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MUSSEL UP!

Ventura Harbor concept could become aquaculture blueprint for California and beyond

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by Chris O'Neal
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It turns out that when a group of entrepreneurial, scientifically minded individuals comes together for a project, big ideas can emerge. Such is the case of the Ventura Shellfish Enterprise — a proposed multiparty project that would allow for 20 100-acre plots for growing mussels in state waters within the Santa Barbara Channel near Ventura Harbor.

Partners working together to further the Enterprise include the Ventura Port District, Coastal Marine Biolabs located at Ventura Harbor; The Cultured Abalone Farm in Goleta and Ventura-based Ashworth Leininger Group, all of whom are in coordination with aquaculture scientists and experts from the state, as well as from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the California Sea Grant, an organization benefiting coastal and marine science and policy.

Individual Enterprise farmers would have the opportunity to work within the specified site farming mussels to be processed at the Ventura Harbor, with the hard part — applying for and receiving permits and leases — taken care of collectively.

Via a \$300,000 NOAA 2015 Sea Grant Aquaculture Extension and Technology Transfer Grant to California Sea Grant awarded to the Ventura Port District, matched through the volunteered time and expertise of a slew of experts in aquaculture and permitting, the Enterprise is currently readying the creation of a strategic permitting plan, submitting permit applications and information in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, accreditation of a testing and monitoring laboratory at the Ventura Harbor and implementation of an outreach program.

THE CONCEPT

Of all the bounty gathered from the sea, squid is the largest catch processed at the Ventura Harbor — making up 28 percent of California's total haul. Between 2011 and 2015, over 212 million pounds of squid were processed in Ventura, according to numbers provided by Ventura Port District Business Operations Manager Brian Pendleton.

The amount of squid per year fluctuates, however. In 2011, 64.7 million pounds of squid were caught and processed. In 2015: 19.2 million. Pendleton says that the Ventura Shellfish Enterprise would be an “opportunity to diversify.”

“We have an opportunity for another



Mussels grow directly attached to line rather than in cages. For the Ventura Shellfish Enterprise, the Mediterranean mussel will grow in spades in similar fashion to the tune of an estimated 20 million pounds per year.

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— Ventura Port District Business Operations Manager Brian Pendleton

commercial product to be landed here at Ventura Harbor which adds employment, distribution and other jobs and so on up and down the supply chain,” said Pendleton. “The scale of the potential operation, if it were to be achieved, would be the largest in California.”

Currently, less than 900 acres is leased by the state for shellfish aquaculture, with additional acreage in Humboldt Bay issued by the local harbor district,

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In Brief

SUPERVISORS VOTE FOR ANIMAL PROTECTION WITH WILDLIFE ZONE

The Ventura County Board of Supervisors voted on Tuesday, Jan. 24, to pursue the creation of a so-called Wildlife Corridor Overlay Zone, which would establish permanent routes for wildlife traveling between the Los Padres National Forest and the Santa Monica Mountains.

The concept originated with Supervisor Linda Parks, District 2, who, with her staff, has been working on the concept for several years. The plan would identify areas in which wildlife traverses regularly on county zoning and land-use maps, and develop standards for the zone that preserve the ability of wildlife to travel in those areas, undeterred, between the Santa Monica Mountains and the Los Padres Forest.

“Urban encroachment is reducing habitat and increasing incidents of roadkill,” said Parks, “and we’re seeing the impact to several species, most notably mountain lions, which will become extinct in the Santa Monica Mountains without work to counter these trends.”

A proposed wildlife overpass near Calabasas has received growing support since being suggested several years ago. In Ventura County, there exists no designation for a wildlife corridor. Parks says that planning staff will work with stakeholders “to draft special standards for properties that are in wildlife corridors” and that “then there will be hearings at the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors before adoption later this year.”

The cost to complete the initial study is estimated to be around \$171,440, sourced from the current General Plan Update Budget and General Fund.

