



Fish farms dangled as small-town economy boosters

By BRYAN MEADOWS

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Government policy and guidelines continue to thwart expansion of the fish farming industry in Northern Ontario – an industry that could help revive struggling rural and single-industry towns, aquaculture industry insiders claim.

The Northern Ontario Aquaculture Association says there is “excellent potential” for slow, carefully planned expansion of the industry in the North.

That’s despite the closure of Northwestern Ontario’s only fish farm near Atikokan last year. The Snow Lake Fish Farm, located in the abandoned Steep Rock iron ore mine pit, was one of two fish-rearing cage sites north of Manitoulin Island. The other is in the Adam’s Mine pit.

NOAA program co-ordinator Karen Tracey said Monday that the aquaculture industry has been requesting “clear and concise” government policy on cage culture over the past two decades.

“For the cage culture industry to thrive and maintain its economic viability, regulatory agencies will need to make a strategic commitment to address institutional barriers and enable its future growth,” she said.

While the Ministry of Natural Resources is “working on” harmonizing guidelines for aquaculture licences, Tracey said, the process was to have started two years ago and is currently about a year behind schedule.

She said most cage culture operations are located in Lake Huron with its ideal water conditions, existing infrastructure, proximity to markets and established processing plants.

Most operations started with private money due to a lack of government support, she said, adding that “when it comes to agricultural funds for farming, aquaculture is not considered farming.”

“(It’s) one of the many legislative mysteries that the industry has faced since conception,” she said.

While there is potential for fish farming in Northwestern Ontario, Tracey said, “I would not encourage any entrepreneurs to look at fish farming in the North until policy has been established by the regulatory agencies.”

An NOAA-commissioned study last spring on the economic impacts of the cage culture industry in Ontario, found that it generates almost \$51 million in annual sales and supports 229 full-time jobs.

“Not only are we producing a product that is naturally rich in Omega-3 essential fatty acids, we are making significant economic contributions to Ontario’s economy,” Tracey said.

Association president Mike Meeker said fish farm operators “are wholeheartedly

committed” to taking the lead in science-based research and development initiatives. “We want to ensure environmental responsibility for today and continued accountability for the future of our industry,” Meeker said, adding, “Operators are passionate about seeing the industry succeed, and believe the industry has excellent potential for slow, carefully planned expansion.”

The study found that the aquaculture industry helps diversify local economies, provides stable employment and important economic benefits for rural communities across Ontario, and produces a healthy food source.

The cage culture industry sustains employment in the Northern Ontario communities of Little Current, Espanola, Manitowaning, Kagawong, Gore Bay, Mindemoya, Evansville, Val Caron, Parry Sound, Sudbury and North Bay.

Closer to home, Atikokan’s Snow Lake Fish Farm was established in 1989 by David Lindsay, who created Atikokan Fish Co-operative Inc., a workers’ co-op that helped turn the former Steep Rock pit into a “green,” job-creating asset. During its peak, the fish farm sold more than half a million pounds of rainbow trout to Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, Toronto and New York.

It closed last year.

“(The owner) just couldn’t make a go of it, I guess,” Atikokan Mayor Dennis Brown said Monday.

Transporting fish fry safely from southern Ontario hatcheries, shipping costs, and a lack of opportunity for staff development and training challenged the operation.

Added to that is NOAA’s concern about a need for “functional government regulations and guidelines” which are preventing cage culture operations from expanding existing sites and accessing new sites.

“The Ontario cage culture industry is being held back,” Tracey said. “Competitors from other regions of Canada and international producers are gaining a competitive advantage over what could be produced here in Ontario.”

Meanwhile, the federal government last month announced \$70 million over five years to develop a sustainable aquaculture industry, including an initiative to streamline regulations and provide strategic investments in research and innovation.

Canadian Aquaculture Industry Alliance executive director Ruth Salmon said “aquaculture is the solution” to meeting the world’s growing demand for fish products while sustainable harvests of wild stocks reach their limits or have been exceeded in many areas of the world.

The alliance says aquaculture could provide as many as 47,000 new jobs in an industry that is socially, economically and environmentally sustainable.

A vibrant aquaculture sector will serve as a boon to areas where traditional economies have been shrinking, says the industry.