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Aquaculture Exchange: Tom Pickerell

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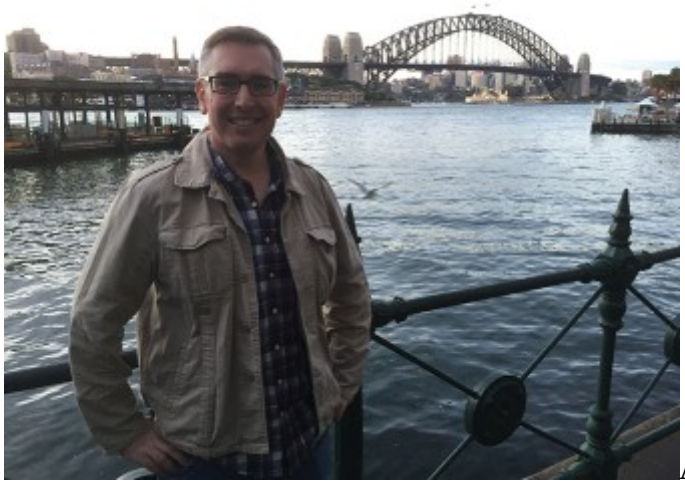
10 March 2016 James Wright

Technical director of Seafish: Aquaculture industry should have ‘moonshot’ goals



As technical director for Seafish, Tom Pickerell puts his diverse experience — including stints with government, industry and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) — to work on a daily basis. Seafish, the U.K. seafood industry authority, aims to secure a sustainable and profitable future for its stakeholders through expert guidance and support. Pickerell said aquaculture development is one of the organization’s priorities.

With crowded coastlines in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, prime fish-rearing areas are a finite resource. The region’s salmon, trout and shellfish growers, however, still see major production growth — even doubling production within five years — as realistic short-term goals. With the guidance and support of Pickerell, a former Monterey Bay Aquarium senior science manager in charge ensuring the integrity of Seafood Watch recommendations, the industry is well informed as it works toward its aspirations.

How do the people of the United Kingdom view aquaculture? Are they welcoming and supportive?

I think so. If you say aquaculture to someone in the U.K. they immediately think of salmon, for obvious reasons. It's the most popular seafood eaten, and they often think of a loch up in Scotland, rather than anywhere else. I think people would be quite surprised that the salmon they are eating in the U.K. is not all from Scotland.

Looking at some of the restrictions to the expansion of aquaculture, it does not appear to necessarily be from a lack of social license, or a lack of support from the general consumer. It's far more about access to space and the red tape or regulatory burden of actually getting a farm established.

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Having lived in North America for a couple years, it's quite a different situation there than in the U.K. Farmed seafood is not really high on the public radar. I think most would find it difficult to tell you whether the seafood they're eating is wild or farmed, and I don't think they would be that bothered by it. We're not a huge producer of aquaculture outside of salmonids. There is a healthy shellfish industry, but it's dwarfed by other countries. Mussels and oysters are often green-rated by NGOs in the U.K. as well, so there's very little negativity around them. In fact, farmed mussels are considered by many prominent environmentalists as the most sustainable source of omega-3 fatty acids.

What have been the hurdles to clear in terms of government relations? U.S. regulations, layered with local, state and federal agencies, are seen as burdensome and complicated. How is it described on your side of the pond?

There has been work done on easing the regulatory burden on aquaculture development, which in itself speaks volumes. That piece of work would not have been carried out had there not been an issue. One of the problems is multiple users. There's very few areas that are designated for aquaculture, which would be very handy. We're not a massive country; we have a long coastline, but there's a lot of use with it. We also have a water framework directive and we have a shellfish waters directive. You can only grow bivalves, for example, in areas that have a testing regime and secondly are of a sufficiently high water quality. That narrows it down because not all bodies of water are potentially suitable for farming bivalves and have the monitoring regime going on there. So that's an additional challenge in finding space.

We're looking at offshore aquaculture more and more. There's a large mussel development in Lyme Bay, on the south coast of England, that took I think 11 years for all the permissions to be in place, to actually get it up and running. That's not good, when we're talking about multi-annual national plans in the U.K. for aquaculture development and expansion, when it takes that long to take things forward. It's not because aquaculture is being stifled, but rather the range of issues that needs to be addressed by the prospective farmer and the often lack of understanding of aquaculture by the decision-makers dealing with the issue at hand.

