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Seafood News – Aquaculture

■ Q&A: Brian O'Hanlon, Open Blue Sea Farms

*By Mercedes Grandin, SeafoodSource contributing editor*

10/15/2009 11:15:34 AM – SeafoodSource caught up with Brian O'Hanlon, founder and president of Open Blue Sea Farms, to talk about everything from the company's recent acquisition of Panama's Pristine Oceans to the future of cobia farming and the prospect of open-ocean aquaculture in the Gulf of Mexico.

Grandin: How has the acquisition of Pristine Oceans changed your business?

O'Hanlon: The acquisition has created an incredible business opportunity. Our group is the most experienced in the field of open-ocean cobia production, and we have good experience selling the fish. Pristine Oceans, on the other hand, had a

really good team on the ground and years of experience doing business in Panama. The acquisition created what we think is the strongest company in the region, poised to take cobia production to the next level. We are feeling an enormous amount of momentum building right now thanks to this deal.

What's the status of your cobia supply?

We are essentially reintroducing our product back to the market this year. We have the fish in the water now for roughly 250 tons of fish harvested in 2010, [and] more than doubling in 2011. Last year, we harvested less than 50 tons through Snapperfarm in Puerto Rico. However, these fish are coming from what we like to call the next generation open-ocean farm. I would venture to say that we are further offshore than any other farm in the world. We are literally over the horizon in very deep water with strong currents, far from sensitive ecosystems and areas commonly used by other stakeholders. Our water is blue, blue, blue, it is crystal clear open-ocean water, and the fish never see the same water twice. The fish is healthier, higher quality, without stakeholder or environmental impact.

What challenges do cobia farmers face?

The primary challenges we see are that cobia cannot be raised in the traditional near-shore farming systems commonly practiced around the world. They are pelagic fish that live in the open ocean. Health and growth performance are the key challenges. While there are some very basic practices we use in order to mitigate and manage these risks, we think that in order to be sustainable, cobia (and other fish like them) must be raised offshore in a more natural environment to mitigate health risks and increase growth performance and efficiency. So the challenge to scaling cobia is to efficiently scale farming offshore. We are well on our way to doing this with 50,000 fish in the water now and another 200,000-plus going in the water over the next 12 months.

How has the decision to allow open-ocean aquaculture in the Gulf of Mexico affected your business?

We get quite a few inquiries about building a farm in the Gulf, but still think it is a long way off before a profitable farm can be built there. Today we are focused on building our business in Panama. We have a platform in place that is going to allow us to do some really great things to advance open-ocean farming technology and scale. We are incredibly excited about the opportunity.

What are Open Blue's plans for the future? Do you hope to expand beyond Panama?

Our focus is currently on Panama, as it represents the greatest opportunity in open-ocean aquaculture today. However, our farming process is portable. We do plan to evaluate other regions of the world in the future in order to build the farms closer to the markets. We have been keeping our eye on a few locations in other parts of the world for the next farm since it takes many years to properly establish one.

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