



PHOTO BY TREVOR RATE

Bella Coola Fisheries president Tim Turyk (left) looks over a dogfish shark. The River Road fish processor bought almost \$4 million worth of the species last year as the company uses it to produce its organic fertilizer.

Fertile idea for fish processor

Delta's Bella Coola Fisheries is turning formerly unwanted dogfish shark into organic fertilizer

BY MAUREEN GULYAS
mgulyas@delta-optimist.com

The riches of the sea have landed on a farm field in Delta in a cycle that links two of the municipality's most important industries.

It begins in an unassuming building that's been a fixture on Delta's River Road for 20 years: Bella Coola Fisheries.

It's dogfish season and the place is awash in hair-netted employees in white aprons and rubber boots. Actually, nearly every month of the year is dogfish season at Bella Coola as the Squalidae family of shark is harvested and turned into a myriad of products.

One of those is an organic fertilizer that's being tested on organic-grade potato, broccoli, bean and corn fields in Delta. It's already used across the United States on organic and conventional farms.

Back at the processing plant, fishermen have just dropped off a load of dogfish shark, delivering directly to Bella Coola via the Fraser River. Bella Coola president Tim Turyk paid Delta-based fishermen \$3.85 million last year for the fishery, harvested at one

per cent of the five per cent allowable catch.

Inside the white building, employees stand at an assembly line while the grey and white-spotted fish, celebrated in Haida native art, is expertly cut apart in a matter of seconds. There are several products for human consumption that come from the dogfish, says plant manager Glenn Johnsen, who's worked for Turyk since high school.

Off comes the spiny back, the top fins, lateral fins, tail and a mid-line cut that separates the back from the belly, then the head. Next, another cutter takes the creamy-coloured belly flap and processes it for shipment to Germany, where it's eaten as a smoked fish. The back of the fish goes to England, where people chop it down in its next incarnation: fish and chips.

But it's what's made out of the guts of the fish that's really interesting, especially for farmers and home gardeners.

"My wife won't let me use it in our garden anymore," jokes Michael Renwick, Bella Coola's business and marketing consultant.

The Renwicks live in Boundary Bay and boast one of the most extraordinary and healthy gardens on the street, all due, says Renwick, to the fish fertilizer.

Dogfish processing came late to Bella Coola, which has enjoyed success over the years processing salmon, roe and specialty

He was looking for someone to get interested in dogfish. It didn't click for awhile," Turyk remembers.

Eventually, the Americans' story caught Turyk's interest. A second fellow, also from the New England area, had developed the fertilizer made from the dogfish.

"It turned out he was strong on the technical side and weak in the marketing/business side," Turyk says.

From there, they got Renwick on board and the company began to develop a marketing plan.

Turyk hired 60 extra people just for the dogfish component.

"It's also given the regular people more work," he adds.

A few kilometres down River Road, Turyk has a second building in the Tilbury Industrial Park, where the fertilizer and cartilage is processed.

The cartilage is dried on 16-foot trays inside a 20-foot container and is sold as

an additive in a health supplement.

In another section of the building, products supervisor Jose Fonseca turns the heads and guts into organic liquid fertilizer by using a unique enzymatic low temperature process that produces a hyperactive bio-stimulant different than other similar fertilizers on the market, explains Renwick. Most competitors use extreme heat or acid to process fertilizer. The cold-pressed process locks in the nutrients and trace minerals found in the fish, Renwick says.

Bella Coola then ships the fertilizer, sold as Pacific Natural, in tanker trucks to farms in the United States.

Smaller containers and a tri-litre size go to home and garden stores, but is mixed differently and sold under another brand name. Pacific Natural is not available yet at your local home and garden store, but Renwick is working toward that goal.

As for local farms, Renwick says many farmers here hire companies to spread fertilizer so Bella Coola will have to approach those companies to get Delta farmers interested in the locally-made product.

A consortium of conventional farmers, who farm 1,000 acres of organic crops, is already trying it out. Heather Niven, an integrated pest management specialist, is conducting trial tests for Fraser Lands.

Niven is testing the Pacific Natural fertilizer on a crop of organically-grown potatoes on 64th Street near the Boundary Bay dike.

"I'm conducting trials on the fish fertilizer on its own and in conjunction with other products to find out what works the best," Niven says.

What she's looking for is improvements in a reduction in seed rot and an increase in the vigor of the plant.

"If they grow quicker, they'll be healthier and be able to withstand more. A healthy plant means you'll have less problems," she says.

Niven has spoken to some of the U.S. conventional farmers using the fertilizer and says some swear by it.

"If we get great results, Fraser Lands would be happy to use the product. They're always looking for something that's going to give them an edge."



PHOTO BY TREVOR RATE

Heather Niven checks on a 64th Street crop treated with Pacific Natural fertilizer.

gift items for domestic and international markets.

Turyk, a former triathlete, was approached by a couple of out-of-work fish processors from the east coast of the United States. Up until 1997, there was a large dogfish fishery in New England, but overfishing started a decline and people lost their jobs. "He knew we had dogfish here.