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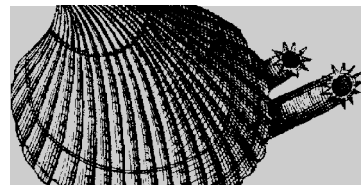
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Beneath

An argument for industry participation in reform of the Canadian Shellfish Sanitation Program

By BRIAN KINGZETT

The time is at hand for the shellfish culture industry to get involved in the reform of the Canadian Shellfish Sanitation Program, the results of which may have business and trade implications for many years to come. Many in the shellfish industry take the Canadian Shellfish Sanitation Program (CSSP) for granted. The program is operated jointly by three federal departments: the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and Environment Canada. The CSSP is mandated to ensure that shellfish are harvested from safe growing waters, that controls are in place to ensure that only safe shellfish reaches the market and that the Canadian shellfish industry is managed in such a way that Canadian shellfish products can be exported to international markets.

The "rulebook" (or bible) for this program is the CSSP Manual of Operations. Unread by most shellfish growers (available on the web at www.inspection.gc.ca), it sets out all of the requirements for classifying, monitoring and harvesting from shellfish growing waters, as well as specific requirements for things like labelling, depuration, shipping etc. Of course the devil is in the details, and like any other bible, the policies within it are often subject to interpretation. In short, everything about how a shellfish grower harvests and gets his or her product to market is ultimately controlled by this program.

Food Safety is Key – a goal that is necessary for government, and critical for a responsible shellfish industry. Historically the program has achieved its mandate of ensuring that only safe shellfish reach the market. However, the program has not always assisted the industry in providing for food safety while also facilitating industry development.

Over the last decade, shellfish growers (especially those cranky ones in British Columbia) have learned that the CSSP manual, and more importantly the way in which the program is delivered by the three lead agencies, is often ill-designed and not workable for the expanding shellfish culture industry. In fact, with notable exceptions, the program has been cited as a classic example of "command and control" regulatory policy. The shellfish industry has long criticized the Canadi-

If you're not actively involved in getting what you want, you don't really want it.

– Peter McWilliams (author and libertarian activist, 1950-2000)

an program for its inflexibility, seemingly out of date provisions, and often rigid interpretations by regulatory authorities. In particular, the detractors of the program have pointed to the inability to involve stakeholders in management, delivery and direction of the program, and the failings of the program to

Since that time there have been significant changes to the NSSP. The NSSP receives input through a laborious and extremely democratic process administered by the Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Commission (www.issc.org). Through the ISSC, state regulators, industry stakeholders, scientists and federal officials bring



Water sampling in Lemmens Inlet

provide adequate service levels.

The original driving force of the CSSP was the 1948 bilateral agreement on shellfish between Canada and the United States which deems the Canadian CSSP and the US National Shellfish Sanitation Program (NSSP) programs as equivalent. On a regular basis, officials from the US Food and Drug Administration come and audit how well Canadian regulators are operating the program. Failure to pass this audit can result in export ability being lost, as recently happened to Mexico (since reinstated). Similarly European authorities have recently examined the program to ensure that sufficient controls exist for EU export.

Of minor interest is that in the United States, each state has the authority for shellfish program delivery, and is audited by the federal USFDA. So in some ways Canada and other countries receive similar status to US states. Further trivia sidebar: in Washington State, native tribes have won the right to act as shellfish control authorities if they choose to apply, and meet USFDA requirements.

In the mid 1990's the sanitation programs were extremely equivalent and the CSSP Manual read in many cases word for word with the NSSP Manual of Operations.

forward recommendations and proposed changes which are debated through a transparent committee process. If passed, these are ultimately reflected in updates to the program. While certainly far from perfect and prone to politics, this process has resulted in significant reform in that the NSSP has produced a series of "model ordinances." Supported by extensive guidance documents, a model ordinance outlines minimum standards that must be met by shellfish control authorities. In particular, the model ordinance generally provides much more flexibility and options as a result of issues that have been raised by industry or state regulators to address certain specific situations.

Instead of choosing to adopt much of the model ordinances at face value, the Canadian program, in flexing program sovereignty, has made a series of relatively minor amendments which have arguably made the program more prescriptive and rigid. The difference in Canada is that changes are made by an interdepartmental government steering committee, and stakeholder consultation generally takes place after amendments have been decided upon.

In comparison, a survey of various US states and international jurisdictions will show that in the most success-

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ful shellfish growing areas, the industry is very involved in shellfish sanitation programs, assisting in setting policy, providing logistical assistance and co-managing programs. In some cases, industry is wholly responsible for the management of growing areas under regulatory supervision.

