Importance of Community Relations for Maine Aquaculture

Having good community relations helps ensure you are a good neighbor and makes the leasing process easier. To grant a lease, the Commissioner must make a series of fact-based determinations about how your lease will impact others and must specifically find that your lease will not unreasonably interfere with commercial or recreational fishing uses of the area. Community members may raise legitimate concerns, and other problems may be perceived, but both can result in serious obstacles to your aquaculture operation and the growth of the industry overall:

- **Fishermen, recreational users, and others** may be concerned with how aquaculture might affect the fishing, recreation, or local flora and fauna.
- **These users and even nearby landowners** are likely to be interested in the frequency that any public launches would be used to access the aquaculture site.
- **Other aquaculturists** will be concerned with any threats to biosecurity, and how you interact with the public affects their reputation as well. Growers are likely to expect your respect.
- **Waterfront or riparian landowners** may be concerned with visual change in the water surface, as well as the frequency of, and noise associated with, tending the aquaculture site and harvesting activities.
- **Nearby landowners and community members** are likely to be interested in the details of the activities that will take place in or near public places, for example washing or other processing activities near a boat launch or visible pier.
- **Local elected officials** may be averse to the operation because of a perceived fear of declining property values affecting taxes.
- **Some community members** may have preconceived negative views on aquaculture. They are likely to be interested in your definition of success as it relates to expected income, or your plans to use a common resource for personal benefit.

In the short term, these obstacles can make the time and effort necessary to start an aquaculture operation prohibitive. In the longer term, even if a lease is approved, **poor community relations can make it difficult to expand and market your own business**, as well harm the reputation of the aquaculture industry, thereby making it more difficult for the industry as a whole to thrive.

**There are benefits from putting the time and effort into community relations!**
- Your process of getting in the water is likely to go faster by addressing community concerns and avoiding the above obstacles as early as possible in your planning stage.
- Fishermen and others may turn out to be helpful in planning your aquaculture operation; you could be the recipient of valuable local knowledge and assistance.
- The community may become your ally, helping to form beneficial partnerships with other individuals, organizations, and businesses; in the long-term, this could result in boosted marketing of your product.
• Neighbors who feel you’ve kept in mind their concerns and values could feel more connected to the working waterfront, being another set of eyes on your operation when you’re not around.

How to make positive community connections:

Choose a site location wisely, one with as few potential conflicts as possible as described by the DMR lease decision criteria: https://www.maine.gov/dmr/aquaculture/documents/leasehearingsandcriteria.pdf

Start small. Consider applying for an LPA initially, and culturing a small amount of product. You will both increase the likelihood that you will avoid concern-raising mistakes as you start out, and have more time to feel out the community, addressing their concerns over time to gain their acceptance and approval of your operation.

Get word out as early as possible. Do not wait for riparian landowners and others to get notified by the DMR, as this could lead to surprise and frustration. If you are applying in a lobster area, talk to Patrice McCarron, Executive Director of the Maine Lobstermen’s Association, to find out who’s the local opinion leader.

Address concerns by listening and reacting to community members’ concerns:
  • Make contact one-on-one and face-to-face as much as possible.
  • Follow up with phone calls to at least provide opportunity for questions to be asked and for the concern to be aired.
  • Acknowledge concerns and feelings. Responding with "Let me look into that more and get back to you" is ok.
  • Sometimes time and space is needed between when a concern is voiced and when information or a response can be heard and processed.
  • Whenever possible, tweak your application to address concerns of your activities overlapping with existing recreational users and fishermen.
  • As much as possible, avoid conflict and stepping on toes. Avoiding seemingly small things in the short-term will make it easier to move forward later.

Help educate your community about aquaculture, including its potential benefits, including water quality and ecosystem health improvements, job creation and supporting other local businesses, and local food production. Even when a hearing is not required by DMR, consider holding community meetings, inviting aquaculturists and other related parties to share their experiences. Collaborate on how aquaculture could support other community goals, such as through education, tourism, culinary focuses, etc.
Avoid negative publicity. If you take a call from a journalist, ask about their objective, how the story will be used, what questions or topics they'll cover, their deadline, and then schedule another time to call them back. Don’t use technical jargon to explain your plans or tell your story. Prepare soundbites that are positive.

For more information and examples of good community relations, see: http://www.islandinstitute.org/what-works/aquaculture-community-relations