

## Mussel Farmer Proposes To Expand Business

Written by Stephen Rappaport

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Mussel farmer Erick Swanson (left) met with Blue Hill Selectman James Schatz (right) and Harbormaster Dennis Robertson (center) to discuss his plans for another mussel farm near Long Island. The already chilly relations between Swanson and town officials weren't improved when Swanson said that Schatz and others who had opposed his plans were "up to your ears" in barnyard excrement.—STAFF PHOTO BY STEPHEN RAPPAPORT

**BLUE HILL** — A mussel grower's plan to double the size of his farm off the shore of Long Island in Blue Hill Bay has town officials steaming.

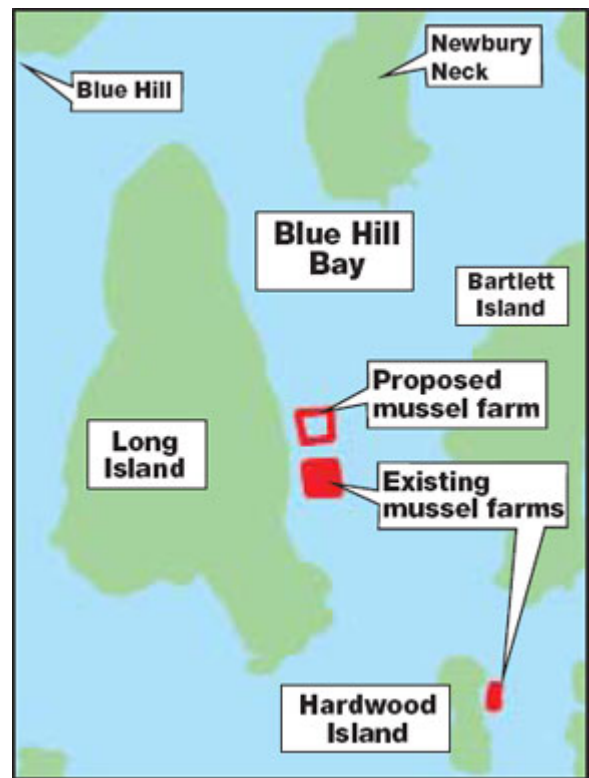
On Monday, Erick Swanson, the operations manager for Maine Cultured Mussels Inc., met with Blue Hill Selectman James Schatz and Harbormaster Dennis Robertson to discuss his plan to apply for an aquaculture lease to grow blue mussels on longlines suspended below the surface of Blue Hill Bay. The proposed lease site would be located approximately 1,000 feet north of a 51.42-acre lease site the company operates in a joint venture with Swanson's son doing business under the name "Mussel Bound Farms."

The Maine Department of Marine Resources (DMR) approved the existing lease on May 25. Friends of Blue Hill Bay, a local conservation organization, is challenging that approval in the Hancock Superior Court.

Maine Cultured Mussels also operates two other mussel farms in Blue Hill Bay. One, comprising some 15 acres, is located east of Hardwood Island in the town of Mount Desert. The larger, comprising some 53.4 acres, is located northeast of Tinker Island, a few miles down the bay.

Swanson said that while the Tinker Island site is good for growing mussels, the company would prefer to move the bulk of its farming operations "up the bay." The Tinker Island site is too exposed during winter weather to allow workers to safely harvest mussels and maintain gear there.

"It's a difficult site," Swanson said. "We've already had a couple of broken ribs," among workers on the farm crew. "We don't want any more injuries."



Swanson also explained that while it would be possible to work the site safely during winter using different equipment, or by having larger onshore storage facilities for harvested mussels, the company wasn't prepared to make the substantial investment required at this time.

"That's it for me," Swanson said. "At 57 years old, this is enough."

Swanson explained that Maine Cultured wanted to lease a 50-acre site close to its new lease off Long Island. The area is good for growing mussels, he said, and sufficiently sheltered so that the company could work the sites with the equipment it now owns. He explained that the two lease sites were to be 1,000 feet apart so that lobster fishermen would have plenty of room to work around all sides of the two farms. According to Swanson, one byproduct of a mussel farming operation is the creation of a substantial fishery for crabs.

Maine Cultured's plans for Blue Hill Bay are not entirely clear. Swanson first said the company wanted to give up its Tinker Island site and move its operations to the Long Island area. He later said the company would "keep Tinker for a while" but reduce the size of the site to "23 or 24 acres." He also said that the area off the eastern shore of Long Island was "the only area in the upper part of the bay we're interested in. It will take care of us for the foreseeable future."

Swanson's proposal, and the whole concept of an informal exchange of ideas that might convince a potential lease applicant not to go forward, got a chilly reception from Schatz. The reason, he said, was that it appears that neither Swanson nor DMR pays much heed to any criticism during the leasing process.

"It is the feeling of many of us that testimony" opposing Maine Cultured's most recent lease application "at the last hearing was ignored. I don't want to see the same outcome," he told DMR hearing officer Diantha Robinson.

Referring to the lease that is under appeal he said, "I'm disappointed at how little testimony it takes to make it happen as opposed to how much it takes to make it not happen. It almost feels biased."

As a businessman, Swanson said, it was his job to understand the state's aquaculture leasing rules and to come up with applications that complied with them.

"My applications are right in the middle of the envelope," Swanson said. "I'm in compliance on all my leases."

Robertson said he was concerned with the impact that Maine Cultured's plan would have on lobstermen fishing out of South Blue Hill. He said their objections to the company's recent Long Island lease application had been ignored.

Swanson said he would be willing to meet with the fishermen any time to discuss the new lease proposal.

If the company decides to go forward with a new lease application, the next step will be for DMR to schedule a "scoping meeting." These meetings, at which the public has an opportunity to ask questions and express objections to an aquaculture lease proposal, are held before any formal lease application is filed. The idea is to allow a prospective applicant to consider public sentiment before filing a formal lease application.

"We want to do it with the least inconvenience to everybody," he said.

Schatz replied, "I hope we're not looking at déjà vu."