

ESAF Case Study – Employer – New Brunswick

Cooke Aquaculture St. George, N.B.

Betty Nickerson, Director of Human Resources

Betty Nickerson, Director of Human Resources, at Cooke Aquaculture located in St. George, New Brunswick, is very familiar with the significant workforce availability challenges faced by the fisheries and aquaculture sector in Atlantic Canada and elsewhere.

“It’s challenging and rewarding work, and we offer full-time, year-round careers for all levels,” she says. “Whether someone is a tradesperson, wants to be crew on a boat, raising fish on our marine farms, driving a tractor trailer or working in our processing plant operations, we have many openings with competitive wages and great benefits.”

And as anyone who works in human resources knows, it is always more cost-effective to recruit locally before having to start looking outside the immediate area or even the country to fill job vacancies. “Our preference is always to recruit locally, but when you have a lot of job opportunities in rural communities, that can sometimes be difficult, but the coastal quality of life is attractive,” Ms. Nickerson explains.

The Essential Skills for Atlantic Fisheries (ESAF) hopes to find the people out there who may have been overlooked in the past or were not participating in the workforce for a variety of reasons, many of which included lack of self-confidence, literacy, numeracy and life skills.

“A good employee for us is someone who enjoys working with a team, gets along with others, is willing to be trained and who takes pride in their work,” she says. “We have many jobs for people with entry-level skills, and many people have built life-long careers here at family-owned Cooke Aquaculture.”

Cooke is always looking for a pool of local employees for the company’s saltwater sites, salmon

hatcheries, net shop, and processing plant where the fish are processed and packaged for shipment to customers.

Like many other players in the aquaculture, agriculture and food-service industries, Ms. Nickerson says that Cooke also now hires temporary foreign workers to help staff their facilities.

“When we hire temporary foreign workers,” she says, “it’s because we can’t recruit enough people locally. Its much more costly to fly in these temporary workers. It also takes a lot of time, with the process often taking months.”

When large employers are located in rural areas with modest populations and limited resources, housing is often an issue, as well. “If we bring in workers, they have to live somewhere,” she says. “Small towns aren’t necessarily full of apartment buildings and rooms for rent. That’s another reason why hiring local people is easier. Most already have places to live. Hiring many people at once is another story, so sometimes they have to live further out, and then transportation becomes an issue.”

For all these reasons, Ms. Nickerson says Cooke did not hesitate for a second to take part in ESAF. “We greatly appreciate labour support programs in order to find people,” she says. “If even one person works out, we’re very happy.” ESAF participants were assigned to the Cooke’s salmon processing plant in St. George, which typically employs over 400 people on a 24/7, year-round basis.

Working through the ESAF coordinator and facilitator for New Brunswick, a number of participants were identified from a list. Subsequently, a tour of the facilities was given and nine people over the two cohorts from 2019 to 2020 were given subsidized work terms. Ms. Nickerson says she would not hesitate to take part again because that is how important hiring locally is to companies like Cooke Aquaculture.

Programs such as ESAF are important, Ms. Nickerson says, because they help find people who may be wonderful employees but who just have not had the opportunity and need a hand up. “We’re always willing to work with people,” she says. “From training to a certain amount of shift flexibility, we always try to accommodate in order to keep employees. There are always issues that people have to deal with in real life, such as childcare.”

The skillsets of the employees recruited through ESAF were good, she says. “But one skill I need every program such as ESAF and others – and even local high schools – to concentrate on is accountability,” she stresses. “They need to understand the consequences on the team when they fail to report for work.”

“Here at Cooke and – I’m sure – in other companies, we deal with teams. When one person doesn’t show up, it causes a domino effect. We need to pull people in from other shifts, other teams, etc. Of course, we understand someone being sick or things along that line, but just not showing up for work with no notice really causes a bit of chaos here. I think any program that really drove that home with participants would have a really positive impact by teaching something that’s missing,” Ms. Nickerson says. “That skill of accountability would serve them well for the rest of their life.”

“Employees need to know that others count on them. And that’s a good thing. They’re valued members of the team. Everyone has their place – and it’s all important.”

Ms. Nickerson emphasizes that there are opportunities with Cooke for anyone who has a good work ethic with room for advancement. “We have people here who started out as summer students and now have good upper-level jobs with us.”

“When I first heard of ESAF through Sherri Deveau, project coordinator, I jumped on the opportunity right away,” she says. “I always hold out hope that we’ll find good local employees in these types of programs.”

“We have lots of great jobs available, and we want our employees to advance and feel part of our Cooke family, and that would be a great thing for everyone! I’ll always support programs like ESAF. They make a difference.”