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Intelligence

Location matters most for newest Maine RAS venture

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By James Wright

Whole Oceans, the second land-based salmon farm announced for the state this year, may not be the last



Whole Oceans plans to build a 5,000-metric-ton land-based salmon farm in Bucksport, Maine, along the Penobscot River, with goals of scaling up in the future. Artist rendering provided by Whole Oceans.

With Maine on the verge of becoming the nerve center for land-based salmon farming in the United States, a leader at one of the new business ventures recently spoke to a gathering at the northeastern state's flagship university to inform them of his group's ambitions and field any questions.

Ben Willauer, director of corporate development for Whole Oceans, laid out plans the brand-new company has this year for breaking ground on a recirculating aquaculture system (RAS) in Bucksport, Maine. It's the second such project announced this year, following Norway-based Nordic Aquafarms, which plans to construct its RAS facility on a 40-acre lot in Belfast, only about a half-hour's drive to the south of Bucksport on U.S. Route 1. Each operation would be among the world's largest RAS facilities.

Presenting to a full classroom at the Senator George S. Mitchell Center for Sustainability Solutions at the University of Maine in Orono, Maine, Willauer emphasized the nascent business' local roots and its hopes to become a trusted neighbor and economic engine for the rural coastal community. Willauer emphasized that he and other leaders behind the venture are Mainers.

"If you are a stakeholder in your investment, there is a different attitude you'll have about the decisions that shape your communities," he said. "Our process is driven by an ethical and personal love for the Penobscot River, which will be the water source for a facility that Willauer said will produce 5,000 metric tons of Atlantic salmon annually.

It will need some 400 million gallons of water from the river to operate, a level that Willauer said will not infringe upon current needs in Bucksport. He also recognized the importance the river holds to native populations in the area.

"We want to act in the most transparent way, as stewards of the land. We see this as their river," he said. "We want to be good neighbors."

The Whole Oceans leadership team – much like that of Nordic Aquafarms before it – has not voiced any criticism regarding the practice of farming salmon in ocean-based net pens. But each has stated that bringing farms on land circumvents a number of obstacles that net-operators face, most recently seen in the state of Washington, on the Pacific coast.

With this dynamic in mind, Willauer talked of the "massive growth potential" for land-based aquaculture, especially if a facility like the one they plan to construct repurposes existing infrastructure. Whole Oceans' facility will exist on the site of a former paper mill, and Willauer said he hopes that former mill employees will embrace the opportunity to work with them.



Ben Willauer of Whole Oceans presented his company's plans to build a large-scale land-based salmon farm in Maine, at the University of Maine earlier this month. Photo by James Wright.

"This is a model for mill redevelopment," he said, adding that Bucksport is a "community looking forward, not backward." Following a recent public meeting in the town, Willauer said he received more than 50 letters of support from throughout the community.

Facing questions from faculty and students at the university – particularly regarding the about the farm's various inputs and outputs, such as the feed the fish will be raised on – Willauer promised transparency and traceability. And while he did not yet know what the final feed formulation would be, he promised that any interested party will be able to find that out.

"We will be able to identify exactly what our fish consume, the chemistry of the water and the history of the broodstock with in a strict, highly monitored, bio-secure environment," he said, adding that Whole Oceans will look to monetize as many byproducts – fish trimmings, oils and blood – as possible.

This is a model for mill redevelopment.

A land-based fish farm has environmental advantages, Willauer said, but Whole Oceans' biggest edge will be its location, just a few hours' drive from Boston, Mass., one of the nation's major seafood hubs. Ninety-five percent of the U.S. farmed salmon supply, he noted, is imported, giving a domestic salmon product a distinct advantage in terms of carbon footprint.

"Seafood is the second-largest natural resource deficit in the United States. It's a national security issue," the former financial services provider said, citing recent comments from U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross, who questioned the safety of imported seafood, which accounts for more than 90 percent of the U.S. supply.

While there might be significant debate about net-pen salmon farming and its impacts on the environment, Willauer said there's no debate about how difficult it is to grow that business in the United States.

Land-based aquaculture, on the other hand, is attracting investors' attention, and Willauer added that he's heard talk of a third RAS salmon project in Maine. While he didn't offer any further details, he stressed that Maine, with its "remarkable research and development" capabilities, has a great opportunity chance to lead RAS development, and he welcomed the prospect of multiple players.

"This industry will be here for the next 100 years and beyond," he said.

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