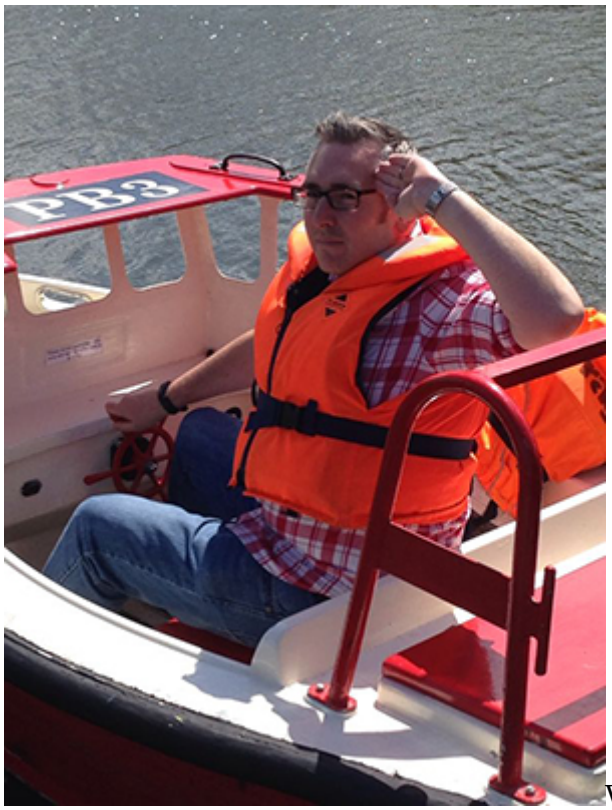
Also, look at where aquaculture actually sits in government. In Northern Ireland, England and Wales it sits firmly in fisheries. But in Scotland it actually has its own area, specific to aquaculture. That's a big point as well. I'm a former government worker. Aquaculture is often nested with fisheries. Should it be? Should it be nested with farming? I'm sure you'd have challenges there. But it's not fishing. Is it best placed in area that's dealing with such issues as quotas, the Common Fisheries Policy, etc.?

Let's talk about Seafish's Domestic Aquaculture Strategy and what its goals are. How can aquaculture expand in U.K. waters? That could mean greater volume or greater diversity in species or products.

Like I mentioned, each of the four components of the United Kingdom have inputted into the U.K. multi-annual national plan for aquaculture, which is explicit in what it's trying to achieve. The ambitions for each of the four areas were different. Wales, for example, had the bold prediction of at least doubling finfish and shellfish aquaculture by 2020. In Scotland they aimed for doubling shellfish production and increasing finfish product by 50,000 tonnes. I don't believe England gave any figures or any commentary on the targets. They simply talked

about general industry-led expansion, which was disappointing, because I think it's kind of good to have that moonshot: "We want to go there, and we're going to try our best to get there."

There's also the European Blue Growth Initiative, in which aquaculture in one of five growth areas. There's a real feeling that this is the best time to achieve growth. How can we, at Seafish, contribute to the development of these national strategies? We did some research on how Seafish can best help aquaculture and to be honest, adding technical input — about equipment or treatment — it's not for us, that's not where we can best add value. The best thing was more strategic objectives.



We have a three-year program, initially looking at four separate strategies for each of the regions. We've done a lot of foundational work in the last year. We've been looking at the economic contribution of aquaculture to the U.K. And the reason is, in a lot of the issues you're facing, you're up against someone else who might have a strong business case for why they shouldn't do something.

I'll give you an example: A lot of the plumbing in the U.K. is Victorian. And that includes the treatment works and outflows into the seawater. And the water companies know these figures down to the penny, [such as] it'll cost X million pounds, or billion pounds, to re-plumb these sewage works to stop sewage overflows going into the water. OK, so we need it clean for bathing waters and shellfish, and we have an idea of how much tourism contributes. But the figures we're using for aquaculture are production figures. It's a fraction of the amount that aquaculture actually contributes. We're doing an economic analysis to find out what this amount could be. So when we go into these discussions we can be absolutely sure to say, "expansion of aquaculture is going to be worth so much to the U.K."

We're also looking at Several and Regulating Orders. These are pretty old pieces of legislation that still work today. It's where you are given a piece of the seabed for a set period of time, normally 25 to 60 years, and it either severs the right of others to have access to it (Several Order) or allows you to manage others' access (Regulating Order). Out to 12 nautical miles [to sea], the Crown owns the seabed, apart from a few areas, like the Faversham oyster beds, where the monarch at the time actually gave it to the Town of Faversham. So if you want to do anything, you need the consent from the Crown Estates.

> We would like to see buyers of seafood adopt the GSSI process, in terms of utilizing the results, instead of just saying they'll buy certified seafood, "this scheme or equivalent." They won't need to

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We're looking at these orders to see how they can be improved, if they can be expanded, to give people the right to actually have some sense of stewardship and ownership so they can develop aquaculture further.

There has already been an English aquaculture strategy, different from the U.K. one, that was produced five years ago. Quite frankly, the key things holding back the sector are access to space, infrastructure improvements and appropriate regulations. It's not anything fundamental. Another is access to finance. A lot of aquaculture initiatives are going to take years to come to fruition. There's been many instances of on-shore aquaculture being established in the U.K., only for them to sadly die a couple of years later. One of the problems is competition. You're competing with marine finfish production from areas like Greece or Spain, where the water's warmer, with much lower costs of getting products to market size and selling it.

