

Saskatchewan Municipal

Best Practice

Île-à-la-Crosse Fish Processing and Packaging Facility

CONTACT

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Project Date: 2016-Current

THE PRACTICE

Île-à-la-Crosse is a community located in northern Saskatchewan. It is the second oldest community in Saskatchewan. The present population of Île-à-la-Crosse is 1,296 according to Statistics Canada but is actually higher – in the 1500 – 1700 range. Île-à-la-Crosse is predominantly a Métis village with 81% of its population being Métis, and the remaining 19% are First Nations. The overarching goal of community development efforts in Île-à-la-Crosse is to become independent and self-sufficient, to become people who determine their own fate. In other words, we are working hard on becoming a sustainable community.

This goal both inspires change in our community and informs our decisions and actions. When deciding on our way forward we are looking at the long-term perspective, at how we can become the community where our children would be happy to stay and prosper instead of leaving for the big cities. We want the next generations to keep the culture and traditions of Métis and First Nations people while being successfully engaged in the 21st century economy and entrepreneurship.

Thus, our key priorities are economic development, support of local start-ups and entrepreneurs, building modern internet infrastructure, and education for our children and adults.

Île-à-la-Crosse has long identified that northern Saskatchewan could contribute significantly to meeting the global demand for high quality wild caught fresh fish. Additionally, the community has identified a need to help sustain a commercial fishing industry that will maximize revenues to fishers, create jobs and economic growth and establish a new model for the industry within northern Saskatchewan. Commercial fishing provides many members of the community with employment and income, and the addition of a fish processing plant would provide supplemental work for the community as well as benefit the local economy.

Although the community has had a 2,000 square foot facility since the 1970s, it has been only used for receiving and packing of local fish. For the community to grow the fishing industry in the north, a new, CFIA certified facility Île-à-la-Crosse Fish Processing Facility would need to be built. CFIA certification—or certification by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency—would enable the plant to access Canadian and international markets. Rather than simply packaging fish for processing by other facilities, the new

facility would be a full fish processing plant capable of value-adding to the primary product, including the processing of pike roe, filleting and deboning. As well, the plant was envisioned as a site for broad commercial fishing industry training course to increase the number of skilled Aboriginal workers in the north west. The building of the plant would incorporate an accredited carpentry and construction apprenticeship training program. Once operational, the plant could provide employment opportunities for those interested in market analysis and business development and provide for the long-term sustainability of the fishing industry in northern Saskatchewan. Employment opportunities would be ongoing, and provide for skills training and career advancement, in areas such as plant management, site maintenance, fish handling, warehousing, transportation, human resources management and best practices related to the eco-sustainability of the fishing industry.

THE PROCESS

No project of this kind would be possible without many groups and organizations each playing a role, and the fish processing facility is no exception. Leadership of the project came from mayor and council with a key role being played by the municipality's own economic development corporation, Sakitwak Development Corporation (SDC). While the leadership of the community recognized the opportunities that an expanded fishing industry would provide to the community, SDC was mandated to engage in a full-scale investigation to assess all aspects of the Île-à-la-Crosse fishery, including marketing options, with the objective in mind to gain control of the fishery and generate revenue for local fishers. In 2013, a new business entity was incorporated, the Ile a la Crosse Fish Company Inc, under joint ownership of the SDC and the Big Island Fisherman's Cooperative. Following the combined efforts of SDC, Big Island Fish Cooperative and with the help of Beaver River Community Futures, a business plan was completed for a 6000 foot federally-certified processing plant.

A key role was played by the village's administrative staff in overseeing the acquisition and rezoning of three residential lots to create an industrial area connected to local infrastructure and water and sewer. Because one of the lots was owned by SaskHousing, the village swapped one of their locally-owned lots with SaskHousing, with local students from the High School building a new social housing unit in exchange. The transferring of property and rezoning took some time, but what came out of it was a new industrial area where the fish plant could have a permanent new home within the village boundaries, and connected to the all important village services. In addition to the three serviced lots, the village also provided in-kind heavy equipment and backfill hauling. To alleviate nearby residents' concerns about noise, a 12 foot sound-proofing fence was erected between the facility site and all residential property.

With community support fully behind the project, all that was left to do was secure funding. Potential funding partners were identified. It was with the community's successful funding application to Western Diversification in 2015 that the final hurdle to the construction of the plant was cleared.

THE RESULTS

The new fish processing plant opened in November 2017, and was expected to bring in \$1.5 million in revenue in its first year and to employ 18 full-time workers and about 12 casual employees at the factory, as well as to provide work for at least 65 licensed commercial fishers. The plant is expected to process at least 750,000 kg of fish per year and is potentially able to process up to 1 million kg of fish per

year. The plant has been certified provincially and federally, and the Île-à-la-Crosse Fish Company is now selling high-quality freshwater fish in Canada, as well as to France, and is currently working on a branding and marketing strategy to expand international sales.

LESSONS LEARNED

Lessons Learned: The plant construction was completed successfully overall, with the plant being ready for season start-up in 2017, but in looking back on stresses experienced during the development of the project the following observations can be made:

- in anticipation of any cost overruns, which is often the case on projects of this magnitude, a local share offering introduced early in the project would have raised additional local funds to support the successful launch of the project;
- in anticipation of the potential for fluctuating supply numbers, as ended up being the case in year one due to quota numbers on Lac Ile-a-la-Crosse, the early hiring of a dedicated, experienced CEO focused on supply sources from across the region and beyond would have secured extra supply going into the company's first year of processing;
- projects of this magnitude can be very stressful for community leaders, adding ex-officio positions to the board of directors for the short term to provide opportunity to bring different levels of expertise to the discussions would have helped support local leaders through the decision making process;
- large construction projects are opportunities to employ many individuals from the community, so you need someone solid to steer the ship on the construction site. Hiring a neutral, experienced site supervisor from outside of the community would control cost overruns consistently and provide strong, consistent leadership on the construction site.

Observations from Another Standpoint: As a northern indigenous Saskatchewan historical (Métis) community, the project was supported by many funding agencies knowing the level of risk involved. However, it is worth noting that such risk was offset with the rationalization that a true northern Saskatchewan industry made much economic sense. The status quo was no longer an expectable option, and in fact, many have noted that without the creation of value added sensibility in the commercial fishing industry, there was greater risk of losing the industry altogether.

This project is a modern day break-through in establishing value-added capability in Northern Saskatchewan in an industry that over the past 100 years was a primary production industry that shipped its unprocessed wealth south via middle men and corporate agencies to large distant processing facilities. Northern indigenous people had absolutely no input or control into the marketing of their product. The Ile a la Crosse Fish Company now not only enables valued added production, it also grows incomes, at home.

The community grew through this process. The region along with its fishers understood that there needed to be a restructuring of their approach to this industry. They understood it needed to establish partnerships and alliances at all levels (local and regional) to extract the capacity, skillsets, focus, and commitment. To suggest that the elevated commitment and hard work ended at the ribbon cutting ceremony to officially open the facility is shortsighted. The community and fishers recognize that attention and hard work – today - is even more important.

It must be clearly understood, our fishers are no less entrepreneurs than any other in this country. They understand the commitment required to succeed in earning an income in an extremely hostile and changing environment - outside, on an open lake, with high wind chills, during short winter days. These entrepreneurs still feed their families even through the ebbs and flows of other industries which recently have caused economic stress in our communities. The Ile a la Crosse Fish Company provides some certainty now and into the future.