

Spotlight

[By Stephanie Porter]

Our regular profile of businesses in Atlantic Canada's service and supply sector



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P.E.I. research facility taking aquaculture industry to the next level

Ask Debbie Plouffe what P.E.I.'s Center for Aquaculture Technologies is all about, and you'll immediately appreciate why the Center—which opened just five years ago—is making a marked difference to the region's aquaculture industry.

"All of us love fish, and fish research; we love aquaculture, and we love the potential of aquaculture for providing food security in the future, for North Americans and globally," says Plouffe, the Center's executive vice-president of research. "We strongly believe in that, and we believe there's a real opportunity to apply modern biotechnologies to improving the sustainability and efficiency of production, and making sure farmers are able to make a living in a responsible way."

But there's more. "Here we have experienced researchers with a good knowledge of regulatory pathways, who understand study design and the research that needs to be done for products in the aquaculture market.

"That's our reason to be."

That enthusiasm, knowledge and commitment to advancing the aquaculture industry has attracted clients from Canada, United States, Europe, Asia and South America. The Center for Aquaculture Technologies is

a for-profit contract services and research company; about 60 per cent of its revenue currently comes from Canada and the U.S., the rest from outside North America.

First established in 2012 in San Diego, California, the Center's Canadian subsidiary opened in Souris, P.E.I. in 2015—an ideal location, says Plouffe, given Atlantic Canada's research capabilities in ocean sciences, veterinary medicine, animal nutrition and related fields. Not to mention the diverse aquaculture industry steadily growing across the region.

The Center is made up of several specialized business units including health and nutrition, diagnostics, breeding and genetics. Whether establishing proof-of-concept or determining regulatory compliance, each project is custom-designed for the client.

"We have various certifications that let us work with aquatic animal pathogens from all over the world, and with different species that we as an industry are trying to develop for aquaculture," Plouffe says. "We test the safety and efficacy of health products, including vaccines and pharmaceuticals... We do nutrition research on raw materials, novel feed ingredients, and we evaluate all those products in a controlled

tank-based environment." Selective breeding and genetic improvement are other key areas of work.

"We have a broad scope," says Plouffe. "We're a one-stop shop that can integrate genetics and health and nutrition and help our clients get the best bang for their research money."

As of early 2020, the Center's P.E.I. facilities are home to more than 30 employees, including seven PhD-level researchers and technical staff with expertise in recirculating aquaculture, animal care, aquatic animal health and nutrition and more. That number is sure to grow: last December the organization signed an agreement to purchase a second facility in Victoria, P.E.I., doubling the Center's Canadian footprint.

As well, Plouffe says plans are in place to establish a \$1.5 million pilot-scale aquafeed production facility on the Island. "To be viable, most feed mills are very large-scale," she says. "That makes it difficult to produce small batches of feed for research purposes or for niche species—if you're growing a small amount of halibut on P.E.I. or char in Nova Scotia, for example. There's no other resource like that in Canada."

The Centre has built its business on filling service gaps for the aquaculture industry, and its reputation on delivering good science.

"Our industry is under a very strong lens. But because it is under such a microscope, the innovation curve is very steep," Plouffe says. "We see a lot of new and different technologies come through that we can evaluate, and work with, and eventually help get to market. That is the most rewarding thing for us as researchers." It's also appreciated by the Center's clients.

"Export of our services grows every year. We aim to become the top aquaculture research organization in the world." |nrm

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