COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PERCEPTIONS IN SEAWEED AQUACULTURE DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS FROM VASHON ISLAND, WA

Session: In-Person

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There are currently two proposed kelp aquaculture projects on Vashon Island that will influence how future seaweed aquaculture will be conducted in Washington. Despite these farms' potential ecological and social benefits, many people strongly oppose them. This study explores the various factors that contribute to people supporting or opposing these proposed farms to help the residents, farmers, and planners to understand how public perceptions are formed. I interned at the Washington Sea Grant, where I interviewed 100 key informants and conducted a thematic analysis on the interview transcripts and the 72 public comments. Dissatisfaction with the permitting process and communication emerged as a recurring theme among both supporters and opponents of the farms, with other themes including ecological, aesthetic, location, and nature of production. Perceptions about the permitting process ultimately inform public perceptions of the seaweed farms themselves, especially in situations involving high scientific uncertainty and strong feelings about a sense of place. Solutions include informing residents throughout and before the permitting process, designating a communicator to act as a liaison between organizations and residents, and addressing concerns and questions in a public setting. The review process for these proposals can shape how the kelp and other aquaculture industries will look in WA. Identifying and addressing these issues can lead to a stronger relationship with the community and more social acceptance, as natural resource conflicts are often a symptom of a more significant issue (Nie 2003). These findings can improve the permitting process, increase collaboration opportunities, and may improve outcomes.