

Farming the Seas Conference
Panel Discussion on Socio-Economic Sustainability
By Nell Halse

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Thank you for the invitation to participate in this conference and the invitation to bring the industry perspective to the discussions. Some of my industry colleagues have been eloquent in highlighting the economic, food safety and policy issues.

I will focus my comments on two questions:

First: What do we mean when we talk about Socio-Economic Sustainability, and what is it that we are trying to sustain?

And Second: What is wrong with our image?

As General Manager of the New Brunswick Salmon Growers Association, I represent the second largest Aquaculture province in Canada and will be approaching the issues from a salmon perspective. While the examples and illustrations come from this sector of the Aquaculture industry, I believe the issues are common to all of us.

Let's look at the social side of the issue first. What is the society we are talking about? Who is this Aquaculture industry - the new kid on the block, this giant in the making?

In Ottawa, the industry's voice is David Rideout, Executive Director of the Canadian Aquaculture Industry Alliance or CAIA. Another voice is that of Yves Bastien, the Commissioner for Aquaculture Development. And most recently, we have Richard Wex, in the new Office of Sustainable Aquaculture. Even the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, Herb Dhaliwal, has developed a reputation as a strong supporter of the Aquaculture industry.

In the regions we have Growers Associations with General Managers like myself, who speak on behalf of "the industry". We also have provincial government departments bearing the name of Aquaculture and Directors of Aquaculture.

While these people are important to the industry, their faces are not really the faces of aquaculture. You have already met some of the industry leaders at this conference. But there are many others - faces that make up the "society" part of the socio-economic factor.

The young man in the hatchery who carefully and skillfully nurtures eggs in as pristine and healthy environment as possible until they're mature enough to go out to sea.

The Geneticists who design and manage the broodstock and egg-rearing programs.

The marine site managers and workers who live on the water, feeding fish and maintaining the farm, every day of the year, in all kinds of weather. Many of them have to adapt to new technologies, such as computerized feeding systems

The divers, who make regular inspections of the cages and fish.

The processing plant worker, who takes the harvested fish and produces a wide variety of food products for the supermarket shelf - once again using the latest in processing technology.

The boat operators who service the marine sites, working side by side with fishermen and tour boat operators - all competing for space on limited wharf facilities.

The **managers, veterinarians and scientists** who bring their professional expertise to the efficient and safe management of the industry.

These people are the "strength" of the Aquaculture industry. They make up the workforce of more than 2500 people in NB and fill one quarter of all jobs in Charlotte County, which, like so many Aquaculture regions is a coastal and rural community.

These jobs are worth sustaining. These people don't need handouts. They don't need propping up. They need to be given a supportive environment so that they can go about their business in the most efficient and economical way possible.

They need a one-stop shopping approach to approvals: site applications, licensing, environmental permits, permits for moving, harvesting and processing animals.

They need supportive programs like those available to their terrestrial counterparts, programs that ensure health and safety, that encourage investment, that protect their international competitiveness and that compensate them for unavoidable losses.

If there are so many positive sides to this industry's success story, why is there a problem with our image and where have we gone wrong?

First of all, I don't believe we have gone wrong. We just haven't come to the point of "building an image" yet.

Images are created, developed and promoted. Image building is a serious and highly sophisticated business. And the Aquaculture industry has been so caught up in its "construction phase" that it is only just beginning to spend time and resources towards image building.

The Canadian Aquaculture industry is only a few decades old but it has experienced phenomenal growth. To move from its humble beginnings on a few experimental farms

led by a handful of gutsy scientists and entrepreneurs to become the province of New Brunswick's largest agrifood industry is truly remarkable. Combine the value of the potato and dairy industry and you have the size of the salmon farming industry in NB.

In the past five years, the industry has reached a new level of maturity - brought on by some tough growing pains in its adolescent years - market and trade as well as disease issues. Add to that the pressure from environmental groups and governments, and farmers have come to the realization that another level of building was required - they needed a Code of Practice. A consistent set of standards for husbandry, fish health management, environmental monitoring and bio-security that would protect the viability of individual farmers and also satisfy the concerns of the general public and of the regulatory government departments.

It has taken time to build consensus on various aspects of the Code, to work with the relevant government departments, to do the necessary research and to implement the management plans. But, once again, the entrepreneurial and visionary spirit of the industry has made things happen at a remarkable rate.

