

Northern Aquaculture chairman applauds Ont. review of industry

by Michael Erskine

MANITOULIN-If you want to get a quick rise out of aquaculture pioneer Mike Meeker, three words will generally do it: Georgian Bay Association. Mr. Meeker refuses to temper his outrage over what he says is blatant misinformation being put forward by the environmental group.

"They worship at the skirts of the Great God Suzuki," said Mr. Meeker, who said he has found himself in a position of trying to counter a well-organized, well-financed, media-savvy organization. Surely he does not want to be quoted on that. "Go ahead," he responded. "I am tired of getting beat up by people who claim to be concerned about the scientific evidence and then turn around and ignore it when it doesn't suit them."

The Northern Ontario Aquaculture Association (NOAA) rep took aim at the aquaculture industry's gadflies on the subject of public opinion. "They are very clever at implying, like they did in a recent story in the Toronto Star, that they have the support of most of the cottagers on the Great Lakes," he said. "I have had hundreds of people through my operation, and that includes a lot of cottagers, and I have not found that to be the case at all. Once people discover the truth they tend to be very supportive of our efforts."

While in the past aquaculture representatives have often railed against government ministries such as the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) and Oceans and Fisheries Canada (DFO) for what they characterized as placing obstacles in the way of the industry, there has been a recent sea change in how the industry views at least one ministry these days.

"If Donna Cansfield were to run for prime minister I would vote for her," quipped Mr. Meeker, who claims to be apolitical and non-partisan as a personal rule. The Natural Resources minister has obviously made a deep impression on the voluble fish farmer. "I like that she does what she says she will do," he said. "It kinda renews your faith in the system."

Mr. Meeker asserts that there has not been a significant change in support from government, but rather that the big difference lies in voiced support being translated into action. "We have had very positive reactions from government officials and ministers," he said. "But the difference is that Minister Cansfield has the administrative moxy to actually get the bureaucracy to moving. She is doing what she is supposed to do."

Mr. Meeker noted that although overseeing the aquaculture industry is just a small part of the minister's job, he feels that she has done an outstanding job in finding out what the facts are as well as she could.

"The point is there are no major issues here regarding the industry," said Mr. Meeker. "We, as an industry, have been very diligent in ensuring that environmental concerns are addressed. We need clean, healthy water if we are going to produce a quality product."

The concerns expressed by environmentalists about water quality are the same concerns as those of the aquaculture industry, noted Mr. Meeker. "Except we are actually doing something constructive to ensure that not only will there be fish to eat that people in Ontario are used to being able to eat, but also that the jobs to be had in raising those fish are right here in this province," he said.

Mr. Meeker said that, after a hiatus of several years, he is now once again fielding calls from young people interested in careers in the aquaculture industry.

"Listen," he said. "This is a tough business, it involves a lot of hard work, outside, in all kinds of hard weather. You are not going to get rich at it, but if you work hard, have a little bit of luck and stick at it, you can make a decent living."

The fish farmer pointed out that while the spectre of shore-to-shore fish cages stretching from Killarney across the North Shore is constantly being placed before the public, the truth of the geography belies that possibility.

"There is room for growth, lots of growth," said Mr. Meeker. "But there is a definite sustainable limit." The essential criteria for a good fish cage operation, especially near shore, places strict limits on how many can be put in place. "There just are not that many good sites," he said.

Mr. Meeker knows a lot about which he speaks when it comes to innovation and research in the aquaculture industry. The province recognized his efforts last year with the regional Premier's Award for Agri-Food Innovation Excellence for his all-natural local product, Meeker's Magic Mix.

"Meeker's Aquaculture, in conjunction with NOAA's research efforts, developed the environmentally friendly compost by utilizing byproducts from Ontario's aquaculture and forestry industries," said Karen Tracey, executive director of the NOAA. The result? "A quality fish compost with high nutrient value for lawns, gardens, flower beds, crops and re-greening projects," said Ms. Tracey. "This product ensures that all waste from aquaculture operations is fully utilized.

Ms. Tracey also pointed out that there have been five new jobs created on the West End of Manitoulin directly as a result of this new enterprise.

Ms. Tracey noted that "the NOAA is taking a proactive approach regarding the importance of aquaculture for providing a healthy food that takes the pressure of the declining wild stocks," adding: "You can't save wild fish by eating them."

The NOAA presented Minister Cansfield with the final report of the Ontario Aquaculture Strategy in Toronto. Following the presentation of the report, the aquaculture team invited Minister Cansfield to a Seafood Road Show extravaganza event that was also in Toronto the same week. "Minister Cansfield not only attended," said Ms. Tracey, "she brought three staff people with her."

The food event was organized by the Canadian Aquaculture Industry Alliance (Ms. Tracey also sits on the board of directors of CAIA) to provide a fresh profile for the industry as a whole, but with "a focus on the wide range of high quality, delicious seafood products that are grown with right here in Canada," said Ms. Tracey.

"The NOAA and government are researching the establishment of a Cage Aquaculture Innovation Demonstration Farm project to develop and evaluate innovative technologies and practices designed to enhance the social and environmental sustainability of the agri-food sector," said Ms. Tracey. "Over the coming year the NOAA will be the industry lead to develop a comprehensive plan to establish this new farm in northern Lake Huron to validate and demonstrate alternative technologies including: nutrient management strategies, fallowing, feeding strategies, and new cage construction."

The NOAA has recently hired two staff to assist the aquaculture industry in the North, said Ms. Tracey. Todd Gordon is the research and development coordinator, and his job will be to report and provide advice to the executive director and the NOAA board of directors on matters of the environment, science and sector R&D. Mr. Gordon has a Masters in science from the University of Guelph.

"To meet the needs of our association mandate, the NOAA also hired Manitoulin resident Lori Thompson as our new executive assistant," continued Ms. Tracey. Lori has been a welcome asset to the NOAA, bringing a strong background in office administration, bookkeeping, record management, public liaising, communications and desktop publishing. The recently reconstructed NOAA website at www.ontarioaquaculture.com is a direct result of Lori's efforts."

Ms Tracey went on to say that the NOAA is very pleased to welcome both Todd and Lori to their office at 13 Worthington Street in Little Current. "An open invitation is extended to anyone interested in learning more about our growing, essential agri-food industry and would like to meet our staff, to call or stop by our office," added Ms. Tracey.