

# Fish farmers: Cost of raising fish on dry land prohibitive

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Hauling Nova Scotia's and New Brunswick's salmon farms out of the water and onto dry land would cost more than the country's entire salmon farming industry is worth, say critics of Nova Scotia's new aquaculture strategy.

As part of the Nova Scotia government's newly released approach to bolstering fish farming, \$60,000 is being put aside to study the feasibility of making "closed containment" a bigger part of the province's aquaculture industry.

Enclosing fish in floating containers on land-based farms to minimize their impact on nearby waters is nothing new to the province.

At the moment, fish are grown in some two dozen closed-containment facilities around the province.

But those on-land tanks tend to hold less-popular species such as halibut, Arctic char and sea bass, with a few being used as hatcheries where salmon smolts mature until they are ready for sea cages.

Most salmon farming, which accounts for 80 per cent of the revenues in the province's \$45-million aquaculture sector, occurs in pens in waters along the coast.

Putting all of salmon being farmed in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick waters into onshore container systems would require a land-based equivalent of 8,000 football fields, said Pam Parker, executive-director of the Atlantic Canada Fish Farming Association.

(Nova Scotia's aquaculture industry is about one-quarter the size of New Brunswick's.)

As well, Parker said, raising salmon onshore fish farming requires expensive pipes, filters and flushing systems to remove wastes and restore oxygen levels.

The upshot: moving the region's aquaculture industry onshore would cost farmers \$1.5 billion in addition to the price of the land.

The extra cost makes it prohibitively expensive, said Paul Merlin who farms halibut, Arctic char and salmon smolt onshore near Advocate Harbour.

“With the current technology, the margins are just too low,” Merlin said in an interview.

He said that growing halibut onshore works because he gets \$8.50 per pound of the fish. Salmon garners growers only \$3.50 per pound.

A 2010 Fisheries and Oceans Canada study into using closed-containment systems in British Columbia put farmers return on investment at 54 per cent for sea pens.

Closed-containment systems gave owners a return on investment of just two per cent.

There are other issues, said Brian Blanchard, general manager of Scotian Halibut Ltd. in Clark’s Harbour.

The iffy economics of onshore facilities mean that owners have to grow more fish to make ends meet.

The Fisheries and Oceans study, for example, calculated that, on average, closed-containment systems stocked 50 kilograms of fish per cubic metre of water.

Sea pens stocked an average of 15 kilograms of fish per cubic metre of water.

“They’re basically heavily concentrated feedlots,” said Blanchard. “It’s inhumane.”

Critics say that the onshore farms also use more energy.

Although they generally laud the direction of the government’s aquaculture strategy, they question whether closed-containment systems will really help rural communities.

If fish can be grown on land, the logic goes, they don’t have to be grown in Nova Scotia’s coastal communities.

“It’s like taking a factory in Trenton and moving it to Mexico because it’s cheaper,” said Blanchard, whose company raises halibut smolts that it sells to growers in Norway.