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OFFSHORE FISH FARM TO CULTURE

LOCAL BOTTOMFISH AND MAHIMAHI

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For Immediate Release

The days when Kona fishermen could make a good living from bottomfishing are long gone. State and Federal agencies consider that Hawaii's native bottomfish stocks - opakapaka, ehu, onaga, and hapu'up'u - have been "seriously overfished". The State has recently imposed restrictions on the fishery, including closures of extensive areas around each island, to try to help restore the stocks. Over half of the bottomfish consumed in the state are now imported from

A Kona company plans to bring these highly-esteemed fish back to prominence, by developing a local farm to culture these fish in the waters offshore of the Natural Energy Laboratory of Hawaii Authority (NELHA), in Kona. The proposal, by Kona Blue Water Farms (a division of Black Pearls, Inc.), will involve producing juvenile fish in a land-based hatchery at NELHA, and then moving the fish to submerged and surface fish pens at the offshore farm site.

The farm will be located in offshore waters between 150' and 200' deep, to avoid exposure to high surf, to minimize the potential environmental impacts on coral reefs along the shoreline, and to avoid conflicts with existing fishing and recreational diving activities along the shore. The bottom beneath the area is entirely sand, with few resident fish. The proposed farm site will also be inside of the "ono alley", where most trolling usually occurs, and well north of the marlin and tuna fishing grounds which extend northwest of Keahole Point.

The two principals behind the proposal, Dr Dale Sarver and Neil Anthony Sims, are long-time Kona residents; marine biologists who are also divers and fishermen. Black Pearls, Inc., has been based at NELHA for over nine years, but has, up to now, focussed on stock enhancement and culture potential for Hawaii's imperiled native pearl oyster. The company has a proposal pending with the Land Board for Hawaii's first pearl farm in Keehi lagoon, on Oahu.

"This is very similar to our pearl oyster work, in that we are hoping to marry together environmental and economic benefits", said Dr Sarver. "As with pearl oysters, the development of commercial culture techniques for these fish species could reduce fishing pressure on existing stocks, and create the possibility for restocking of the reef by release of hatchery-produced fish. At the same time, the farm could provide employment

opportunities for fishermen, and at the same time create a consistent supply of these fine fish to Kona's restaurants."

The company is also working with developing hatchery culture techniques for some of the reef fish species that are targeted by the tropical fish divers.

"This has to be the way of the future", said Dr Sarver. "Man must learn to take better care of the oceans. In the future, we hope that we will take as good care of the ocean as we do with our gardens -and for the same reason: because that's where our food comes from."

The farm proposes to begin operations with culture of mahimahi. A pilot-scale land-based mahimahi farm was set up at NELHA in the early 1990's, but encountered difficulties with maintaining good water quality in the tanks. By moving offshore, into deep water net pens, the company believes that they will overcome these problems. At the same time, KBWF is working with researchers from Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology, in Oahu, to develop the hatchery culture methods for the other Hawaiian bottomfish.

"We understand that this is a ground-breaking step for aquaculture in Kona", said Dr Sarver. "Because it is new, we recognize that some people may have concerns or fears. We want to work very closely with the community, to minimize potential conflicts, and to ensure that there is good understanding of the issues involved. We hope to receive solid community support for the proposal. Over the next few months we intend to meet with the different organizations representing the fishing, diving and recreational interests, to discuss this proposal with them, and to address what they see as the ways that this could impact their use of the area".

Dr Sarver encouraged representatives from any interested organization to contact him or Mr Sims, at their NELHA lab facility (phone: 808 331 1188).

The shoreline adjacent to the proposed farm site is a steep cliff, at the edge of the 1801 lava flow. Prior to the 1801 flow, the Keahole area was the site of the largest Hawaiian fishpond complex in the islands.□The fish pond was so large that the Hawaiians used canoes to sail around it. Kona Blue Water Farms believes that this link with Hawaiian fish farming is the perfect historical precedent for what could be the next generation of aquaculture in Kona.