



DOWN ON THE FARM

Canada's aquaculture industry has struggled with numerous challenges and misperceptions in its efforts at major expansion

BY TREENA HEIN

Canadian aquaculture was born in the mid-1800s with a few P.E.I. oyster farms. But it wasn't until the 1970s that the industry really began to develop, mirroring the global growth that has taken place over the past several decades. In Canada the industry has grown as a wider selection of products become available, and consumers become more adventurous in their tastes. Health-conscious consumers are also eating more fish as a source of healthy, low-calorie and low-fat protein, and the health benefits of nutrients such as omega-3 fatty acids found in species like salmon.

As global fish stock continues to decline, the aquaculture industry has become stronger and more cost-effective, and is now a significant contributor to Canada's national economy, providing an economic boost to struggling coastal and rural areas. Today there are aquaculture facilities in every Canadian province and the Yukon, including 16 First Nations communities. "Aquaculture is a highly progressive, high-tech, innovative industry that Canada can be proud of, and it's ready to expand. There is huge potential here," says David Rideout, executive director of the Canadian Aquaculture Industry Alliance (CAIA).

If a regulatory framework can be put in place fast enough, aquaculture has the power to become an economic powerhouse for Canada, and an industry world leader. "An [annual] \$600-million to \$650-million farmgate industry could move very quickly to a \$2-billion to \$3-billion industry if we can get government to move forward more quickly," says Rideout. Because seafood is the fastest growing food

sector in the world, multinationals are looking for product to fill a number of markets, and fast. They're also looking to invest in farms and processors in order to get in on the action. But if Canada isn't ready to attract investment dollars soon, significant expansion opportunities may be lost. Already Asia controls 91 per cent of the world aquaculture production market, with Chile and Norway also emerging as world leaders. "Chile started out around the same time as Canada in the mid-'80s, and now has five times the production," says Rideout.

According to the CAIA, there are three main sets of regulations needed to pave the way for expansion. The first set, which took five years to create, is the National Aquatic Animal Health Program. These regulations assure other countries that Canada is a disease-free, safe seafood trading partner, while ensuring that our industry is protected from foreign diseases. The second set of regulations also involve protection, but focus on preventing invasive species from entering our waters. Most non-native organisms arrive via ballast water or on ship hulls, and can cause substantial economic losses. For example, sea squirts displace mussels on P.E.I. farms. Lastly, says Rideout, "We need federal and provincial regulations for fish farm site creation – consistent, strong, enabling regulatory policy framework to move the industry forward." This would involve establishing complex environmental regulations regarding issues such as placement and size of operations.

While working towards the speedy creation of these regulations, the CAIA has been busy collaborating with Canadian processors on a variety of issues. One key concern has been recent changes to the U.S. country-of-origin seafood labelling requirements. The organization is also heavily involved in marketing and formalizing the regulatory framework that supports it. To set Canadian aquaculture products apart, the CAIA and the federal government launched the multifaceted Brand Canada initiative in March 2004. Companies are hoping the initiative's quality and consumer satisfaction assurances will prove to be a valuable marketing asset. To use the Brand Canada logo, companies must meet the stringent demands of a three-pronged certification system, one that will soon receive formal recognition from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency: an On-Farm Food Safety Program, National Traceability Program and Canadian Code System for Sustainable Aquaculture. To build consumer confidence, the CAIA and other organizations are also working with the food industry to demonstrate the rigorous retail-driven food quality standards that are being developed as part of

the international Brand Canada initiative.

Together these programs address food safety, environmental issues, worker safety and humane treatment of livestock. To ensure the standards are met, companies involved with each program will be subjected to twice-yearly third-party audits. This fall, 40 to 50 people working on farms and in processing plants nationwide are being educated on the certification standards in order to ensure their operations will be ready for the audits, which should begin by early 2006. "It won't be a difficult chore," says Rideout. "Industry is already doing these things and has the willingness to be certified."

In addition to the usual farming challenges – including everything from weather and disease to new technologies and U.S. currency fluctuations – the fish farming business has had its share of issues to overcome. A major problem has been public misconceptions about aquaculture. "They don't view fish farms as farms, they view them as something else," says Rideout, noting that this leads to unrealistic expectations. He likens the situation of people not wanting fish farms near their homes to the issue of windmills: "Everyone wants clean energy, it all sounds good, and then later no one wants the windmills around. NIMBY is a difficult one for us." Another misperception is the view that the industry is at a standstill, and that issues that existed many years ago have not been addressed. Rideout vigorously disputes this, noting that changes in everything from operating procedures to feeds have resulted in enormous transformations. "The industry is

moving all the time and progressing in every way," he says.

There's also the concern that the industry is not as strictly controlled as it should be. But, says Rideout, "It's the most highly regulated type of farming in the world." According to the B.C. Salmon Farmers' Association, "Antibiotics are less frequently used in salmon farming than in other livestock farming. All antibiotic use is under the supervision and prescription of a licensed fish health veterinarian, and is governed by both federal and provincial legislation and regulations. There is a mandatory waiting period after treatment, to ensure that antibiotics are cleared from the animal's system, before they can be harvested. Hormones are not used in farm salmon grown for human consumption."

The aquaculture industry has also had to face years of rumbling from environmental groups over a variety of issues. B.C. salmon farmers have been heavily criticized for the escape of Atlantic salmon, the species most commonly farmed in B.C., with Chinook and Coho making small inroads. (Norwegian companies, which pioneered salmon aquaculture, chose Atlantic salmon for their high feed conversion rate and their gentler nature, resulting in better harvests and fewer



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