In many cases, farmers are voluntarily adopting codes of practice, well before they become a regulatory requirement. Last February, representatives from salmon farming countries around the world met in London, England with representatives from NASCO, an international conservation organization, to develop a set of common principles and establish a working group for developing international guidelines for containment. Each country represented committed to developing and implementing Codes of Containment for their specific jurisdictions that matched the international guidelines. It will take time before the Codes are drafted and formalized, but long before the ink has dried on the documents, farmers will have adopted and implemented codes, often above the standard required. As sound business people, they know they have to protect their animals in order to protect their bottom line. And governments are not the only ones to have an impact on the professionalism of the industry.

As farmers develop and adopt their own standards, like the Fish Health Surveillance Program and the Fish Health Database that is being developed right here at the Atlantic Veterinary College or the Environmental Management Plan, financial institutions and insurance companies are building those standards into their own approval process.

These internal developments and system of checks and balances do not supercede the need for government regulations, but they add another level of professionalism to this growing industry. Industry needs government to set clear standards and to fulfill their auditing mandate.

The next step in this construction phase is the building of an image. And we do have to focus on our image. Farmers and the people in the industry are frustrated by bad press. Governments and investors are sensitive to negative media and so is the consumer.

Both the fisherman and the farmer are treated with dignity and deep respect. Both have been around for centuries, not just decades. Their work is surrounded by a mystique and culture of the land and the sea, a culture of song writing and of storytelling. There's something so sacred about their work that when governments mismanage fish stocks or try to cut back on veterinary and research services, there is a public outcry.

The image of the farmer and fisherman is that of weather beaten faces, work-worn hands and food on the table. The focus isn't on the manure pile or the veterinarian prescribing medication or the waste from the slaughterhouse.

We need to do the same for the Aquaculture industry. Focus on the people who have jobs in the same coastal and rural communities where fishing and farming jobs are becoming scarce. Focus on the safe, healthy food products we produce. Remind people that the salmon they buy in the grocery store or order in a restaurant was raised on a farm. Focus on the thriving towns and villages along this country's coastline. Focus on the professional expertise of scientists, veterinarians, researchers and managers of international support companies who are moving into these communities. Focus on the companies that are sponsoring school projects, sports clubs and conservation initiatives.

I believe we are doing a good job of building grass roots support. In New Brunswick we are making presentations to town and village councils and to community groups. These presentations are opportunities to tell the industry's story, but also provide town councilors and people in the communities a forum for asking questions. Two town councils have adopted resolutions in support of the continued development of the industry. The resolution and the facts are now part of the public record.

And they become the foundation for important collaborations between the Aquaculture industry and the other users of the marine resource. In Grand Manan, salmon farmers have joined forces with the commercial fishery to find a solution to the lack of adequate wharf facilities. Much of the user conflict in our coastal zones comes from having to compete for limited and inadequate infrastructure. Wharves are a prime example. There aren't enough of them, they're under funded and often in poor repair. The Aquaculture industry is big business - that means big boats and big trucks, heavy equipment that needs to operate from safe wharves. Bio-security concerns and strict disinfection protocols mean that farmers need separate facilities for loading feed and smolts than for unloading harvested fish. Inadequate, or barricaded wharves mean that these measures have to be compromised and the risk of disease transfer is too great.

At least at the community level, this message is coming through. I meet with the Grand Manan working group next week to finalize a business case for the need for wharf repairs and the upgrading of a facility that will serve both industries.

At this level, I think we are making progress.

But we need to do more. And this is where the professionals come in. The industry has to invest in developing communications strategies and advertising campaigns. Our critics,

the environmental lobbyists, spend a large part of their budgets on communications. If we want the messages the public reads, sees and hears to be balanced, we will have to do the same.

We also need clear signals from government. As we have heard over and over again this weekend, we need clear regulations and guidelines. We need government departments to talk to one another - harmonize regulations and policies. i.e. In NB, we have been without a Site Allocation Policy for 3 years. We have been told that one is imminent. But we are also hearing about the CEEA Workbook. DFO officials in NB tell us they may stop all applications even though the province approves. In the meantime, farmers are spending thousands of dollars on pre-site assessment work, hoping that the information they're gathering for their site applications, once application procedure is reopened, is the right information. While all the bureaucratic wheels are turning ever so slowly, business plans, budgets, equipment purchase, hatchery and weather timelines keep on moving ahead. We need to synchronize the two somehow, or companies will go out of business.

We need to shed the parochial, poor provinces image and let the world know that the people of Atlantic Canada are leading the way in developing one of the most vibrant, dynamic and promising food industries of the future.