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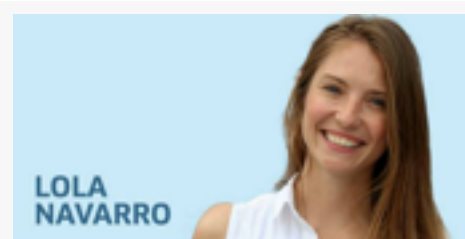
New US land-based salmon farmer ready to deliver its first fish

Company's backers include former head Safeway seafood buyer and other retail execs.

by
John Fiorillo
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Finger Lakes Fish Inc., a new land-based salmon farming operation in Auburn, New York, expects to deliver its first batch of fish as soon as mid-August, Phil Gibson, a board member and the company's marketing advisor, told **IntraFish**.

The farm is raising coho salmon in a closed, recirculating aquaculture system (RAS). The company's initial production is expected to be around 180,000 pounds, or 80 metric tons, but, when complete, the facility has capacity to produce 500 metric tons, said Gibson.



LOLA NAVARRO

Finger Lakes Fish, which is still under construction, is just over a year old. It began hatching coho eggs, supplied by British Columbia-based Northern Divine, late last May. It is working with local processor and distributor JD & Sons in Rochester, New York, to supply customers.

The company has reached a deal with a regional retailer, who is testing the product in one of its stores but plans to ramp up to 10 stores as production increases, said Gibson, who declined to name the retailer. "We're also looking at the white tablecloth foodservice sector, too," he said.

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Why coho?

Most of the land-based salmon operations springing up in Maine and other parts of the United States are focusing on Atlantic salmon, but Finger Lakes Fish chose coho to separate itself in the market.

“The competitive atmosphere for Atlantic salmon is very commodity driven. You’re always compared to the lowest common denominator there. We’re not that company,” said Gibson.

“We’re producing locally from a small-scale operation. We’re shipping within a 200 to 300-mile radius from where our facility is. We’re hiring local, we’re producing local and we’re producing a fish which is different than what you can get in the commodity market.”

The facility and team

When the company’s first facility is fully built out, it will have nine raceways in which it will raise its salmon. Each raceway is 80 feet long and 16 feet wide.

The company CEO is Ed Heslop, the former managing director of investment banking firm Schwartz Heslin Goup Inc., located near Albany, New York.

The majority of the six board members, who share ownership of the company with some outside investors, have retail grocery backgrounds with chains such as Ahold, Harris Teeter and others, said Gibson, who spent 20 years running the seafood purchasing program for US supermarket chain Safeway.

The company is also being advised by Michael Timmons, the dean of the aquaculture program at nearby Cornell University, and John Holder of JLH Consulting, a British Columbia-based RAS consulting firm.

Looking forward

Once the current farm facility is finished, Gibson said, the company plans to begin construction of a second one in the same area.

The current farm is a 500-ton facility, but the second farm could produce around 1,000 metric tons. “When you are talking about managing into a local footprint we really don’t want to get much bigger than that,” he said.

But plans extend beyond the two facilities, said Gibson. “One of our primary investors wants to build a facility in Illinois, so that would be our first branching out of [New York] state. Ultimately, we have a vision of having 10, 15, 20 of these sited at strategic locations across the country,” he said.

“We’re building a completely closed system, sustainable program. We use no antibiotic, we use no pesticides. We recycle at least 90 percent of our water. Effluence is 100 percent recaptured and re-purposed for the agriculture business. We use eggs from an organic source,” Gibson said.

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