

# BUILDING LOCAL TRUST FOR AQUACULTURE THROUGH SOCIAL LICENSE TO OPERATE

## PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Center for Food Integrity



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## PURPOSE

Understanding local values, concerns, and sentiment is increasingly important to aligning aquaculture growth goals with a community's interest. This is referred to as seeking a social license to operate (SLO), which is valuable in building relationships, sharing information, and getting ahead of potential conflicts when organizations are planning projects. This is accomplished by working directly with community leaders to learn about area concerns and needs with respect to aquaculture project plans.

## OBJECTIVE

In 2023, Gulfstream Aquaculture, LLC and Ocean Era, Inc. began preliminary siting analysis for a potential commercial aquaculture project south of the Florida Keys. The Center for Food Integrity (CFI) formed and moderated a Community Advisory Panel (CAP).

## DESIGN

CFI began the CAP process in 2023 by identifying 15 community leaders from different sectors to participate on a panel. Over six months, the CAP met monthly to identify community concerns. CFI conducted a more detailed year-long engagement with a second CAP in 2024.

Initially, CFI identified 12 participants, beginning with nine people from the 2023 CAP. Membership fluctuated over the course of the year so that a total of 19 individuals served at some point on the 2024 CAP.

Stakeholder questions and concerns were condensed into one topic that each bi-monthly 2024 meeting addressed.

## SOCIAL LICENSE TO OPERATE (SLO):

A community's acceptance of operations where that community exercises a moral authority over stewardship and use of its resources, public and private.

## RESULTS

CAP members were asked to complete a survey in April 2024 that consisted of a short series of statements, which could be assigned a number on a scale of 1 to 10 (1=strong disagreement, to 10=strong agreement). The same survey was conducted again in December.

Two statements asked participants to rate the economic impact of the planned project: **“The proposed project has the potential to support local communities and economies with jobs and tax revenues”** and **“The proposed project has the potential to sustainably raise fish/seafood in the U.S., i.e., reducing some of the growing seafood imports.”** Opinions largely shifted in favor of Gulfstream-Ocean Era on these points.

Another focused on environmental concerns, **“The proposed fish farm will pollute the local waters and negatively impact the reef,”** demonstrated a shift from some agreement with the statement in April to more confidence in December that the project would be safer than initially anticipated.

Importantly, two survey questions gauged the overall efficacy of the CAP process:



## BENEFIT FOR THE SOYBEAN FARMER

At the close of this process, CFI reported that CAP participants seemed disappointed there would not be additional meetings in 2025 — indicating their interest in keeping apprised of the project on behalf of their community, and additionally attesting to the strength of SLO outreach and transparency when put into practice. SLOs have the power to increase the acceptance of aquaculture as viable and welcome business ventures in more communities, in turn creating more domestic markets in need of U.S.-grown soybeans for fish and other seafood feed formulations.