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MacKnight's founder joins entrepreneur on land-based sea bass project

The sea bass RAS company has \$10 million in investments to date, and brought on MacKnight smoked salmon's founder to help push the product into the market.

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One thing that drew James MacKnight to Connecticut-based Ideal Fish was the company's President and CEO Eric Pedersen.

"Eric Pedersen started this company in the basement of a house," MacKnight told **IntraFish**. "I started my smoked salmon business in the basement of my house. That was an immediate connection as far as I was concerned."

MacKnight was impressed by Pedersen's vision for creating the first US-based company to use a recirculating aquaculture system (RAS) to produce branzino, also known as Mediterranean sea bass.

The fish are being farmed in a 63,000 square-foot repurposed manufacturing site housing a 12-tank aquaculture system.

MacKnight, who joined Ideal Fish in January, learned about the project last year when he was approached by Pedersen to help with the company's marketing strategy. Ideal Fish is the consumer-facing brand for Great American Aquaculture, which Pedersen also heads.

He said the approximate total investment in Ideal Fish to date is \$10 million (€8 million), with aquaculture equipment and engineering firm Pentair being its largest shareholder.

"We're also one of the few RAS companies in the world raising seagoing fish in saltwater on land. We bring in fingerlings, fly them into JFK [International Airport] and take them to our facility. They go into our quarantine or nursery where they stay up to three months. We watch them very closely," he said.

Ideal Fish imports its fingerlings from a hatchery in France but ultimately plans to be vertically integrated.

He expects the company to harvest 250,000 pounds of branzino in its first year, with deliveries starting in June to select foodservice and retail customers on the US East Coast.

"Because we're so close to NYC and also Boston, we're looking to go direct to high-end restaurants and also retailers who are interested and excited to have this product offered to them," he said.

Ideal Fish is also using the waste byproducts of fish cultivation to grow vegetables and other fresh produce in an 8,000-square-foot indoor aquaponics system it expects to have running by July.

"What you have today is a factory that is about 95 percent complete. We are currently finishing out construction of our processing and distribution area," he said of the entire project.

MacKnight, who has seen the aquaculture industry evolve for over 25 years, said when he started River & Glen, a sustainable seafood purveyor in the 2000s, the word sustainable didn't have the same cache with consumers it does today. That company closed in 2014 because it couldn't raise enough money to keep operating.

"If I look at RAS today, without out a shadow of doubt it's the epitome of sustainability if done correctly," he said. "It addresses the majority of open-cage ocean farm issues that have plagued our industry so long: escapes, environmental issues, hormones, antibiotics."

Ideal Fish is also partnering with Seattle-based Trace Register to gill tag each of its fish with a QR code that will show every step the fish took along the way: from fingerling to harvest to transportation.

He said the company's goal is to eventually replicate its state-of-the-art RAS around the country and the world.

"We're not just looking to raise branzino, but we're looking to raise several different species of seafood, which is also pretty exciting," he said.