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Article published Mar 17, 2012

State lawmakers get fish story from marine sciences group

By [JC Reindl](#) Day Staff Writer

Magnet school seeks legislative OK to sell tilapia, trout raised in aquaculture project

Hartford - Students at the Marine Sciences Magnet High School of Southeastern Connecticut are busy raising nearly 600 tilapia and rainbow trout in giant aquariums, scrubbing the walls of a dozen tanks and administering twice-a-day feedings.

But whether any of their fish appear on the menu at local restaurants could depend on the outcome of a legislative proposal spearheaded by their principal, Nicholas Spera, and state Sen. Andrew Maynard, D-Stonington.

The bill, which would streamline the state licensing process for aquaculture systems that cultivate seafood for human consumption, is slowly moving up the General Assembly's channels. Aquaculture is the controlled raising and harvesting of marine life.

On Friday, Spera led a delegation of four students and two teachers from the Groton school to a meeting room in the Capitol complex to testify before the legislature's Environment Committee. He was the last speaker at the daylong public hearing, which began at 10 a.m. and ran until 6:30 p.m.

"This legislation will provide the students with the hands-on learning experience and skills that will equip them with the knowledge to become future leaders in business and aquaculture," Spera told lawmakers, adding later, "We just want to sell our fish."

A second part of the bill, separate yet seafood-related, calls for tightening the regulations for harvesting scallops in the Niantic River.

State Rep. Ed Jutila, D-East Lyme, said the goal is to keep more juvenile scallops in the river so that the overall population can grow over time.

The measure would prohibit the taking of scallops that can pass through a 2½-inch ring. The current standard is a 2-inch ring. It also would clarify the legal authority of the Waterford/East Lyme Shellfish Commission to set limits on the number of scallops a person can harvest in one day.

The commission's current volume limit is one peck, which is one-quarter of a bushel. The size of the scallops determines the number in a bushel.

Commission Co-Chairman Eric Kanter said the law's existing language dates to 1949, when Niantic River scallops were famous and more abundant, and their lifecycle wasn't fully understood. Bay scallops generally live for just 18 months to two years, so it is important that those smaller, immature bivalves be given time to spawn, he said.

As for those 600 tilapia and trout, the magnet school has a tentative agreement to sell part of its full-grown harvest to Grossman's Seafood of Groton, a retail and wholesale dealer. Sean Coleman, Grossman's general manager, reached out to the school last fall shortly after the opening day of its inaugural year.

Coleman learned that the school wanted to introduce students to the business side of aquaculture, not only the marine biology. So he offered to do business with the teen entrepreneurs.

If the school can gain the regulatory approvals needed to sell Coleman the tank-raised fish, Grossman's could offer the fish to scores of restaurants and put a few on ice for purchase at

its marketplace.

"We're excited about getting the kids involved from tank to table," Coleman said by phone Friday.

The marine sciences magnet school is one of three regional marine high schools in the state. It opened in September to just over 100 freshmen and sophomore students who hail from 26 school districts. The school plans to grow to serve grades nine through 12.

The students' aquaculture lab began raising the fish from the fingerling stage late last year. "We've had them since they were teeny-tiny and it's fun to see them growing," said Kate Green, 15, of Stonington.

So far the only setback came when a trout got stuck in a tank filter and died, releasing ammonia into the water that killed about half of the original trout stock.

In addition to Green, the students who accompanied their principal Friday - Tyler Urena of Groton, Ethan McDowell of New London and Meghan Wynne of Hebron - must give presentations to their classmates on what happened at the Capitol.

"This is four students who are getting to live the curriculum," said Annie Pascuzzi, their civics teacher.

The Environment Committee heard public testimony on 16 different bills Friday, but has yet to vote on them.

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