

MARINE SPECIES

Maine Halibut Farms readies to scale up

After several years of R&D, an East Coast company plans to produce commercial-scale quantities of this popular marine species.

BY WHIT RICHARDSON

After eight years of incubation at the University of Maine's Center for Cooperative Aquaculture Research, Maine Halibut Farms is preparing to break ground on the first commercial-scale halibut farm in the country.

The company's founder, Alan Spear, says he's working out the detailed engineering plans right now and expects to break ground on the facility in the next 12 months. Maine Halibut Farms will be the first tenant of a planned aquaculture business park on former Navy land in Corea, Maine.

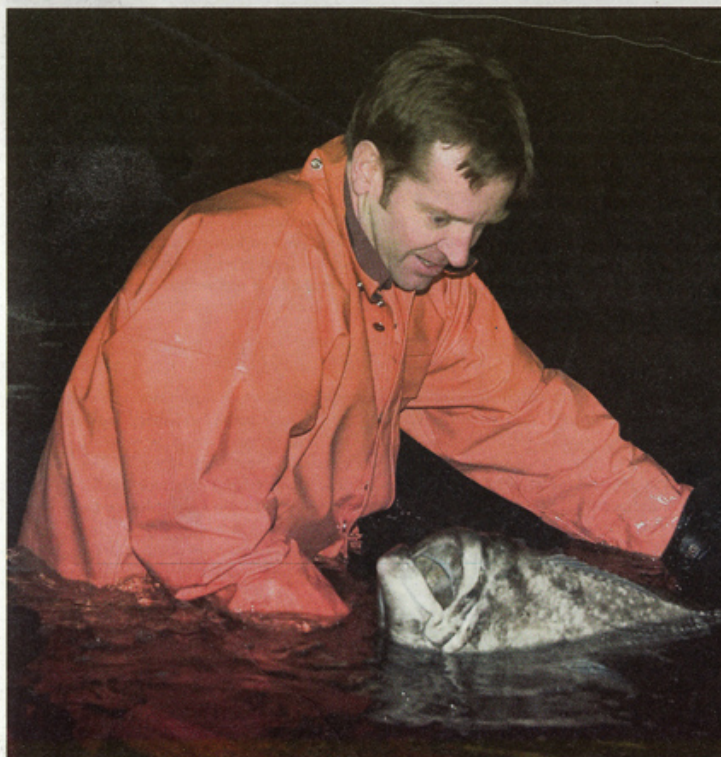
The Center for Cooperative Aquaculture Research has been conducting research on halibut since 2000 and has been collecting eggs from broodstock since 2004, according to the center's operations manager, Nick Brown, who ran a successful halibut farm in Digby, Nova Scotia, before taking the job in Maine in 2001. The halibut research has been funded through grants from the USDA Northeastern Regional Aquaculture Center and Maine Aquaculture Innovation Center.

Maine Halibut Farms began as a pilot project at the center in 2002. In 2006, the center successfully reared 25,000 juvenile halibut, which it subsequently sold to Maine Halibut Farms. The sale marked the first large-scale batch of farm-raised halibut in the country.

Brown says that after years of research into developing the proper protocols and diets for rearing juveniles, all the pieces are in place for "a viable company with enough capital behind it to scale up. That's what's missing now."



Nick Brown, manager of the Center for Cooperative Aquaculture Research, on the right, along with James Cameron, a University of Maine graduate student, as they strip eggs from a female halibut.



Maine Halibut Farms hopes to fill that void. Spear, however, declined to share financial figures or specifics about the capacity of his land-based farm.

Halibut farming is still a young industry. The first juvenile halibut were reared in Norway in the mid-1980s. Currently, halibut farms operate in Norway, Canada and Iceland. In most cases, the fish are raised in land-based farms. But in places with warmer water, such as the fjords of Norway, some fish are moved to ocean net pens to grow to market size, says Brown. But, in Maine, whose waters are colder than the fjords of Norway, land-based recirculating systems are the best bet for raising halibut, Brown says. He's found halibut to be a very robust fish with not too many disease problems. "We've grown them in recirculation systems for many years and they do very well," he says. "It's a great tank fish."

This is Spear's first foray into aquaculture. His background is in the utility business, so he says his initial interest was in the energy side of land-based fish farms. During his utility work, he'd often cross paths with people in Maine's aquaculture business looking at land-based salmon farming. When he learned of the halibut research going on at the Center for Cooperative Aquaculture Research, he created Maine Halibut Farms to capitalize on the opportunity. Spear says land-based systems offer more control over the grow-out process and have a small environmental footprint. "The technology is emerging all the time to help make it a profitable proposition to do a lot of these activities on land, depending on the species, life cycle, market and all that."

But he's not doing it on land solely for sustainability's sake. "There's great interest in sustainability, but there is and always will be a willingness to buy freshness and quality. And those are job number one in any business. We're pursuing this in a sustainable manner for practical reasons," Spear says. "I'm not making claims to any label, but use sustainability just as a general adjective."

Since the Atlantic halibut fishery is basically nonexistent, Maine Halibut Farms has an opportunity to fill a niche market that doesn't compete with fishermen for plate-size halibut at restaurants. Spear won't disclose how big he plans his farm to be, but says he'll begin by targeting the large markets in the Northeastern United States. "For the short run, that's plenty of market to make the business plan work," he says.