



Our Story

The Ile-a-la Crosse Fish Company Incorporation (IFCI) is a federally certified fish handling facility; a processing and packing plant, jointly owned by the community economic development corporation—Sakitawak Development Corporation (SDC) and the local fishermen— Big Island Fishermen’s Co-operative. With continued support from the local region— Turnor Lake, Dillion, Buffalo Narrows, Beauval, Dore Lake, Canoe Lake, Cole and Jans Bay, the Ile-a-la Crosse Fish Company was revitalized in 2014.

The company directly employs 25 local people, 80 commercial fishing businesses with up to 250 support workers. This focus is forging a new direction for northern Saskatchewan’s freshwater fish industry. The company processes and supply’s high-quality sustainable products of walleye and pike.

History

Located on a peninsula in northwest Saskatchewan, Ile-a-la Crosse is the second oldest community in Saskatchewan— founded in 1776. Historically and geographically, Ile-a-la Crosse has always been a regional economic hub as there are four river systems flowing into the local lake. Also known by its Cree name Sakitawak, translates to where the rivers meet. With no road access in the early 1800 and 1900’s, this river system made the community easily accessible by the local people, fur trading people, and voyageurs. Thus, gave rise to the Ile-a-la Crosse Fish Company in the early 1900’s. People within the region depended on the fish company as a source of income. The commercial fishing industry was an integral part of our northern Saskatchewan economy and continues to be a way of life for many of our people. Revitalized in 2014, the Ile-a-la Crosse Fish Company focused on this historic economic philosophy and capitalizing on the rich local resource to build and keep wealth within the community/region.

Purpose

The purpose of the Ile-a-la Crosse Fish Company is to provide a stable economic support system to our regional fisheries. Our fisherman/woman having direct ownership of the company not only provides financial incentive to them, but enriches their trade with input of the direction and involvement in company. Thus, giving them a great sense of pride.

By processing value-added products directly, it gives us the ability to control the quality of our fish— right from the lake to processing and packing. It gives us full control of our great tasting delicious product which is evident through the award-winning product line under the Coop Gold Pure brand. We take a great sense of pride in providing freshwater northern Saskatchewan fish to the people of western Canada and will continue sharing this great tasting product from our northern lakes.



Challenges

Quota Limits

After discussion with the Ministry of Environment representative on April 14th, it was brought to our attention the last index netting for fish population for the Ile-a-la-Crosse Lake was completed in 2013. This means 8-year-old data has been used to make assumptions and base regulations to set the quota limits. Since 2013, the walleye species has increased abundantly and remained healthy the past 7 years evident by the annual kg's. Because no index netting has been completed since 2013, there is no account to ascertain this increase in the walleye population. Old data was and is still used to make assumptions for quota limits which was obtained from prior years (2005-2012) when the walleye population was significantly lower. You can see the walleye population per kg before and after 2013 below:

Lac Ile a la Crosse - Commercial Production History				42,734 ha			
*Round weight equivalents in kg							
Year		Whitefish	Walleye	Pike	Lake Trout	Mullet	Total KGS
1997-98	*	7,200	4,886	100,055	58	148,149	260,348
1998-99	*	5,688	14,072	128,566	19	124,738	273,083
1999-00	*	6,115	34,404	126,540	63	163,400	330,522
2000-01	*	12,755	27,784	124,057	48	245,797	410,441
2001-02	*	26,735	38,984	128,048	39	311,929	505,735
2002-03	*	25,285	51,066	90,320	58	220,021	386,750
2003-04	*	15,846	40,040	79,040	11	146,889	281,826
2004-05	*	24,977	13,327	103,004	86	230,294	371,688
2005-06	*	12,104	4,514	118,302	84	219,737	354,741
2006-07	*	6,634	5,749	50,703	24	70,654	133,764
2007-08	*	11,051	12,081	72,350	15.6	162,103	257,600
2008-09	*	9,344	13,599	95,233	108	110,907	229,190
2009-10	*	2,239	4,155	23,253	4	82,781	112,431
2010-11	*	10,482	18,683	73,416	128	147,928	250,637
2011-12	*	15,935	22,651	93,868	98	?	132,552
2012-13	*	17,495	30,088	87,441	50	?	135,074
2013-14	*	9,936	35,835	112,840	96	?	158,707
2014-15	*	11,553	42,064	103,329	122	?	157,068
2015-16	*	10,532	49,692	101,138	64	?	161,426
2016-17	*	8,716	48,980	90,401	22	?	148,119
2017-18	*	11,329	46,947	103,303	54	?	161,633
2018-19	*	10,997	48,008	65,858	?	?	124,863
2019-20	*	17,490	43,859	58,349	?	?	119,698
4 YRS		12,133	46,949	79,478			138,559
% of Quota		0.225	0.939	0.631			
10 YRS		12,446	38,681	88,994			
% of Quota		0.230	0.774	0.706			
Quota		54,000	50,000	126,000	?	?	230,000

