

February 2017—AQUACULTURE PERSPECTIVES

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A new U.S. administration: will we see fish used more as political weapons?

by Bill Mancini

With the presidential election behind us and as Donald Trump takes office, there is clearly a different feel to the White House. Certainly, that sense is very clear when it comes to trade.

By all indications, the new president is itching for a trade war—or trade wars—with some of our most active trading partners. China, Mexico, Japan, Vietnam, and Korea immediately come to mind.

While the new president has been less-than-belligerent to Russia—even defending the Russian president against accusations of tampering with the U.S. election, the Russians in certain respects seem to be positioning themselves for self-sufficiency in the face of ongoing or future economic sanctions.

The Norwegians and the Russians recently agreed to resume shipments of Norwegian salmon into Russia. But those shipments were halted for years as punishment for Russian occupation and aggression in Crimea.

Additionally, the Russians recently have significantly bolstered their fish processing capability by as much as 20 percent, with the opening of a new processing plant.

Almost regularly now, we hear of new aquaculture operations springing up in Russia. Aquaculture is growing rapidly. Clearly there is a fortress mentality in Moscow, with an imperative to, as much as possible, remove imported food as a retaliatory hammer. Fish and seafood are right up there on the agenda.

Our new president may be wise to pay attention to, and learn from, the moves the Russians are making with regard to domestic fish supplies and food security.

The American economy is burdened with a fisheries trade deficit that exceeds \$11 billion per year. When you couple that with trade-war drum-beats directed at Mexico and China, we could be put in a difficult position relative to our seafood supplies.

While the Obama administration was relatively slow to act on supporting the development of domestic aquaculture for fear the environment would suffer, the Trump administration may be wise to accelerate those efforts.

Indeed, President Trump's campaign promises to reduce federal regulations could be a real shot in the arm for our industry.

Now, I know some of you are saying that an increase in the growth rate of domestic aquaculture—particularly if it's spurred by a decrease in federal regulations—will come at a horrible cost to the environment. I am here to say that argument is (pardon the pun) a red herring.

First, a bump in the growth rate of domestic aquaculture does not necessarily mean a trade-off in environmental quality. We have learned important lessons over the years, and are much more sophisticated in our approaches to freshwater and marine aquaculture production. Sustainability is now our primary operative word, with an understanding the environment supports what we do. So, we must be kind to it.

Second, we should be encouraging the growth of aquaculture anyway. Our insistence on hunting and gathering fish in the wild is outdated, antiquated, counter-productive and anathema (i.e., overfishing) with respect to a thriving and healthy environment, and potentially dangerous to consumers who are offered no traceability when it comes to wild fisheries products (just hope it's not contaminated). In this day and age and in many respects, commercial fishing seems absurd (e.g., shark fins, totoaba swim bladders—really?).

Even without presidential chest-beating to heighten trade tensions with our partners, President Trump will be well served by encouraging aquaculture development, in whatever form that might take. Our fisheries trade deficit has been much too high for far too long, and needs to come down.

The Russians are feeling the food security pinch, and are taking bold steps to resolve it, including new and long-term solutions that include a lot more aquaculture. Let's not wait until we are in the same or a similar position.

Addressing food security is an exercise in power, and the balance of power—concepts our new president understands very well. We can learn from Russian pain.

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