NEW FACILITY RAMPS UP PRODUCTION AT FORMER NAVY BASE

Halibut Making Gains in Maine

Right: new Marine Finfish Hatchery at University of Maine's Center for Cooperative Aquaculture Research in Franklin, Maine. Below: stripping brood.

Important improvements continue to be made in the production of halibut according to a spokesperson for the University of Maine's Center for Cooperative Aquaculture.

Operations manager Dr. Nick Brown said the program has now reached the point where a company is now working on a land-based commercial-scale halibut growout facility at a former US Navy base in the township of Corea. The name of the facility is Maine Halibut Farms (MHF).

Brown said the university research center in Franklin will act as the initial hatchery and development base for MHF, formed in 2002 by individuals with engineering backgrounds from Bangor Hydro. The facility is planning to expand its production significantly and MHF's plan is to be producing around 100,000 market-size fish of three to 10 kgs – depending on the market – within a matter of about six years.

"We now have our first production run of fish and first batch of eggs, and 5,000-10,000 fish that are close to being weaned, which is the first (commercial) production in the United States for Atlantic halibut," said Brown.

"We'll be approaching 20-25,000 next year and about 50,000 in '07, and then 100,000 the year after that."

Brown said techniques developed at the centre in recent months have seen egg-to-adult survival rates climb from an acceptable but low rate of about 6% to some 10%. It is hoped to boost that still further through selective breeding, maintenance of optimal water temperatures and densities, as well as water quality and husbandry practices.

"At the moment it's taking at least three years to get a 3-kg fish and we want to reduce that still further," he said.

Brown said that currently the main problem has been getting the fish up to the nursery stage of about five grams. After that, they're extremely resilient to handling, transportation and almost all challenges.

MHF has established that there is strong demand for halibut which cannot currently be met by the wild capture fisheries because of declines in ocean populations.

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