I had an interesting discussion at a meeting about a proposal to rear finfish — £20 a kilo was estimated to to be the breakeven point. At that meeting we found out that the same product was being sold at £7 a kilo on the market already, brought in from another farm in another European member state. You just can't compete against that. What can we rear? That's why salmon is so good in Scotland and why trout is good in England, because it works where it is. Can it be expanded? Absolutely.

What about government support for the aquaculture industry, is it strong enough? Is it a priority?

As a result of economic pressures, budgets are cutting across government. Defra (Department for Environmental, Food and Rural Affairs) also deals with floods, and we had a lot of flooding in the U.K., and that is really a priority. We are likely to be faced with decreasing levels of support from government, not necessarily due to a lack of interest, I think it's to do with a lack of resources in terms of budgets or staff. There's plenty other areas that will be suffering, so I'm not whining or wagging fingers. It's the situation that we have to deal with. Seafish is trying to look at that and see where we can step in and assist. One of the big challenges is the regulations. What can be done outside of the decision-making family, the government, to make this process easier? The precautionary approach is often used to say "no." It's easier to say no, there's less chance of you getting in trouble or bother. The precautionary approach is a good coverall. That's terribly sad.

We are firm believers in seafood being the means to address the protein gap going forward. The population is increasing, there is going to be a protein gap. Seafood has got to be the solution. Wild fisheries are going to contribute a small increase. So the rest of it is going to come from aquaculture. It's a global commodity that's traded, but what can the United Kingdom's contribution be? How do we do that? How do we make real world change? There's only so much darting around the outside that you can do.

The key area has got to be the regulatory burden and making it favorable. There's got to be this consideration of farming the seas. There has to be balance; there have to be areas set aside for food production as there are areas put aside for conservation.

Tell me about Seafish's informational resources for buyers, like the Risk Assessment for Sourcing Seafood tool.

RASS is for wild-catch only at the minute but we are developing aquaculture content. RASS is a tool that doesn't tell people what to do; that's not our job. It enables commercial buyers to decide whether or not to buy something based on their own CSR (corporate and social responsibility) policies. Essentially, we measure the risk of a nasty NGO getting on your roof.

When I was at Seafood Watch, we were having discussions with a big retailer that was desperate to use Seafood Watch. But they were struggling because all the open-sea farmed salmon recs were red. Of course, that was one of their biggest sellers. I thought, "Is this helpful?" They were looking to do the best. "What is the best-rated salmon? We'll buy that." You can't because it's red. "What's the best red?" No, they're all red. It was almost like being constrained by dogma. This is where RASS comes from.

For aquaculture in RASS, we can't go to every single farm and rate it. No one is wanting us to do that. The other side of that, is it's no use for us to prepare a risk assessment on a country or region, because you as a buyer are buying from a farm or farms, not buying from a region. What we're going to be doing is assessing the risks associated with a form of farming that NGOs, and therefore consumers that are influenced by NGOs, are going to be concerned about. For something like salmon sea lice is one of the risks. We've got to find out the risks associated with this, what other mitigations are out there and how you, as a buyer, can make a conscious decision. Then we can link to certification schemes that are out there for a particular species. If you want to buy salmon, these are the risks associated and this is how the schemes address those risks. Ultimately we'd like to link it with GSSI.

Perfect segue to my last question: GSSI should be releasing results of its benchmarking tool for certification standards soon. What are your hopes for GSSI and what role have you played in developing the tool?

I was the vice chair of the expert working group for process. So, the group that looked at components A and B, management of the scheme and the governance of the certification, with C being fisheries and D being aquaculture.

There's a couple of schemes going through it, the first out of the blocks. It takes a little time to get the process going but there should be some public consultations on the first schemes to be looked at, any minute now. That will be fantastic. In terms of our hopes for it, we've committed to GSSI, we totally believe in it. I've got two staff available for benchmark committees. Going forward, we would like to see buyers of seafood adopt the GSSI process, in terms of utilizing the results, instead of just saying they'll buy certified seafood, "this scheme or equivalent." They won't need to say that anymore because of GSSI. It opens up the landscape and reduces confusion. Really looking forward to what the next phase could be.

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Aquaculture Exchange: Barry Costa-Pierce, UNE

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The Global Aquaculture Alliance will honor seafood procurement expert Bill Herzig with a Lifetime Achievement Award during its annual GOAL conference. He talked to the Advocate about top-to-bottom commitment to sustainability and the ambitious lobster aquaculture project he spearheaded in Malaysia with Darden Restaurants.

