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Riparian Landowners Grumble at Tribal Aquaculture Venture

By IAN FEIN

A public hearing called by Aquinnah selectmen to discuss the management of Menemsha Pond turned instead this week into a debate about private aquaculture licenses and the Wampanoag Aquinnah Shellfish Hatchery.

Pondfront property owners complained about visual and environmental pollution caused by floating oyster beds, while representatives of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) and other residents listed the many benefits of the commercial aquaculture program.



Tribal representatives did formally apologize for large amounts of blue Styrofoam that broke loose during heavy storms and washed up on shore, and promised to the five dozen residents in attendance on Tuesday that they would clean all of it up.

The tribal hatchery program began two years ago, in April 2003. The tribe farms more than a million oysters in a floating bag system on five acres of water off the western shore of the pond, south of Red Beach.

Arguments over aquaculture aesthetics in Aquinnah have surfaced before, when a group of pondfront residents approached selectmen in October 2003 to complain about the then-fledgling hatchery.

Conservation commission chairman Sarah Thulin, who owns a pondfront home close to the tribe's oyster beds, outlined many of her neighbors' concerns at the hearing this week.

"Obviously everyone here wants the tribe to succeed in terms of its economic endeavor. But I hope through this dialogue we can learn to find a common ground whereby we can all enjoy Menemsha Pond," Mrs. Thulin said. "We want to be good neighbors and find a way we can use the pond together, so one use doesn't completely negate the others."



Mrs. Thulin cited the visual impact of the floating oyster beds, and asked whether a different method could be used to raise the oysters underwater and out of sight. She also complained of noise pollution emanating from the tribe's main barge area, where generators run and hatchery employees listen to the radio.

"The stillness and quiet that used to be there has been interrupted," Mrs. Thulin said.

Planning board member Jo-Ann Eccher defended the tribe's

hatchery. She referred to the aerial photograph of the tribal oyster beds that appeared on the front page of the Boston Globe during the red tide scare earlier this summer.

"It looked like a beautiful impressionistic painting. It truly is in the eye of the beholder," Ms. Eccher said. "The historical use of this pond is fishing - for hundreds and hundreds of years. Look at the people who live here year-round, what is their livelihood?"

Indeed, the history of shellfishing in Menemsha Pond dates back thousands of years. Evidence suggests that shellfish was a primary food source for Native Americans who lived on the pond centuries before European settlers arrived.

Hatchery technician and tribal member David Vanderhoop, who is one of five Aquinnah residents with a personal town aquaculture license, said that he is living a dream.

"I went to school for this in the 1970s when aquaculture was still a new word," Mr. Vanderhoop said. "Being able to grow shellfish on a site like that is not only a personal dream, but also one for my kids, so I can show them a clean way to make a living in this town."

Some property owners questioned town selectmen about whether the town as a whole benefited from the private hatchery endeavors. Applicants pay the town \$25 per acre per year for their aquaculture licenses.



Selectmen for the most part kept quiet on Tuesday. However, selectman Camille Rose, who requested the Menemsha Pond hearing at a board meeting last month, offered a brief statement at the end of the evening. She said the debate heard Tuesday night represented a classic conflict between aquaculture and property rights.

"Town revenue is based on property taxes - and we have to respect property rights, including aesthetics," Ms. Rose said. "We have to look at it too in terms of numbers. Are we losing more in terms of recreation and aesthetics than the select few people who have permits are gaining? We need to honor the wonderful thing of aquaculture, but we also have to honor the wonderful idea of beauty. We have to find a balance."

One resident with an aquaculture permit who farms for personal - not commercial - use, said that he believed it benefited the community in a grassroots way.

"For me its a community-based thing. I'm able to my feed my family, friends and other people in the town," he said. "It allows citizens to go and farm the sea - to reap the benefits which ripple through the community."

Tribal natural resources director Bret Stearns mentioned other hatchery initiatives that benefit the pond and community at large.



The tribe last year secured a \$250,000 federal grant to restore bay scallops and eelgrass to Menemsha Pond, which would then be available for harvest by anyone with a recreational permit.

Mr. Stearns also spoke about tribal efforts to improve water quality in the pond, in part through a \$150,000 oil separation unit installed near the Herring Creek.

"When I heard we were talking about Menemsha Pond management, I wrote down some things we should all be concerned about - like the areas where road runoff is coming into the pond," Mr. Stearns said. "We maintain that [oil separation] system - we're happy to do it. It's the right thing to do for the pond and for the town."

The oyster beds also remove large amounts of harmful nitrogen from the pond, Mr. Stearns said, and the tribe operates a water quality testing laboratory on the pond that is open to the public.

The tribal hatchery came under fire, however, for the extensive amounts of blue Styrofoam that broke loose from the oyster beds during heavy storms this year and washed up on pond shores. One East Pasture Road resident brought in a plastic Tupperware container filled with Styrofoam that he picked up on his beach the day before and passed it around the room.

"As a conservation commission, we have a lot of concerns about this," Mrs. Thulin said. "It's bad for the birds. It's bad for this fish. What kind of impact will that have on the environment?"

Mr. Stearns explained that when the tribe first purchased the Styrofoam floats, they were supposed to last three years with no degradation. When the hatchery realized the extent of the problem this spring, the tribe bought \$25,000 worth of new solid black plastic floats that are ultraviolet resistant.

"We're sorry it did happen - it's embarrassing to all of us," Mr. Stearns said. "We are addressing the issue and it will not happen again."

Mr. Vanderhoop said the hatchery in the last two weeks finally found a large enough crew to tackle the Styrofoam cleanup. He said that they will make their way around the entire pond and clean everything in sight.



"I don't like seeing that stuff on the beaches either. It's a mess," Mr. Vanderhoop said. "I will tell everyone here I'm committed to cleaning that all up."

Upon hearing Mr. Vanderhoop's commitment, a number of pondfront property owners offered to help with the cleanup efforts.

"When you're coming my way just let me know," one resident told Mr. Vanderhoop. "I would be delighted to come help."

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