

Fish farm supporters reel in members

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SHELBURNE — Hundreds of people in Shelburne County say they'll welcome more fish farms and a fish processing plant for the aquaculture industry to their part of Nova Scotia.

But their views on the benefits to be had are often dismissed by people who say more salmon pens will harm the environment.

"I've never seen a community come together like this," said Sherri Harris of the group Citizens for Sustainable Aquaculture.

"And then to be represented as misinformed and misled — that's not fair."

Close to 400 people are group members, and the association has a Facebook page.

Many display lawn signs, and about 560 letters have been sent to government by supporters of aquaculture, Harris said.

Opponents of fish farms say hundreds of thousands of young salmon swim in close quarters, cause a deterioration of the natural habitat nearby and often harm the quality of existing wild fisheries like lobster.

Some opponents have said groups like Citizens for Sustainable Aquaculture are composed of business owners who stand to profit from more fish farms, either directly or indirectly.

Yes, some members are business owners, said Harris.

"My husband and I own a trucking company that hauls boats. We've had to diversify.

"Do we . . . work for Cooke (Aquaculture)? Yes, we do."

She said their affiliation with Cooke, which has been farming fish for about 15 years in Nova Scotia, has enabled them to continue working and employing people.

"I have a lobster boat sitting in my yard next to an aquaculture boat sitting next to a pleasure boat," she said.

Harris also said some folks who complain about more fish farms do so because they purchased oceanfront properties and want their views protected.

A community meeting sponsored by the Ecology Action Centre was held June 27 in Shelburne to inform people about some of the consequences of large-scale salmon aquaculture, according to a news release.

"I think . . . we found it insulting the Ecology Action Centre was coming here (to educate us) and they're radical," said Harris.

No one in her group wants to see a harbour destroyed, she said. They do, however, want to enjoy the potential benefits from new jobs and spinoffs that could boost an ailing economy long dependent on the sea.

Many young people have gone west to find work and that's sad, she said.

"You should be able to have the opportunity to work in your community."

By the end of this month, 16 new aquaculture jobs will have been created in the Digby area, said Nell Halse of New Brunswick-based Cooke Aquaculture.

And 700,000 young salmon are now swimming in one of two new St. Marys Bay fish farms, Halse said recently.

"Up till now, all of the fish that (we've) grown in Nova Scotia waters have been taken to New Brunswick for processing," said Halse in an interview.

"So the communities and the government have been asking 'Why don't we do this in Nova Scotia?' "

In order to have a year-round fish processing plant, the company needs more fish — about three million — coming from the aquaculture pens, said Halse.

Cooke is talking about developing a hatchery in Digby, expanding a feed mill in Truro, and either constructing or renovating an existing building near Shelburne as a processing plant.

"It's about a \$150-million project over five years," Halse said.

It includes work in the three towns as well as the two new St. Marys Bay farms and three proposed Shelburne County farms.

Harris said she is confident all will be done correctly.

"We can all monitor our environment."

Recently, a group of 17 people from coastal communities sent 52 questions to provincial Fisheries Minister Sterling Belliveau. The list concerned topics like the risks involved in fish farming, job creation and the use of public money to help establish aquaculture sites.

The minister received the questions July 7. A government spokeswoman said the Fisheries and Aquaculture Department will be taking a look at all of them.