

SHUSWAP NATION TRIBAL COUNCIL – THE RIVERFRESH STORY

CFE PROFILE

OVERVIEW

The Pacific Integrated Commercial Fisheries Initiative (PICFI) program has helped the Shuswap Nation Tribal Council (SNTC) revive a historic inland salmon fishery and turn it into a successful diversified business that's generating revenues and winning recognition for quality, sustainability and business innovation.

The SNTC is made up of nine Secwepemc communities whose traditional territories include Kamloops Lake and a large part of the middle and upper Fraser and Thompson River systems. The Secwepemc people had a valuable commercial salmon fishery in Kamloops Lake until the early 1900s, when it was made illegal by the fisheries management of that time. Secwepemc leaders have worked for years to bring it back.

PICFI SUPPORT

The PICFI program has allowed the SNTC to build on those efforts and make the fishery a reality. More recently, PICFI Business Development Source (BDS) has helped SNTC expand that fishery into a regional seafood producer, retailer and distribution company called RiverFresh.

RiverFresh has developed a strong brand for its locally caught salmon, supplemented by wild seafood products from partners with similar brands and values. RiverFresh meets a regional market need, and brings social, political, environmental and economic benefits to Secwepemc people.

RiverFresh diversification was a natural business development that arose from efforts to make the commercial salmon fisheries a business success. The

SNTC holds the only commercial salmon fishing licences in the region, but these fisheries had to be rebuilt from scratch. RiverFresh director Murray Ross says, "we had no commercial infrastructure, no docks, no regional processing capacity nor distribution networks. We had to build it all from scratch."

SUPPORTING CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

The work started in 2004, before the PICFI program, when the SNTC fisheries arm, and the Secwepemc Fisheries Commission (SFC) started hosting community forums to develop direction for new commercial fisheries initiatives based on traditional knowledge and values.

The resulting vision statement requires SNTC's commercial fishing enterprise to bring socio-political, environmental and economic benefits to the Secwepemc people. Guiding principles were also written including: to prioritize food, social and ceremonial fisheries over commercial fisheries; to use selective fishing techniques where possible; and to manage the commercial fisheries on a communal basis. Ross says, "following from our vision, our immediate focus is to achieve economic viability for the enterprise."

After the community direction was established, the SFC started feasibility studies to assess the viability of re-establishing commercial fishing for sockeye and chinook in upstream locations within Secwepemc'ulucw, the Secwepemc homeland. PICFI funded the studies, then provided fishing licences and operational funding, which helped to pay for boats, gear, docks, and all the other essential commercial fishing infrastructure.

There are many advantages to inland salmon fisheries, the biggest being sustainability. Inland fisheries can be more



SHUSWAP NATION TRIBAL COUNCIL – THE RIVERFRESH STORY

CFE PROFILE

selective with less harmful by-catch than downstream or marine fisheries. They can more easily target only the strongest stocks and let weaker ones pass by unharmed. Inland fisheries also help to meet the growing regional demand for locally-sourced food. RiverFresh products are being successfully marketed as local, wild, healthy and sustainable.

The location of the fishery does present some challenges. It didn't take long for the RiverFresh managers to realize that they weren't in a position to process their own fish economically, and probably never would be. It took time to find a reliable processing partner further south that could do the job and deliver value.

Two other challenges faced were how to sell most effectively and how to cope with the annual variability in salmon supply to the region. The solutions to these problems led to a retail storefront with a distribution arm in Kamloops, and diversification of RiverFresh's product lines to include seafood from partners such as the Haida Nation-owned *Haida Wild* and *Simply West Coast*.

DEVELOPING ECONOMY, JOBS AND OPPORTUNITIES

RiverFresh's marketing, sales and distribution activities are managed by Nikki Johnston, who came to the job in 2014 with 20 years of experience in sales and marketing. She has spearheaded the bold and energetic branding of RiverFresh as a 100% First Nation-owned business offering high-quality sustainable, traceable seafood that is certified Ocean Wise by the Vancouver Aquarium's popular, nation-wide sustainability assessment program.

RiverFresh offers sockeye and chinook salmon in value-added formats such as fillets and steaks and smoked and candied varieties. Most is vacuum packed and blast frozen, while some is in shelf-stable packaging that

doesn't need refrigeration. From its partners RiverFresh sells numerous other products such as halibut, ling cod, sablefish, smoked sablefish, coho, prawns and tuna. It also sells other value-added products such as soups, sausages, bacon, and seafood pizza.

In addition to selling through the retail store, RiverFresh is a regular presence at local farmers' markets where it has made great progress in educating consumers on the value of buying high-quality, local, wild seafood. They also market to different food-service sectors and special events such as pow wows. Currently, RiverFresh can deliver within a day's drive of the Kamloops store, but plans to expand sales into Alberta soon.

Under Johnston's management, expansion and diversification has been thoughtful and controlled, and development to date has been solid and impressive. This led to RiverFresh being given a 2015 BC Aboriginal Business Award for outstanding achievement.

While RiverFresh is managed by Johnston and Ross, they get their direction from the SNTC leadership, which consists of the nine chiefs of the Secwepemc communities.

THE FUTURE

The company has five staff and is planning further expansion. Ross says, "we want to wean ourselves off PICFI funding as soon as we can. We have broken even in some years, and we're aiming to make enough money to be a sustainable, viable business over the long term." Fishing and market success to date indicate the opportunity is there to be developed.

In the meantime, RiverFresh offers useful lessons for other commercial fishing entities looking to establish and develop their own business. RiverFresh demonstrates the importance of initial study, careful planning, incremental development, and a clear and realistic assessment of strengths, weaknesses and unique value proposition.