

N.S. invests \$25 million in fish farm

Investment in aquaculture company will bring up to 400 jobs, Dexter says



Premier Darrell Dexter looks on as Glen Cooke, president of Cooke Aquaculture, announces the funding for Cooke Aquaculture. (BRIAN MEDEL / Yarmouth Bureau)

SHELBURNE — It wasn't only warm sunshine on the first full day of summer that put smiles on faces here Thursday.

Premier Darrell Dexter's announcement that hundreds of new jobs would be coming to the Shelburne area and other parts of Nova Scotia had folks cheering.

Dexter's government announced a \$25-million investment to help Cooke Aquaculture grow in the province.

Cooke already employs 140 Nova Scotians.

"And with this investment, the company will create up to 400 new jobs," Dexter told those invited to the announcement at the Shelburne Harbour Yacht Club.

"This is an important opportunity to provide rural Nova Scotia with hundreds of good, high-value, long-term jobs, and we have planned to make the most of it."

Of the \$25 million, \$16 million is in the form of a 10-year, interest-bearing repayable loan and \$9 million is in the form of a forgivable loan.

There's potential for an additional \$4 million to be forgiven, based on research and development, a government briefing document states.

Dexter said there are concerns about aquaculture practices, and the province will ensure that the industry is well-managed and sustainable. A strategy for aquaculture development was released in May.

“Many people question whether or not we should be farming the oceans,” said Glenn Cooke, president and CEO of Cooke Aquaculture, headquartered in Blacks Harbour, N.B.

“My family has been farming the ocean for more than 25 years and the sky hasn’t fallen,” he said.

Some people advocate growing fish in enclosed, self-contained units on land, where chemicals and fish waste won’t affect the environment.

“It is far too simplistic to suggest that we simply move our fish farms from the ocean to land-based tank farms,” Cooke said.

“This would create far more problems than it would solve and is not sustainable.

“We know the challenges posed by the environment, and we have invested in the right technology to withstand the winter conditions, hurricane-force storms and temperature fluctuations.”

Cooke said his company has learned from experience and is committed to continuous improvement.

“We are all Maritimers who care about our people, our neighbours and our communities,” he said.

Cooke said he has a responsibility to create and sustain a healthy business as well as thriving communities and families.

“Thank you for accepting this opportunity and for demonstrating your support so publicly,” he said to the people of Shelburne County.

“Thank you for your signs on the lawns.”

He said new ways of doing things must first make good business sense but also environmental sense and fish-health sense.

Shelburne Mayor Al Delaney said Dexter’s announcement was great news.

“As a (town) councillor, I became acquainted with Cooke six years ago and I was impressed with their vision for Shelburne.

“As mayor, I am proud to say that my council and I have supported the Cooke initiative from the outset.”

The fish-farming company understands rural family values, the mayor said.

But not everyone was allowed into the yacht club to hear the premier’s announcement. Police kept certain people at bay, including those carrying signs opposing open-pen aquaculture.

One of those protesters was Ray Rogers, a professor of environmental studies at York University in Toronto who is originally from Little Harbour, Shelburne County.

“Many people are happy but many more have concerns and are not being listened to or taken seriously,” Rogers said.

“Certain kinds of corporate interests are not being listened to. We feel like there’s a kind of policy monopoly that’s operating behind the scenes. There’s widespread frustration across the whole province with regard to public input into this whole process.

“This is a perfect example of what’s wrong with the situation. ... We’re not allowed even to hear what’s being said.”

Protesters say Cooke Aquaculture doesn’t need the huge outlay of taxpayer money.

“These guys are making a fortune,” Rogers said. “They don’t need our money. They’re doing very well themselves.”

New projects that are part of Cooke’s \$150-million expansion of its Nova Scotia operations are a salmon processing plant near Shelburne that is expected to employ 120, a \$12-million freshwater salmon hatchery at Mink Cove, Digby County, that will create 20 jobs, a feed mill expansion in Truro that may result in the hiring of another 30 workers or more, and expanded farm operations in Shelburne and Digby counties that are to employ another 120 or more. The province provided the job estimates.

Matthew Miller, general manager at Northeast Nutrition, said construction at the Truro feed mill will take two to three years and increase capacity.

“Obviously this is a very big project,” he said.

Speaking in her home riding of Truro-Bible Hill, New Democrat MLA Lenore Zann said the announcement means good things for her district, the province and the fishing industry at large.

Zann, who is noted for her concern for the environment, said she believes the province and Cooke Aquaculture are moving forward in a prudent and sustainable manner for both the economy and the environment.

“I wouldn’t be here doing this if I didn’t think there was hope that we could do it in a sustainable fashion,” she said.

Opposition party leaders offered no support for the province’s investment Thursday.

Liberal Leader Stephen McNeil said Cooke is already a successful company that recently tried to take over Clearwater, so it doesn’t appear to be short of money.

“I’m concerned about the fact, here we go again giving away forgivable loans to wealthy, large companies,” McNeil said. “What about investing in the small businesses of the South Shore to create long-term viable economic opportunity?”

McNeil also said he doesn't think the government should approve any new aquaculture sites until there's a review of regulations to ensure the environment is protected.

Progressive Conservative Leader Jamie Baillie doesn't support the investment either, calling it a "terrible knee-jerk reaction to growing unemployment on the South Shore."

Baillie said he wants the province to have a sustainable aquaculture industry, but open-pen aquaculture needs more regulation.

"They are putting the cart before the horse," he said of the government. "They refuse to properly regulate open-pen fish farming based on science. The wrong way to go is to shovel ever more money at a project without a detailed and strict plan for regulation."

Cooke Aquaculture was in the news this week because of a suspected outbreak of infectious salmon anemia at one of its six operating farms in Nova Scotia.

There was an earlier outbreak this year at a Cooke farm in Shelburne Harbour that resulted in several hundred thousand farmed salmon being destroyed.

With David Jackson and Michael Gorman, staff reporters