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Intelligence

Maine seaweed farming company secures a kelp dryer and promptly decides to share it

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By Lauren Kramer

With dried kelp making up 90% of the market, kelp dryer shows promise for helping seaweed farming companies to expand



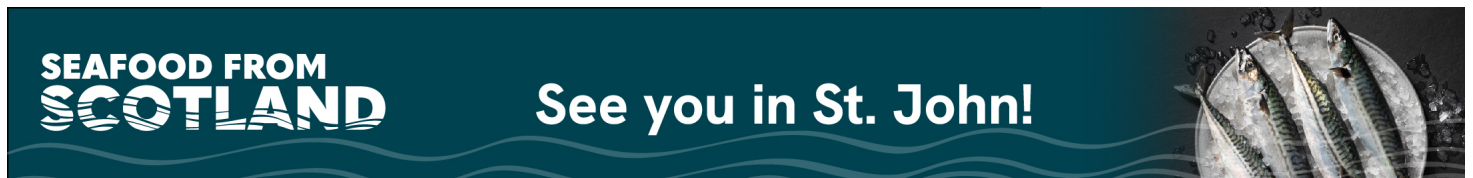
Oceans Balance in Maine secured an industrial kelp dryer from South Africa that has the capacity to process other local seaweed farming producers' plants. Courtesy photo.

With more U.S. seaweed farms coming online on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, producers' concerns are shifting from raw material procurement to processing. With well-established preferences for seaweed products in the marketplace, it behooves local producers to meet them to wean the market off of imports.

When Mitchell Lench, CEO of Oceans Balance in Biddeford, Maine, discovered an industrial kelp dryer that could dry up to 3 million pounds of farmed seaweed annually was available in South Africa, he jumped at the opportunity to purchase the \$650,000 machine and ship it across the sea.

Oceans Balance had been blanching and freezing its farmed kelp for years because there wasn't a suitable dehydrator available. It was limiting their business options.

"The kelp harvest always comes in at the same time of year, March through May, and you can't dry it outside if you're in a cold climate, so we had to freeze it," he said. "But frozen kelp has a limited market. Ninety percent of the [global kelp] market is dried kelp."



(<https://events.seafoodfromscotland.org/>).

The company had tried drying in greenhouses and using other dehydrating machines designed for wild kelp, but the temperatures were too high for farmed kelp. Lench needed a machine that could handle 10,000 pounds of kelp biomass per day. When it arrived in May, his prayers were answered.

The 50-foot-long, 17-ton machine uses belts to dry the seaweed at low temperatures, which preserves its nutritional properties. The seaweed is shred and spread evenly on the belts for drying, and the dehydrator can be operated by one or two people, so its labor requirements are minimal.



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Since its capacity is three times more than Oceans Balance requires, Lench formed a new company, Seaweed Farmer Services, offering dehydration and kelp milling to other kelp farmers as well as to agricultural producers in Maine.

“If you can dehydrate seaweed, which is very sticky, then you can dehydrate almost anything through this machine, so we think this will be of interest to agricultural producers. But in the meantime, we’re getting calls daily from kelp farmers in British Columbia, Alaska and Norway who have run into the same issue and who are interested in using our dehydrator,” he said.

“All the reports on the seaweed market point to the same problem: the issue with drying or dehydrating. And everyone wants to farm more seaweed, but there’s only so much frozen seaweed that the market is demanding.”

The new dehydrator is a game-changer, he added, one that will allow Oceans Balance and its competitors to compete more effectively in the global market for seaweed. Moreover, it will allow Oceans Balance to discontinue its frozen farmed kelp and to dehydrate other high-value wild kelp species in the future, including dulce and nori.

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