

LIQUID GOLD, SILVER LINING

Maple industry needs Crown leases, trained workers

by George Fullerton

Eric Caron, president of the New Brunswick Maple Syrup Association (NBMSA), is acutely aware that many players in this industry took a hit as the COVID-19 pandemic cast a dark cloud over restaurant and tourism markets – but he believes there may be a silver lining.

In his address at the group's AGM, held by Zoom on Jan. 30, Caron said that while sales in the hospitality sector declined last year, demand in food stores increased substantially as consumers adjusted to doing more home cooking. Quebec producers witnessed record high prices through 2020, and demand actually cut into global maple syrup reserves. On this basis, Caron speculated that prices are likely to rise in 2021.

The NBMSA is in growth mode, which means there is potential to take advantage of a strong market. In the past year, membership has increased from 80 to 93, while associate members increased from 37 to 52. Total area in production grew from 10,863 hectares to 12,241 hectares, and capacity increased from just shy of 2.5 million taps to nearly 2.75 million.

In his report to the membership, Caron provided an update on the NBMSA's ongoing lobbying to convince the provincial government to increase the amount of Crown land available for maple leases. He said the group's efforts have brought some positive results, and the Department of Natural Resources and Energy Development (NRED) has taken steps toward incorporating sugar bush development into its new forest management plan.

The NBMSA committee devoted to this issue has expressed satisfaction with LiDAR analysis of maple potential on Crown woodlands, though Caron pointed out that it will take some time for NRED to integrate this data with other forest objectives, including timber and conservation. In the meantime, the NBMSA has launched an initiative for members to prepare business development plans specifying their desire



Eric Caron, president of the New Brunswick Maple Syrup Association, believes pandemic-related market shifts may actually result in higher prices for 2021. (Contributed photo)

to access Crown land for sugar bush development, and this information will be shared with the NRED planners.

Louise Poitras, the NBMSA's executive director, reported that the advance payment program, which the group delivers on behalf of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, is increasingly recognized as an important business tool. The program provides maple producers interest-free loans of as much as \$100,000, and interest-bearing loans of as much as \$900,000. Five years ago, a total of \$1.4 million was made available to the industry, and that figure had grown to \$2.6 million in 2020. Poitras said this financing has helped producers with cash flow, allowing them to hold onto their syrup inventory and market it later in the year when prices increase.

Poitras also talked about the NBMSA's work with the Collège Communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick

(CCNB). One project is the development of a maple syrup grading course at the Grand Falls campus. It is hoped that producers, by becoming well versed in the physical attributes and parameters that determine grade, will be better able to provide consistent high-quality syrup to consumers and processors.

Another education initiative involves developing a comprehensive maple industry training program at the CCNB Bathurst Campus. Poitras said maple producers need employees who are proficient in a wide range of skills – from tree tapping and pipeline maintenance, to operation and repair of highly sophisticated processing equipment, to packaging and value-added manufacturing. To meet this demand for skilled labour, the training program will be offered as a series of modules focusing on specific tasks, and those who complete the entire suite of courses will be certified as maple

production workers.

CCNB expects to begin rolling out the program in 2022. Poitras said other commodity organizations are watching this process, with an eye to using it as a template for their respective industries. She pointed out that skilled workers are key to productivity and profitability in all sectors, and effective training programs are beneficial for economic development across the province.

This winter, Poitras dedicated a good deal of her time to helping producers navigate COVID protocols, especially with respect to travel from Quebec. "If we cannot get workers and equipment through the border, for some operations this coming year will be a total loss," she said.

The level of participation in the virtual AGM was comparable to live attendance numbers in recent years, and Poitras said response from the membership was very positive, with most indicating they would be interested in using a similar format next year.



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N.B. syrup stats

The New Brunswick Maple Syrup Association (NBMSA) reports that the province's total production in 2020 was 561,000 gallons (7,431,904 pounds) – a slight decrease from a record-breaking 598,000 gallons in 2019. Globally, New Brunswick is the fourth-largest producer, after Quebec (13,210,000 gallons), Vermont (1,855,000 gallons), and New York state (672,000 gallons).

Average production in New Brunswick was 2.85 pounds of syrup per tap, which worked out to average revenue of \$7.90 per tap for reporting operations.

Canada exported maple syrup to 65 countries in 2020, and the total value of those export sales increased by more than 20 percent. New Brunswick's maple syrup exports increased 17 percent compared to 2019.

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