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 Intelligence

Stubbornness helps aquaculture persevere in northeastern U.S.

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By Steven Hedlund

At Northeast Aquaculture Conference, stakeholders speak of challenges regarding social acceptance



Roughly 400 individuals attended Northeast Aquaculture Conference at the Omni Hotel in Providence, R.I.

In the eight coastal northeastern U.S. states – from Delaware to Maine – aquaculture operates at various states of maturity. In Delaware, the industry is like an infant trying to take its first steps. In Rhode Island, Maine and Massachusetts, the industry is like a teenager primed for growth yet frustrated by the realities of adulthood.

But there's no lack of motivation and determination for the 550-plus individuals who attended Northeast Aquaculture Conference at the Omni Hotel in Providence, R.I., earlier this month. The biennial three-day conference kicked off with a plenary featuring aquaculture representatives from Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine. They painted a picture mixed with optimism and frustration.

Despite the differences in their respective outlooks, their commonalities are numerous, and mostly positive. Consumers' seemingly insatiable appetite for raw oysters is driving aquaculture growth, or at least potential new growth, in each state. For instance, the value of Rhode Island's annual farmed seafood crop increased 30-fold from 1999 to 2016.

However, bureaucracy, the arduous and costly permitting process and particularly the lack of public acceptance – the not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) mentality – are hindrances that linger in each state.

It's been almost four years since former Delaware Governor Jack Markell signed a bill to permit commercial shellfish aquaculture in the state's

inland bays, and in the spring the Division of Fish & Wildlife will finally begin accepting shellfish aquaculture lease applications.

"It's difficult timing," said John Ewart, an aquaculture specialist with Delaware Sea Grant. "Maybe we'll be able to get something in the water for the 2017 growing season."

The adoption of Delaware's new shellfish aquaculture program and the reintroduction of leases has been met with public resistance. "They're not against aquaculture. They're just against aquaculture in their backyard," said Ewart, referring to two local homeowners groups. "I like to call them the NIMBY people."

As frustrating as it may be for those so passionate about aquaculture and its potential to provide food and employment to rural parts of a state, there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

From 1999 to 2016, the number of acres dedicated to aquaculture in Rhode Island jumped from 25 to 270, while the value of the state's annual farmed seafood crop mushroomed from about \$200,000 to a projected \$6 million. Oysters are Rhode Island's No. 1 farmed seafood crop by far. There are 70 farms in the state.

"This is what Delaware can look forward to once its regulatory framework is straightened out," said Bob Rheault, an adjunct professor at the University of Rhode Island, executive director of the East Coast Shellfish Growers Association and long-time owner of Moonstone Oysters, who credited Rhode Island's success to "a few stubborn individuals."

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To the north in Maine, the number of farms is pushing 200, according to **Sebastian Belle** (https://www.aquaculturealliance.org/advocate/aquaculture-exchange-sebastian-belle/?_hstc=236403678.d73cc8a096f281d0501da72af1fe3ec7.1681021747948.1681021747948.1681021747948.1&_hssc=236403678.1.1681021747949&_hsfr= executive director of the Maine Aquaculture Association. Though about three-quarters of those farms are pre-revenue startups within the past five years, the diversity of species is impressive. A total of 24 species are farmed across 190 farms and 1,300 acres in Maine, with a farm-gate value of \$80 million to \$100 million in 2016.

"We can't grow fast enough," said Belle. "Demand [for farmed seafood] is off the charts."

In a state with a rich tradition of commercial fishing, aquaculture is no longer the "red-headed stepchild" of Maine's seafood industry; it's become trendy, added Belle.

That's no small feat in a state where rural gentrification is prevalent, according to Sam Hanes, who is part of a team studying aquaculture development in Maine as part of the University of Maine's EPSCoR SEANET project. Maine, he said, has the country's highest percentage of seasonal homeowners. "Amenity migrants have nostalgic, romantic views of the landscape and natural resource use," he said.

However, Hanes cited Maine's Damariscotta River as an area, though highly gentrified, with little public resistance to aquaculture development because aquaculture has existed there since the mid-1970s, and now aquaculture farmers are woven into the social fabric of the community.

Still, more and more people "from away" are staking ground in the oyster-rich Damariscotta River area, he said, heightening the potential for a person unfamiliar with aquaculture to push back against development. A farmer in the audience during Hanes' presentation cited the Damariscotta River Association's two-year oyster-gardening program, in which the local residents grows their own oysters for their own consumption with the help of professional farmers, as an example of the type of public outreach that farmers can get involved in.

Perhaps the quickest way to a consumer's brain is through his or her stomach. Participating in the Northeast Aquaculture Conference were representatives of Island Creek Oysters in Duxbury, Mass., and Matunuck Oyster Farm in Wakefield, R.I., both of which went from being successful farmers to successful restaurateurs and romancing the New England foodie scene.

Perry Raso, owner of Matunuck Oyster Farm and the wildly popular Matunuck Oyster Bar, agreed that a restaurant is perhaps the best way to educate the public.

Raso hasn't abandoned the "grassroots" work that helped him gain public acceptance in the first place. He acquired an education grant to take students out to the farm to increase their understanding, and, in turn, their parents' understanding, of aquaculture.

Island Creek Oysters' two restaurant concepts – Island Creek Oyster Bar and Row 34 – are also wildly popular, raising public acceptance of aquaculture in a state that, like Maine, has a rich tradition of commercial fishing, and is home to two of the country's most storied landing ports, Gloucester and New Bedford. Oysters are now Massachusetts's No. 3 seafood crop overall.

Still, "we have our NIMBY issues like everyone else," said Chris Sherman, president of Island Creek Oysters and the Massachusetts Aquaculture Association, during the plenary.

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