

# Farming halibut could lead to year-round work for Island fish processing plants

by Heidi Riley

Aquaculture



Bob Johnston, partner in the Halibut PEI project, feeds farmed halibut at the MorningStar Fisheries plant in Victoria PEI.

- Two aquaculture technicians feed the fish, maintain the tanks and monitor the water temperatures, salinity and oxygen levels.

## A successful experiment

The Halibut PEI project proved that the water temperature and the salinity levels of the salt water wells at the MorningStar Fisheries plant were ideal for growing halibut. There was low mortality and growth rates were good. They also determined what size fish to start with in September in order to come up with a halibut they could sell in April when the tanks are needed again for the lobster industry.



Liam Dolan, owner of the Claddagh Oyster House in Charlottetown, serves halibut produced by the PEI Halibut project. "This is an absolutely fabulous product, and the response is unbelievable - customers are just raving about it," says Liam. "It is nice to know exactly where it's grown, and that it's fresh. The wild halibut season on PEI is very short. If we didn't have this new product we would have to rely on frozen fish."

Five years ago, three Islanders with a great deal of experience in the fisheries industry decided that the Island could be an ideal place to produce farmed halibut.

Halibut is a high-value fish that inhabits the bottom of the ocean in cold waters. Wild halibut populations are declining, but the demand for the fish is on the rise.

## Conditions on PEI are right for farming halibut

During the past year, the **Halibut PEI project** explored the possibilities of growing halibut on the Island. The MorningStar Fisheries plant, owned by **Ocean Choice International LP** in Victoria was used to grow small halibut to market size. "We experimented with about 2,500 halibut of different sizes this past year, and we proved that the fish will grow well and that we can produce them for the market," says **Bob Johnston**, one of the partners in the Halibut PEI project.

## Partners

The three partners involved in the Halibut PEI project include:

- **Dr. Gerry Johnson** has worked in aquaculture education and fish health research at the UPEI Atlantic Veterinary College since 1986.
- **Jim Dunphy** has 35 years of fisheries management and marketing experience nationally and internationally.
- **Bob Johnston** has worked for the Federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the Canadian Aquaculture Institute at UPEI, which delivered courses for the aquaculture industry across Canada and around the world.

## Other staff

- Halibut PEI's senior biologist **Melissa Rommens** has worked in halibut aquaculture in the Maritimes for more than 14 years.

## PEI halibut is now being served here

"Our fish is now served at the **Claddagh Oyster House** in Charlottetown," says Bob. "We also sent samples to the **Culinary Institute** and to other restaurants. The feedback was that the taste is excellent, and we know that there is interest by high-end restaurants for this product."

## Future plans

The Federal and PEI governments are providing funding to help Halibut PEI grow and expand. "Now we are entering the next phase," says Bob. "We are finalizing plans to ramp up to a commercial level next year with about 17,000 fish."

"We are looking at a number of places on PEI with salt water wells or where we could drill wells and use some of the infrastructure in place. There are 13 lobster processing plants on PEI which could potentially be growing halibut. If it turns out to be as successful as we think it could be, we could have a new land-based aquaculture industry on PEI."

"We try to use local products as much as possible. PEI halibut adds to our locally-produced menu of oysters, vegetables, and beef."

"I think this product has great potential, and I believe it will have a market at high-end restaurants here in Atlantic Canada and in Ontario."

"Growing halibut on PEI would bring more employment to the facilities that are sitting idle so much of the year. There is a potential for value-added by doing the filleting on site. It would also help to diversify the lobster industry by adding halibut farming."

## Employment spin-offs

"On PEI, a number of lobster processing facilities have holding tanks and salt water wells or are drawing water from the ocean," says Bob.

"That infrastructure is only being used for about 10 weeks of the year. The employees in those facilities are working seasonally, and then they are laid off for the rest of the year and the infrastructure sits idle."

"If we could farm halibut during the times when the lobster holding facilities are usually idle, we could provide employment to people in rural PEI who would have been laid off," says Bob. "We can create permanent year-round jobs for three to four people per facility."

"We have a great recipe for success here," says Bob. "We have the science and business expertise, the right infrastructure, and good salt-water wells which produce water with the right salinity and temperature levels."



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