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Construction wraps up on first US seabass RAS farm

By Jason Huffman

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📷 The truck Ideal Fish plans to use deliver branzino to Boston, Massachusetts, and New York City, New York. Photo courtesy of Ideal Fish.

Construction is a little more than a week from being completed on what a US company asserts will be the US's first branzino aquaculture facility and the world's first to raise branzino, or European seabass, indoors.

Ideal Fish, a company co-owned by Eric Pedersen, a long-time water technology expert and former General Electric employee, and Pentair Systems, a water technology firm, will celebrate finishing the processing and distribution area -- the last part of the 63,000-square feet, 28-tank operation -- on June 28, the company told *Undercurrent News*.

Pedersen, who began working on the creation of Ideal Fish in 2013, knows other recirculating aquaculture system (RAS) fish producers have had a tough go of it in the US, but said his company has the “solid management team” needed and is “well capitalized for the long haul.”

Also, the timing is right, he said.

“We are seeing a number of very favorable indications within the RAS industry, the most compelling of which is the emergence of capital formation”, Pedersen said. “The timing is excellent. The market is looking for another form of sustainable aquaculture. The technology is now there.”

Ideal Fish now expects to harvest its first 1,000 lbs of branzino, also known as Mediterranean sea bass, at the beginning of September, James MacKnight, the company’s sales and marketing director, told *Undercurrent*. MacKnight told *Undercurrent* in March at the [Seafood Expo North America conference](#), in Boston, Massachusetts, that the company would hold its first harvest in May, but he said it decided instead to let the fish grow out more to insure it maintained a consistent supply once it started harvesting.



James MacKnight, sales and marketing director for Ideal Fish, a Waterbury, Connecticut, company using RAS to grow branzino.

Ideal plans to harvest 113t of branzino in its first 12 months, but ultimately reach a goal of 140t per year. The facility is capable of holding more than 300,000 fish at one time, MacKnight said. Branzino typically grows to a harvest weight of 500 grams each, he said.

Ideal Fish will begin by selling whole round fish, focusing on a target market of high-end retail stores and restaurant groups within a 150-mile radius of Waterbury. That includes Boston, a city of 673,000 within 132 miles of the company’s facility and New York City, a city of 8.5 million within 92 miles.

It owns a single truck that it will drive to each city twice a week.

“Positioning a RAS facility near a major market is imperative for the company’s success,” Pedersen said. “Local supply carries a lot of importance today. We can deliver within 24 hours of harvest with no antibiotics, hormones or chemicals.

Ideal’s domestically produced branzino will compete mostly against imported pen-raised fish.

The US imported 7,585t of branzino worth more than \$47m in 2017, up 21% from the 6,260t imported in 2016 and 49% from the 5,076t imported in 2014, according

to data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Greece (43%) and Turkey (33%) are the US' two largest sources of the fish.

And Ideal Fish will have a few other advantages, too. Beginning in August, the company plans on tagging gills with QR codes during processing so consumers and retailers can trace the history of their fish.

It plans on employing several other new technologies, too, including one that will allow it to reuse 95% of its water. Sometime in the fourth quarter it plans on implement a new aquaponics system that will allow it to use fish waste to grow some 75,000 pounds of organic fruits and vegetables annually.

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