

First Nation's Processing Plant a Major Regional Employer

Esgenoôpetitj First Nation owns and operates a thriving fish processing plant in the village of Bas Caraquet on the shore of Chaleur Bay in New Brunswick. Baie Chaleurs Fisheries processes around five million pounds (2.3 million kilograms) of snow crab annually and a \$4.5 million expansion is planned to update equipment, increase capacity, and add lobster processing by the fall of 2021.

Fishing is the major economic driver for Esgenoôpetitj. The First Nation took full control of the plant in 2015, which employs up to 166 people each year. Twenty-five per cent of these employees are First Nations.

“The processing plant creates jobs and additional revenues in communities where jobs are scarce,” says Clark Dedam, President and General Manager of Baie Chaleurs Fisheries. “It also provides pride in having a job.”

Esgenoôpetitj First Nation is a Mi'kmaq community of 1,929 registered band members who mostly live on Miramichi Bay. Snow crab is the biggest earner with 100 per cent of the profits going back to the community. There are three large community crab boats employing band members. A number of non-Indigenous crab boats also sell their catches to the plant.

“We used to process herring as well but the catches have gone way down,” says Dedam.

Since Esgenoôpetitj is located approximately 100 kilometers south of the plant, a “bunkhouse” for 40 workers was built next to the plant in 2016. It has two floors—one for men, and one for women—and features kitchens, showers and common areas. The \$400,000 cost to build the bunkhouse was divided between three levels of government and the First Nation.

“We have 12-hour shifts, so spending three or four hours a day driving back and forth made it hard to attract workers. And it can be dangerous,” said Dedam.

The bunkhouse is just for First Nations employees and helps ease the transition from their community to the plant and living in Bas Caraquet village. “They’re like a family there, eating supper together and so on,” he says. It has been very instrumental in the processing plant’s success and has attracted quite a few younger community members who also benefit from the wisdom and advice from the bunkhouse’s housekeeper and cook.

“It’s a very demanding job,” says Dedam, people are working up to 10 days straight. However, the season is only 8-10 weeks a year in which to make your livelihood.

Working in the plant away from the community can be a culture shock, so Dedam has found that an extended orientation is essential for new employees. “I’m very direct and say they must respect the rules and we’ll give them every opportunity to succeed.” That includes being more than plant workers and learning other aspects of the business from quality control to sales. “I’m happy to mentor someone to take my place one day.”



Baie Chaleurs Weight Scale. Photo Credit: Baie Chaleurs

Open communication is also important in a plant with workers speaking different languages and coming from different cultures. A First Nation foreman brings any personnel issues directly to Dedam so things can be worked out quickly. It's often some kind of misunderstanding he says.

"Hiring good people and having strong council support has been essential in building the business."

With a major expansion underway today at Baie Chaleurs Fisheries, it's hard to imagine that the plant was on the verge of bankruptcy not long after Esgenoôpetitj First Nation took full control of the business from their previous partners. Fortunately, a Mi'kmaq finance company, Ulnooweg Development Group Inc, provided a major loan to the business.

The community was also new to fisheries and fish processing so there was a steep learning curve to take on roles like finance and sales says Dedam. A consultant was hired to help run the plant at the beginning but overall, it was a lot of trial and error, and we're still learning he says.

"I'm proud of what we've accomplished. We ship the best darn snow crab all over the world."

First Nations commercial fisheries in Atlantic Canada generate about \$110 million in gross revenue every year and employ approximately 1,675 people. This includes seafood processing workers such as those employed at Baie Chaleurs Fisheries.



Baie Chaleurs Bunkhouse. Photo Credit: Baie Chaleursw



Bunkhouse Interior. Photo Credit: Baie Chaleurs

Best Practise:
*Business Diversification
and Shared Values*

