inform permitting actions.

NMFS considered and analyzed four alternatives:

1. No Action Alternative
2. Santa Barbara Channel: one or more AOAs would be identified within Federal waters offshore of Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties in the Santa Barbara Channel
 - a. macroalgae and shellfish aquaculture only
 - b. all types of marine aquaculture
3. Santa Monica Bay: one or more AOAs would be identified within Federal waters offshore of Los Angeles County in Santa Monica Bay
 - a. macroalgae and shellfish aquaculture only
 - b. all types of marine aquaculture
4. Santa Barbara Channel and Santa Monica Bay: one or more AOAs would be identified from within the boundaries of either alternative area
 - a. macroalgae and shellfish aquaculture only
 - b. all types of marine aquaculture



The AOA alternatives considered in the PEIS were developed using an evaluation of available spatial data within the Southern California Bight, feedback received during public comment, as well as the best available science and literature on aquaculture and the region. The locations were informed by a spatial planning process led by NOAA's National Centers for Coastal and Ocean Science to identify areas with the highest potential to support three to five marine aquaculture operations and the least amount of conflict with other ocean uses.

II. Decision and Rationale for Decision

Through the PEIS, NMFS considered the purpose and need of the proposed action, analyzed a reasonable range of alternatives, and considered public and agency comments received during the PEIS scoping and review periods. Public comment on this action included a 60-day comment period on the Notice of Intent and a 90-day comment period on the Draft PEIS as well as public listening sessions. In addition, NMFS consulted with multiple Federal agencies as well as the appropriate regional fishery management council (i.e. the Pacific Fishery Management Council), and coordinated with appropriate state (i.e., California) and tribal governments, in accordance with E.O. 13921.


While this planning action of identifying AOAs would not have impacts to the physical, biological, socioeconomic, and cultural and historic environment, the PEIS additionally assesses impacts of siting aquaculture facilities there, in accordance with E.O. 13921. The programmatic approach takes a broad look at issues and geographic alternatives for offshore aquaculture in the Southern California Bight. The PEIS provides a programmatic-level NEPA assessment of the potential impacts on the human environment, should an AOA or AOAs be identified in Federal waters off the coast of Southern California and should aquaculture facilities be sited within such AOA or AOAs. The PEIS considers impacts of identifying alternative locations as AOAs, as well as considering impacts to water quality, federally-protected species and habitat, wild fish stocks and fisheries, ports and working waterfronts, tourism and recreation, markets, public health and safety, oceanography and climate, and tribal, cultural, archeological and historical resources, among others, if aquaculture operations were to be sited within each location. The PEIS analyzes and compares potential risks associated with protected species entanglement, escapement, non-native species, antibiotic use, marine debris, and disease transfer as well as potential visual, lighting, and noise impacts, among others.

The purpose of the proposed action is to apply a science-based approach to identify AOAs in Federal waters. The proposed action is needed to meet the directives of E.O. 13921 to address the increasing demand for seafood, facilitate long-term planning for marine aquaculture development, and address interests and concerns regarding offshore marine aquaculture siting. The goal of identifying AOAs is to promote American seafood competitiveness, food security, economic growth, and support the facilitation of the development of domestic commercial aquaculture, consistent with sustaining and conserving marine resources and applicable laws, regulations and policies. Identifying AOAs under E.O. 13921 is also consistent with directives in the National Aquaculture Act of 1980 and the NOAA Marine Aquaculture Policy, for NOAA to promote sustainable aquaculture in the U.S.

When evaluating alternatives, NMFS considered the directives of E.O. 13921 and the purpose and need of the proposed action. The PEIS concludes that identifying AOAs may have a beneficial impact by informing and facilitating efficiencies in permitting and environmental review processes for individual projects proposed later in time through the information provided in the PEIS.

NMFS has selected Alternative 4b (all types of aquaculture in both the Santa Barbara Channel and Santa Monica Bay) as the proposed action as this alternative best meets the directives of E.O. 13921 and the purpose and need of the proposed action. Alternative 4b provides the highest number of locations on a programmatic level which were considered potentially suitable, and realizes the goal and directives of the proposed action. In balancing the potential effects of the various alternatives, NMFS has identified AOAs that could be considered potentially suitable for finfish, shellfish, macroalgae, or multi-species aquaculture. The action is a planning effort. It is expected that siting considerations within an AOA may require additional analysis to determine the suitability for specific types of aquaculture and/or cultivation approaches, and to determine any mitigation measures. Potential impacts associated with future aquaculture operations that may be sited in an AOA would be context and location-specific, and dependent on the proposed activity. Any future aquaculture operation proposed in an AOA would still need to comply with all applicable laws, including applicable requirements regarding potential impacts on the environment. Avoidance, mitigation, and monitoring measures could be imposed under various permits, consultations, and statutes.

The AOAs identified through this action do not represent the only potential suitable sites for aquaculture in Federal waters off of southern California. Identifying AOAs does not create legal boundaries or restrict activities. The PEIS provides information for permitting agencies, applicants, other entities, and individuals, and can also inform future environmental review.



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9/10/2025

Date