The result of this policy is our fisheries has ceased fishing earlier in the season, mid-March rather than on April 15th, because the walleye limit near in and around the 50,000 kg limit. When you reach a limit for 1 species, you must cease fishing for the other species. This is evident by the decrease in our pike numbers over a 4-year average—our historic dominant species. You can reasonably conclude and suggest increasing the kg limit for walleye to resolve this problem



immediately if index netting is not performed in our area. New data is needed to make assumptions on quota limits. This not only helps the fisherman, but our local economy.

The last increase in quota limit for the Ile-a-la Crosse lake was in 2005— went from 40,000kg to 50,000kg for walleye. The data at that time did not warrant any increases like it does today. How was this decision made at that time? You can see from numbers there was a spike in the walleye population from 2000 to 2004, however, decreased over the next several years. This example is still used today to justify restricting any increases to quota limits, which has been an unfair assumption as index netting was not used to increase the quota limit in 2005. The biggest threat to our fisheries is overfishing our lakes, which is why we have adopted our individual fisheries allocation limits throughout parts of the year. This ensures we align with our Ile-a-la Crosse Fish Company sustainability statement. The data clearly depicts we are fishing in a sustainable manner. There is definitely room for an increase in quota limit of walleye without harming the fish population. Any consideration for an increase would be greatly appreciated.

Eco Certification

There has been discussion of eco-certification of our northern Saskatchewan lakes for marketing purposes and certain customer, in particular, the European markets. This certification gives the consumer confidence that our fisheries is handled in a sustainable matter. While this is good to for a consumer, it adds significant costs to fisheries with no direct benefit. This cost in fully incurred per fisheries and does not guarantee any increase in sales. Costs can range up from \$150,000-\$200,000 to achieve certification.

There 5 stages to achieve and maintain certification:

1. Pre-certification (take up to a year)
2. Full assessment (1 to 2 years)
3. Certification
4. Annual Audits
5. Reassessment- every 5 years.

There are 3 certifying bodies for eco certification. The primary one and only one to certify a freshwater lake in Manitoba is Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). Experience in this area from the governing body is still a work in process and limited as they usually certify larger scaled fisheries on the coast lines. MSC bases the certification on 28 sustainability indicators. They appoint a 3rd party auditor called a conformity assessment body (CSB), to audit these areas. So MSC employs added organizations to verify any findings from our lakes and is not directly involved in the auditing process.

As you can see, there are a lot of layers and costs to achieve eco-certification for no guaranteed direct benefit. With the hardships our industry has faced over the past decade, this is another obstacle to overcome if consumers expect any certification of this sort going into the future. Government support will definitely be needed to achieve and maintain eco-certification.



By-Catch and Freight

Our Ile-a-la Crosse Fish Company has found success in direct markets for walleye, pike, whitefish, and trout. We have grown year over year since inception and consumers have been happy with our frozen filleted products. Although this is the case, we have yet to find direct markets for our by-catch— mullets. Because of this, we still require our partnership with Fresh Fish Water Marketing Corporation (FFMC). There is uncertainty surrounding their future, which makes it of strategic importance and vital for us to find a direct consumer for by-catch within the next 3 years. We have reached out to the provincial Saskatchewan Trade and Export Program (STEP), but they made it clear it would be difficult to find a buyer for only a seasonal fishery (December to April). With this being said, we will continue to search for buyers by attending national and global food trade shows and conventions. This focus will expand our network with hopes of securing more consumers.

The cost of freight has increased over the past decade. This is to be expected with the increase in fuel and cost of assets. Freight subsidies were historically offered from the province to assist fisheries in the past, but were discontinued in 2012, after the abolishment of the FFMC agreement. These funds for a freight subsidy were reallocated else where and there has been no assistance since. This has hurt the fisheries industry and is clearly highlighted by the closure of the Wollaston Lake facility— where freight subsidy was essential to get fish to market. Although this is an extreme case, freight is a challenge for our Ile-a-la Crosse fisheries and area. Certain lakes, which were historically sourced, are no longer fished because of this. The result is our local economy is financially impacted, which carries over socially as more families become reliant on social government programs. This brings into question saving of finances in one area— freight subsidy, increases output or spending in another area— social programs. To stimulate the fisheries in northern Saskatchewan, we created the Ile-a-la Crosse Fish Company. The province has been relatively inoperative with assistance since 2012. Any assistance of any sort from the province would stimulus our fisheries industry.