

ESAF Case Study – Employer – Newfoundland & Labrador

North Atlantic Aquaponics Black Duck Siding, NL

Louis MacDonald, Owner

Before he got into the eel business, Louis MacDonald spent a number of years working for the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Forest, Resources and Lands as a Forestry Technician and College of the North Atlantic as an Engineering Technology and Natural Resources Program Developer. Mr. MacDonald and his business partner now operate North Atlantic Aquaponics Limited (“North Atlantic”) and its affiliated agriculture-related companies – M&M Farming Limited and Growing for Life. He retired from the civil service in 2018, but not before learning more than most people ever do about the industries’ challenges in the province.

Mr. MacDonald also had a keen sense of the province’s situation in relation to food security. “Newfoundland is an island,” he says. “We’re isolated. If the ferries are down for a number of days due to poor weather and no trucks make it over, you really see the impact with emptying shelves in grocery stores. It’s important that we ensure that we grow what we can in order to ensure we’re not as reliant as we’ve been on the ferries.”

Located in Black Duck Siding and Robinsons not far from Stephenville on Newfoundland’s west coast, Mr. MacDonald’s agricultural and fisheries businesses’ concerns are much like North Atlantic’s, which ships eels and eel products to the Asian market, primarily South Korea, Japan and China. They, too, rely on the availability of a scarce rural workforce. “Businesses like ours that are located in rural areas are in continuous need of workers,” he says. “That’s why I was so happy to be approached to participate in the Essential Skills for Atlantic Fisheries (ESAF) Program.”

Dealing primarily with the Asian market, North Atlantic Aquaponics exports aquaculture eels and eel filets that are also part of a product called kabayaki, a preparation of eel filets that are

skewered and dipped in a sweet soy sauce-based sauce before being cooked on a grill or in a pan.

“The eel business is a lucrative export business, but licences are limited, and markets must be developed and nurtured,” Mr. MacDonald says. “That’s what we’ve done and we’re quite successful. Then, the pandemic hit, and we no longer had access to our normal markets. Restaurants closed and we had to figure out other ways of getting the product to market. With all that said, we still needed staff, so the ESAF definitely played a positive role in that.”

Mr. MacDonald says the ESAF participants he brought on were all good workers. “We took on six from the program and we hired them all,” he says. “With the end of pandemic hopefully in sight, we’ll be ramping up all our operations.”

“Food security in Newfoundland and Labrador is a huge issue,” he says, “which is why we’re also expanding out agricultural operations, such as potatoes and other root vegetables. It all gets consumed here in the province. We don’t export any of it. The eels and value-added kabayaki, however, are all for export.”

He says that – combined – his entire operation will need more employees in the coming years. He is developing more farm land and has big plans. He also says ESAF would be a very worthwhile model to expand into other industries, especially agriculture. “The work is there. We just need to source more local employees. And if that can be done by training in essential life skills, I’m all for that. The combination of classroom training and subsidized on-the-job experience worked very well for us.”

“A lot of good employees come out of programs like ESAF,” he emphasizes. “I love seeing when they take ownership of their job and work hard to produce top quality products, whether it’s fish or potatoes. When they start proactively insisting on maintaining high standards, it’s a very good sign that they take pride in their work.”

When employees get to that level of ownership, they only have a positive impact on the company’s bottom line, Mr. MacDonald says. “When employees start self-monitoring and insist on high quality, of course that means there’s less spoilage and less rejected product from stores. The last thing you want to hear is a client tell you that they weren’t happy with the quality of

your last shipment, so when you hear employees discussing quality issues, you know that they're looking out for the company and our clients."

"I also give credit to the ESAF coordinator, Jennifer Brake, who was excellent," he says. "I was quite pleased with the people she sent, and I thought they were all a good fit. That doesn't happen by accident."

It is hoped that program participants can grow into more senior positions as time goes by. "There are all sorts of training programs for the food industry. The more qualified and trained they become, the more valuable they become to us and the more we can grow as a company. Since we're currently in expansion mode, this is a good thing."

One ESAF participant was very grateful for the opportunity and ended up turning his life around. "He told me that we saved his life by giving him a job," Mr. MacDonald says. "ESAF and my company may have given him a chance, but it's his own work ethic that made it successful. Self-confidence can do wonders for a person. Programs like ESAF can certainly help to enhance that through their training. This individual is now contributing to society and can grow with the company. It's good to see."

With the need for more employees only growing, Mr. MacDonald says these types of programs make a difference because the employees they end up bringing were often unknown to the company before. "As time goes by, we can continue training and their skills will increase. Some may be able to move up into other jobs as their skills evolve and their self-confidence grows."

"I would definitely take part in ESAF again if given the chance," he says. "Without the program, these employees wouldn't have been known to us for a variety of reasons. They have good work ethics and good attitudes, and those are things that are worth a lot. They all toured the facility before being brought on, so they all knew what the jobs entailed. When you train people right, you give them an opportunity to really show their stuff."