

My name is _____ and I live in _____. I am testifying today against attempts to develop finfish aquaculture operations in the Gulf of Mexico. First, I want to express my disappointment that the Corps is refusing to provide a public notice and comment period on its permit for Ocean Era's Velella Epsilon facility. Public participation is a central hallmark of our democracy. It improves the quality of agency action and ensures that the administrative process has both public accountability and legitimacy. I urge you to heed public outcry and refrain from reaching a decision on this permit until a formal notice and comment period is held.

Second, I want to voice my opposition to the Velella Epsilon facility. This operation would be bad news all around for Sarasota and the larger Gulf region. It has been well documented globally that operations like these pose serious threats to the environment and public health. They routinely allow for massive, catastrophic fish spills – like the release of more than 260,000 non-native Atlantic salmon along Washington state's coast – which spread disease, can change genetics and behaviors of fish, and create unnecessary competition with our already struggling wild fish stocks. Serious tropical storms and hurricanes are one primary cause of spills, like the August 25th storm in Scotland that caused 50,000 farmed Atlantic salmon to escape into public waters. We just had two back-to-back storms come through the Gulf. Hurricane Laura caused heavy damage and a number of deaths. Imagine how a storm like this could destroy a fish farm in its path.

Equally concerning are the excess nutrients that this facility will discharge into the Gulf. Finfish farming operations freely flush a range of pollutants into the water, including heavy metals, pharmaceuticals, and fish waste. These types of pollution could feed red tide and other harmful algal blooms. In recent years, the red tide has been longer and more severe despite Gulf citizens, states, and localities taking serious steps to reduce runoff. The last thing we need is *any* additional nutrients in our water, which is exactly what this facility would cause.

Moreover, it is clear that Velella Epsilon would harm our fishing, tourism, and other marine industries, which are under intense pressure from the COVID-19 crisis and were already struggling to rebuild after recent disasters like oil spills, hurricanes, ongoing algal blooms and widespread coral die off. This facility would also create a private enclosure in public waters, creating unreasonable competition for marine space and pushing out public uses like fishing, boating, swimming, and diving.

For these reasons, I'm joining my neighbors today to protest Velella Epsilon, and to call for the Army Corps to deny the proposed permit. This operation is the last thing our Gulf needs.