

Fish farming industry requires deft stewardship



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There will soon be more fish farms in Nova Scotia — no doubt.

It's now a matter of the provincial government determining how that can happen in an economically feasible manner without harming the environment.

Fisheries and Aquaculture Minister Sterling Belliveau says he wants to triple the value of the aquaculture business in Nova Scotia because he views fish farming as an opportunity to provide high-paying, year-round jobs in rural areas where jobs are needed most.

That's why Belliveau's department has come up with a new strategy that aims to take "a balanced approach" to developing Nova Scotia's aquaculture sector.

Fish farming contributes about \$50 million a year to the Nova Scotia economy, creating about 750 jobs. But Nova Scotia has fallen behind some other provinces that have a more aggressive approach to developing their aquaculture potential, the government says.

Statistics from 2010, the most recent available, show that British Columbia's aquaculture business is a \$536.7-million industry, employing 5,960 people. New Brunswick's is worth about \$168.7 million and employs 2,420. Newfoundland and Labrador has been slow to build its aquaculture sector but it now contributes \$116.8 million to the economy, employing 405. Prince Edward Island has a \$30.6-million aquaculture industry employing 1,165 workers.

Critics of the aquaculture industry, and there appear to be many, are concerned about a number of issues, such as the potential for fish farms to spread disease to the wild fish population.

There are also worries about the use of antibiotics in farm-raised fish, substances that could affect consumers. And other people complain that fish farms spoil their view of the ocean from their home or cottage.

Belliveau, in a recent meeting with The Chronicle Herald's editorial board, indicated his belief that a new aquaculture strategy would be able to address critics' concerns and the industry's needs.

One of the big issues for the industry is how much energy it takes to operate a fish farm. Farms, especially those that use pens on land — the preferred method for people concerned about the environment — require a great deal of energy, Belliveau says.

It is possible that renewable energy projects could be teamed up with aquaculture operations to reduce the cost and carbon footprint of aquaculture projects, he says.

Instead of committing to allowing fish farming in pens on land only, the government is investigating whether "closed containment," which would put the fish pens behind permanent barriers, could be used in Nova Scotia.

In theory, such a system would protect the natural environment from direct exposure to disease, which seems to plague fish farms from time to time.

The government is also talking about improving regulation of the aquaculture business, and it is committed to hiring another veterinarian to double the number of government vets working with the fish farming sector.

But the changes also come at a price, and the cost of fish farming is on the rise, Belliveau admits. He says he expects small and medium-size local businesses will start aquaculture projects, and foreign investors will find opportunities here.

The payoff for the provincial economy will come when the industry grows to a size that allows it to support businesses that service aquaculture — that's when the number of jobs indirectly related to the industry will grow significantly.