ONGOING TAX PREPARATION WORKSHOPS ACROSS COUNTY

Beware, the tax man cometh. There is hope yet for those scrambling for assistance: Several groups across the county are holding tax-preparation workshops ahead of the April 15 filing date.

The Conejo Senior Volunteer Program will host free tax-preparation services on a first come, first served basis, Monday through Thursday, 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., through April 13 for seniors 60 years old or older, or for individuals who make less than \$53,000 a year, at Newbury Park Library, 2331 Borchard Road, Newbury Park. For more information, call 381-2742.

The Cabrillo Economic Development Corporation's HomeOwnership Center, United Way of Ventura County, County of Ventura Human Services Agency and the IRS are partnering to offer volunteer income tax assistance for Ventura County residents who earn less than \$54,000 a year, beginning Saturday, Feb. 4, through April 15, at several locations throughout the county. To schedule an appointment and for more information, dial 2-1-1.

Finally, the American Association of Retired Persons, in conjunction with the IRS, will host free-income tax preparation assistance and e-filing for seniors and low-income individuals through April 15 throughout Ventura County. In some cities, appointments are required. For more information and for a list of locations, contact Jeff at jwlittle99@gmail.com.

MEASLES RETURN TO VENTURA COUNTY

Four additional cases of measles have been confirmed in Ventura County for January, bringing the total number of cases to five.

All of the cases are within the same household, according to Ventura County Public Health. While none of the cases has required hospitalization, the infected individuals were isolated and are said to be either doing well or recovered.

“We are doing our best to contain this measles outbreak so that we can prevent any further cases in our county,” said Dr. Robert Levin, Ventura County public health officer. “I urge anyone who has not been immunized against measles to get vaccinated. Measles is both a serious and a highly contagious disease.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control, measles can cause encephalitis, pneumonia and even death. Young children, pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems are more susceptible to serious complications from the virus.

— Chris O'Neal

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and in Agua Hedionda Lagoon in Carlsbad, leased by NRG Energy, which operates a power plant there. The Enterprise project would



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— **Ventura Port District Commissioner Everard Ashworth**

dwarf current acreage with its 2,000 potential acres.

Farmed mussels are a global industry, with China providing most of the world's supply. According to NOAA, 91 percent of the seafood Americans eat is imported, and only a fraction of a percent (0.8) of the world's aquaculture is produced by the United States.

Using a geographic information system developed at the University of California, Santa Barbara's Bren School for Environmental Science and Management to identify an "optimal growing area that minimizes conflicts with other ocean uses," the Enterprise will determine a potential growing area along the Ventura coast.

Initial identification of a suitable growing area using the GIS (geographic information system) model was selected by eliminating areas with existing navigation routes, marine protected areas, areas of hard rocky bottom representing essential fish habitat, oil and gas leases, and existing infrastructure such as telecommunication cables and municipal wastewater discharge pipelines. Temperature and mussel-growing conditions were also taken into consideration, as well as potential impact on existing commercial fisheries.

The mussels would originate from an onshore hatchery, where they would begin life as juvenile mussels (known as spat) until they grow large enough to attach to special, so-called “fuzzy lines.” These lines would then be transferred to the specified locations by the individual growers to mature, at which time they would be harvested and processed onshore at the Ventura Harbor.

Enterprise partners estimate production at roughly 20 million pounds of mussels per year.

at full project capacity, exceeding an anticipated value of \$50 million annually.

"Seafood is a resource that, with a little bit of vision and active management, can be a real asset to the coastal economy," says Doug Bush, general manager of The Cultured Abalone, an onshore abalone farm based in Goleta.

The particular type of mussel to be grown

part of the Enterprise.”

Imondi and Santschi are using this time to educate stakeholders on environmental and economic issues of a project of this size as well.

Beyond that, Imondi and Santschi say that a portion of the growing area will be set aside as a kind of “sea farm” that will “be dedicated to a range of education and research activities conducted by Biolabs and its collaborators.”