The Canadian shellfish industry has been lobbying for increased participation in the CSSP for many years, with some successes and support from groups such as the now defunct DFO Office of the Commissioner for Aquaculture. Successes have included the piloting of On-Farm Food Safety Programs by the Canadian Aquaculture Industry Alliance, the North Coast Water Quality and Biotoxin Society which has established stakeholder based services in northern British Columbia, and one-off monitoring agreements between CSSP agencies and stakeholders.

The ultimate goals of industry participation in program direction and management have so far proved elusive. However, the time may have come where a responsi-

ble industry may be able to make its case. Simply put, after years of struggling to provide more service with less resources, the CSSP agencies are reaching a point where they can no longer meet the service delivery requirements of the expanding shellfish culture industry. The situation is being compounded by emerging global trade factors which are demanding increased quality assurance, monitoring for biotoxins, traceability, and on farm food safety (which I reviewed in a previous column).

Without a significant increase in funding and reorganization of the partners, which would include giving all program responsibility to the CFIA for a start, the CSSP agencies are faced with a series of hard choices. These include further reducing service and closing areas (not politically acceptable), demanding user fees for the program (forcing even more burdens on a struggling developing industry), or bringing industry into the fold as true partners and looking for innovative solutions (perhaps the

least palatable to some regulators). For the first time in a decade of dealing with CSSP issues, I have heard the term "CSSP Reform" used on a regular basis by government.

The opportunity now for industry is to challenge the agencies and make a case for working together for innovative solutions such as industry co-management of the CSSP. This will require a concerted, responsible lobby on part of the shellfish industry in the coastal regions, and nationally through the Canadian Aquaculture Industry Alliance. Previous projects now show that the Canadian industry is capable of the challenge. International examples provide tools that can be adapted. Collectively we have the ability to redesign the CSSP from the ground up and develop a world class program that everyone will be proud of.

Brian Kingzett (brian@bluevolution.ca) is a senior associate with the Blue Revolution Consulting Group. He was unaware of the CSSP when he bought his oyster farm in 1993, and has been arguing about it ever since.

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NEW WAY TO SELL FISH

Maine producer tests agricultural marketing model in aquaculture

A novice fish farmer who has taken a leaf out of an agricultural marketing program in Maine says that he thinks the system could revolutionize rural aquaculture across North America.

John Stewart and his wife Cynthia obtained the US franchise and manufacturing licence for the Australian-based Aquaculture Systems' small-scale on-land production system two years ago, and the couple is currently running a small fish-farm operation in a converted barn at their 1.5-acre property in Washington, Maine.

Stewart said the main purpose of the new fish farm is to demonstrate the viability of the Aquaculture Systems modular method of producing fish.

And to do that, the Stewarts are using the CSA model of marketing and selling their fish. Stewart said the initials stand for Community-Supported Agriculture but could equally apply to aquaculture. Customers such as restaurants take out memberships in operations, pre-paying in advance for a desired amount of product to be delivered weekly or as they wish over an agreed period.

Stewart said he knows of a vegetable farm in the state which charges \$425 for 16 weekly deliveries for two people. The customer pays in the spring and the farm makes the appropriate delivery of agreed vegetables as they reach harvest time.

"We looked at that and said it's a perfectly reasonable plan for us too," said Stewart.

"We're copying that model and I think it could become a growing trend. It could revolutionize the way the (on-land aquaculture) industry could work.

Stewart said that his aquaculture engineering company and farm uses organic methods of producing fish, without chemicals or antibiotics at any stage, but he said that one of the main advantages of the CSA way of operating is that it appeals to local buyers such as restaurants. They know the farmer, who is readily available for consultations, and can drop in for a visit or call to make inquiries if they have questions.

"We have two of the CSA (agricultural) farms in our community (of about 1,250 people) that serve well over 100 people," he said.

Stewart said he and his wife began the fish farm using bluegill – a hybrid form of sunfish – simply because they had some in a pond, so they didn't have to pay for stock to start their demonstration operation.

Stewart said the 600 or so fish doubled in length in three months, but there's evidently not too much demand for bluegill – which are seen as being very bony. So the farm will bring in trout fingerlings in late November or early December.

"Right now we have 10 restaurants committed under the CSA system to purchasing the fish (at \$5 a pound) and the first crop will be available in about June," he said. Stocking will take place every 12 weeks to ensure continuity of supply, and the first harvest is expected to be about 1,200 pounds.

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John and Cynthia Stewart

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