

Ellsworth American
Aquaculture
Blue Hill Bay Salmon Farmer Turns to Mussels
By Aaron Porter

MOUNT DESERT — Erick Swanson is changing fish but not farms.

The Mount Desert Island fish farmer said Monday he's going to shift his efforts from salmon to mussels starting in 2005.

As the owner of Trumpet Island Salmon Farm and Acadia Aquaculture, Swanson has operated a salmon farm off Hardwood Island in Blue Hill Bay since 1993. He has pursued another salmon growing site in the bay since the late 1990s. He seemed to be making some progress in that direction when the State Department of Marine Resources renewed his Hardwood Island lease and granted him a new 30-acre lease off Tinker Island on Oct. 5.

However, those decisions to grant leases to Swanson for those stretches of state water have been challenged in Kennebec County Superior Court. In addition, Swanson still had to get a pollution discharge elimination permit from the Maine Department of Environmental Protection before he could grow new fish.

In spite of those immediate hurdles and a history of local opposition, Swanson insists the major factor driving him from salmon to mussels is a long-range provision of his Army Corps of Engineers permit for the salmon leases.

The provision, he said, that has forced him to change his future is the one requiring the identification of all farmed salmon as specific to their particular leases by July 2007.

Swanson said the marking provision imposed by federal fisheries services in response to the listing of some wild Atlantic salmon strains under the Endangered Species Act is impossible for him to adhere to. He said he's told the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service his concerns and gets no response.

"If they don't answer, I assume that when that drop-dead date comes up, I've got to drop dead," he said.

The updated permit from the Corps specifies timelines for increasingly specific fish identification protocols. Swanson said the final standard would require him to affix coded metal tags to the fish at the cost of 16 cents per fish, as well as \$800,000 for equipment to affix the tags to the fish. That investment would be in addition to an estimated \$4 million he would need to restock the Hardwood lease site, and equip and stock a new farm at Tinker Island.

"All this expense and effort for what?" he asked. He said he understands the possibility that farmed salmon could escape, but what effect they might have on the few wild salmon returning to Downeast rivers every year is not clear to him. He said even if identifiable salmon were found

in a wild salmon river, it might well be as much as two years after the escape, far too late to allow for any correction to prevent more escapes.

The permit also includes details of containment provisions intended to keep farmed fish from escaping in the first place. Swanson said he approves of that preventative approach, but can't understand the practical use of farm specific identification. Currently, Maine farmed salmon are identified as such by a notch cut on a fin. But, more specific identification will become prohibitive, especially for independent fish farmers, Swanson said.

Sebastian Belle, executive director of the Maine Aquaculture Association said the provisions are a problem for larger salmon companies as well.

"They are certainly asking themselves the same things," he said of the larger growers remaining in the state. In the long term, "the site specific marking requirement is fatal," he said. And while salmon growers have opposed farm-specific marking since the idea was introduced, they are now asking for language in the Army Corps permit that will allow the marking issue to be reassessed in a few years.

Belle said such language has been included in the pollution elimination discharge permits. Growers want the Army Corps permit to allow for the same reassessment. In the meantime, they are concentrating on containment and management protocols that would make the marking irrelevant by preventing escapes of farmed salmon.

The eventual removal of the marking requirements is far from a certainty, and Belle said growers can't help but think about the longer term and whether it's worthwhile for them to operate in Maine.

For Swanson that thinking has been done. "My thought is, 'I can't win this fight.'"

But Swanson isn't a corporation that can move his operations to Chile or New Brunswick. He lives here, and so he's adapting.

His solution is to move on to mussel culture on his leases. He said he's already applied for a change of species amendment on the Tinker Island lease while the Hardwood Island site already allows for mussel culture. Although, the latest department approval prohibited the presence of mussel rafts not owned by Swanson.

Much of the mussel culture in the state is done on ropes suspended from rafts. Swanson won't be doing that. He's focusing on suspending his ropes of mussels from lines of submerged buoys. He said the advantage is that the mussels can be submerged 30 feet below the surface, out of the way of passing vessels and the immediate temptation of ravenous eider ducks that can do serious damage to a cultivated mussel crop.

The 600-foot lengths, from which the laden ropes will hang every two feet, are to be moored on the lease parallel to one another, 100 feet apart. Swanson said he expects to start putting the new

gear on the leases this spring with the possibility of having a half million pounds of the mussels in the bay by next fall.

He said he's confident that the market for rope-grown mussels is strong. The immediate advantage is that mussels, unlike salmon, don't use feed added to the marine environment, are grown from seed stock produced by local wild mussels, don't interfere with an endangered species, and can't really escape from the farm, other than by falling off the rope. As a result, the regulations for mussel farms are far less restrictive.

Swanson, who has been synonymous with salmon farming efforts in Blue Hill Bay, said he will keep his hand in that business as well. He said he intends to keep a pen with as many as 8,000 salmon on one of the leases. He said he can sell the fish locally for a good price, especially if he can find organic feed for them. The mix of some salmon and mussels will allow him to remain more diversified than supplying salmon to Heritage Salmon, the Canadian salmon farming company that Swanson sold his fish to regularly.

As for the identification question, Swanson said he's hoping to get his fish from the U.S. Department of Agriculture research facility in Franklin. He said he's hoping it will develop a solution to the marking requirements imposed by other federal agencies.

Don Eley, president of the Friends of Blue Hill Bay, said he's pleased that Swanson is thinking about reducing his salmon operations in Blue Hill Bay.

"What we're after is appropriate places for aquaculture," he said. But he's concerned that the fact that the department approved the leases means that Swanson could sell them to some other salmon grower who wants to keep operating at full capacity.

He said he is curious whether the leases, which have been challenged in court by the Conservation Law Foundation, would be amended by the state to reflect Swanson's altered needs.

Department of Marine Resources administrators did not return calls before press time.