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Michigan nixes net-pen aquaculture

by [Tom Walker](#)

August 9, 2016

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The final report published by the Michigan state “Quality of Life” departments concludes an 18-month process, in which the Departments of Agriculture and Rural Development, Environmental Quality, and Natural Resources, considered two applications for net pen trout farming in Lakes Michigan and Huron. (See story in *ANA* Jan/Feb 2016.)

Currently, there are no net pen aquaculture operations within the US Great Lakes. There are nine in Lake Huron waters within the Canadian province of Ontario.

Five initial reports were produced that considered the science, economics, and current regulations in response to the applications. A sixth report summarized stakeholder input, which included a public forum.

The scientific report urged caution and recommended that if net pens were approved, a siting tool should be developed as well as a nutrient tracking model, extensive monitoring be deployed, and an adaptive management approach be utilized to address and evaluate potential concerns.

The economic assessment suggested that two, one-million-lb net pen trout facilities could lead to up to 17 direct jobs, 27 indirect jobs and a total output of \$10.3 million (in contrast, a Michigan Sea Grant Report in 2014

envisioned a billion-dollar aquaculture industry for the state).

The final report concluded the “ecological and environmental risks and uncertainties... would pose significant risks to fishery management and other types of recreation and tourism.” The agencies also expected that they would encounter significant legal challenges if they moved forward with the applications.

The \$3.3-million startup costs are not provided through conventional funding models, the final report noted. “This level of public investment for an estimated return of \$10 million does not appear to be a prudent use of the state’s resources at this time.”

Michigan legislators will get their say with three bills now before the Senate and three bills in the House of Representatives that support the expansion of aquaculture. One Senate bill and one House bill seek to prohibit aquaculture in the Great Lakes.

The regulatory review noted that commercial net pens could not legally operate in Great Lake waters at this time, according to current state law. Any future approval would very likely trigger a legal challenge under the “Public Trust Doctrine”.

— *Tom Walker*

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