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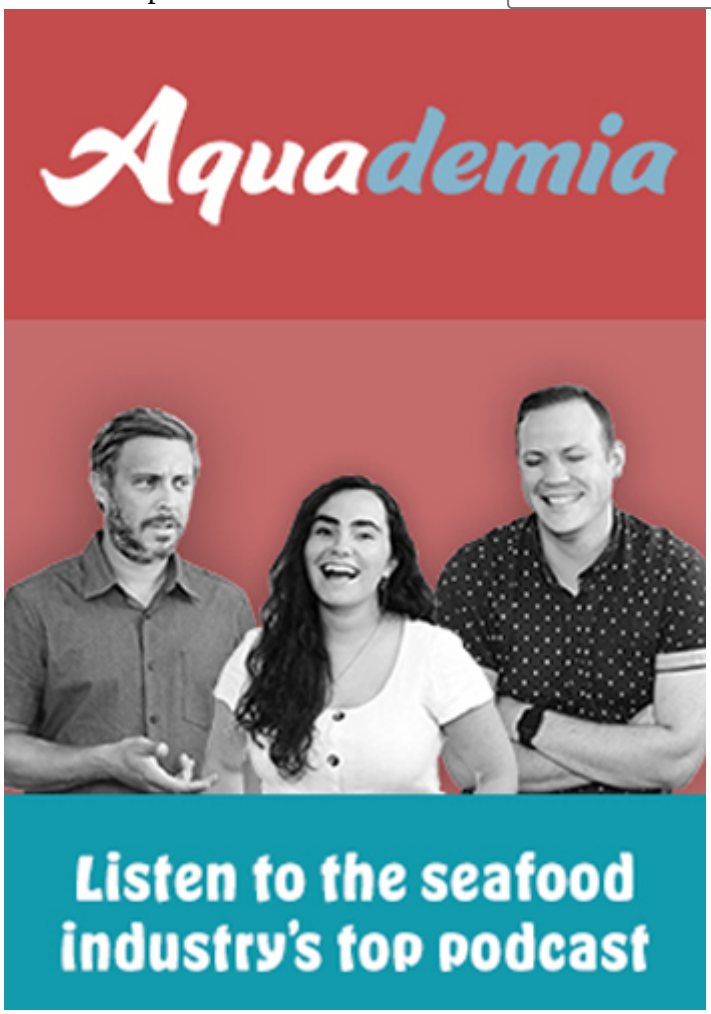

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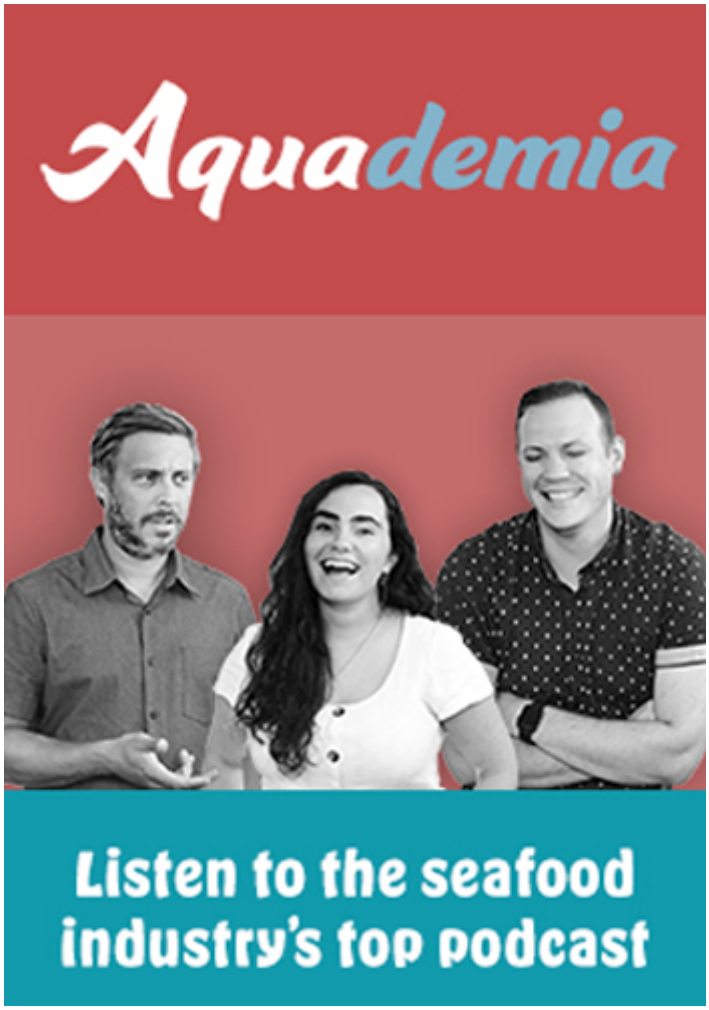

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