To launch the educational outreach portion of phase 1, eight public workshops have been scheduled, ranging in topic from aquaculture itself to the potential economic impacts and benefits of the Enterprise.

THE ROAD TO MUSSEL BEACH

Everard Ashworth, principal with the Ashworth Leininger Group and commissioner and vice chairman of the board of the Ventura Port District, speaks greatly of the potential of the Enterprise to effect change and, most importantly, affect sustainability at the Ventura Harbor and beyond.

“The best path forward for the Port District is to permit sustainable aquaculture which will secure a robust fishery that we manage as opposed to chase,” says Ashworth.

As the farm will be located within California waters, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, California Fish and Game Commission and other state regulators will have a say-so in its approval. Ashworth says that initially there are 13 permits to obtain before the project can move forward.

"Some 30 years ago there was an understanding that permitting aquaculture was complicated," says Randy Lovell, state aquaculture coordinator with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Lovell says that the State has not issued a new aquaculture lease in over

20 years, noting that part of the reason why is the high cost of the permitting process, which can be up to a quarter of a million dollars and two to three years' time. "What's new here and what's inspiring, I think, is the model that this Ventura project is taking in going after those permits and entitlements on behalf of smaller growers who may not be able to consider it."

Lovell says that the idea is for state agencies to "create a document that would be guidance not only for the Ventura project but for others in the state" as well, as California and the rest of the nation eye the world's growing aquaculture industry as a means by which to meet the ever-growing nutritional demand for inexpensive protein.

GIVE 'EM SHELL

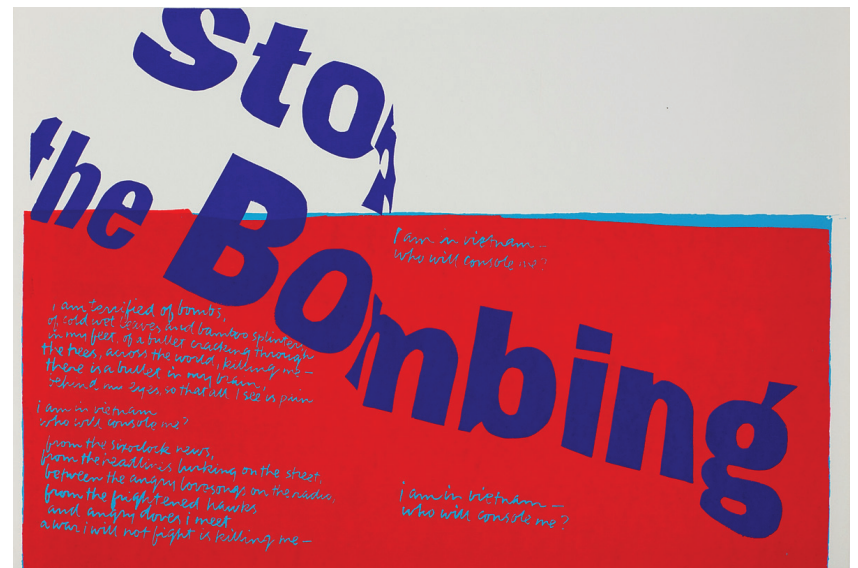
The word “convergence” has been on Ashworth’s mind as of late, as the Enterprise partners come together. The group expects that the strategic permitting plan will be completed by first quarter 2017, with the second part of the grant work to be completed by second quarter 2018. In the meantime, the Ventura Port District, together with its Enterprise partners, is seeking additional funding to complete the permitting phase.

"If you look at a really good idea, it has its own inertia," says Ashworth. "This project is worthy and deserving of the focus and attention that will be needed to move it forward." ♦

The first of eight public workshops will take place on Thursday, Feb. 16, and be titled "Introduction to Shellfish Aquaculture and the Ventura Shellfish Enterprise." The workshop will be held at the Channel Islands National Park Visitors Center, 1901 Spinnaker Drive, Ventura, 7-8:30 p.m. For more information and a complete schedule, visit www.venturashellfishenterprise.com

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