Local Catch Network co-founder: Seafood has been ‘forgotten’ in US food policy

A partnership between the USDA Office of Seafood and Local Catch Network is intended to raise seafood's profile within the federal government's policy-making mechanisms

By Amanda Buckle | Aug. 28, 2026 18:24 BST

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For decades, seafood has occupied an awkward place in the US food system.

"Fisheries are often forgotten as part of our broader food system," Josh Stoll, an associate professor at the University of Maine School of Marine Sciences and co-founder of the Local Catch Network, said on the latest episode of *UCN*'s weekly podcast, *Catch the Current*, released Friday (Aug. 28).

Stoll believes the newly established US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Office of Seafood, which recently partnered with the Local Catch Network for outreach support, as reported by *Undercurrent*, could provide an opportunity to change that.

While US food-system discussions typically center on products farmed on land, seafood has often been treated primarily as a "commodity that we catch and sell" rather than as a component of the nation's food, nutritional and community systems, according to Stoll.

Photo credit: Josh Stoll/ University of Maine

That disconnect is reflected in the way the federal government approaches seafood, he said.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) focuses on fisheries and activities in the water, while USDA has traditionally focused on farming and food systems. The result, Stoll said, is a gap between the two agencies when seafood moves from the water onto land.

"There's this kind of no man's land where seafood falls," he said.

The scale of that disconnect became clear when Local Catch analyzed approximately $32 billion in recent USDA funding for food systems. Only about 0.5% of that funding went to the seafood sector, according to Stoll.

Stoll said the problem is partly one of institutional language and familiarity. Seafood businesses have spent years learning how to navigate agencies such as NOAA Fisheries, while USDA -- a significantly larger agency -- remains unfamiliar territory for many in the sector.

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One of the most immediate tasks the new partnership is tackling is simply helping seafood businesses understand what USDA resources are already available to them, Stoll said.

"I think that's the low-hanging fruit -- [helping people] understand the opportunities right now, today," Stoll said.

But he cautioned that simply opening existing agricultural programs to seafood will not necessarily solve larger problems with the system.

The seafood sector has characteristics that do not always fit neatly into platforms designed around terrestrial agriculture. Some USDA funding is also restricted by congressional language specifying which sectors can receive it, meaning some changes may require action beyond the agency itself.

Stoll said the partnership's goal is therefore bigger than getting fishermen access to a handful of existing USDA programs. It is

about changing how seafood is viewed within the broader US food system.

That will require input from the industry, which is why Local Catch Network is collaborating with USDA on listening sessions, which will be available on its website later this year, he said. The sessions are intended to give harvesters, businesses and other seafood stakeholders an opportunity to identify gaps and priorities for the new office.

Stoll expects those needs to span grants, loans, technical assistance and research.

But he also urged the industry to temper expectations. USDA's integration of aquaculture took decades to develop, he noted, and the Office of Seafood should not be viewed as an overnight fix to longstanding issues.

"If we're serious about change and improvement and integration into the food system, this can't be a two-week, four-month, six-month process," he said.

Still, Stoll sees the creation of the office as an opportunity to finally give seafood a more prominent place in federal food-system policy.

"I keep on telling people, show up, be part of this conversation," he said. "This is a really interesting opportunity to bring seafood to the center of the plate, if you will, in our food systems."

Listen to Stoll on *Catch the Current* on YouTube below, or read the transcript of his full interview here.

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