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Entrepreneurs Creating New Markets for Maine Seaweed

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In fits and starts, Maine's seaweed industry is growing. Entrepreneurs are trying to create new markets for seaweed-based products, like fertilizers, pet medicines, condiments, even granola. But as harvests rise off Maine's coast, so do some concerns that the resource needs protection. Fred Bever reports.

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It's a busy morning at Saco's winter farmer's market, where Tom Roth sets up the tables and display stands that carry the numerous seaweed-based products he and his wife Kelley make and sell under the name "VitaminSea."

From seaweed-accented salts to nutritional supplements for pets, Roth's offerings are popular. Even the hot-dog lady at her cart outside the market's door is a fan.

"Hey how are you?" Roth says, greeting Sandra Specken. "Good," Specken replies. "I was telling your wife my daughter's coming today, just to buy that sea stuff."

"Hey we'll sell it to you wholesale," Roth says. "Come on now."

The big hit is a granola bar made with seaweed, blueberries and dark chocolate. The Roths had been baking as many as 1,000 bars a month. They now expect to triple their sales.

Roth collects the seaweeds himself, and contracts with harvesters up and down the coast to bring in a wide variety of edible sea plants. "We have dulse, we have aleria, we have kombul, so there are several different varieties we harvest at different times of the year," he says.

These seaweeds are not necessarily an easy sell, particularly to the uninitiated. That's where Rod Williams comes in. "On several new food products we're very cautiously playing down the fact that there's seaweed in the product," Williams says.

Williams was one of the branding pioneers who helped get Tom's of Maine products noticed by national markets, and more recently he's been doing the same for Kate's Butter. Now he's a VitaminSea investor.

"VitaminSea - the challenge there is to get to the people who are interested in health and nutrition, to appeal to that category of buyers," he says. "But also do it on a subtle basis to reach out to the mass market, who may not want to try anything with vitamin-seaweed, to get them to try it. Once they try it they are hooked on it, they love it."

While demand for seaweed used in health foods is on the rise, Roth still relies on lower-profit, bulk harvests of rockweed, a seaweed variety that's used strictly for animal or agricultural purposes. It's the plant with the matted fronds you see draping across barnacles when the tide goes out on a rocky shore.

Roth still harvests rockweed by hand, sometimes, and brings it back here, to a wharf behind Becky's Diner in Portland. He sells it to local lobster packers. "We just do this

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because it fills a void," he says. "It's exactly how we started before we moved on to bigger equipment. So here we are back in the beginning."

But it's the modern mechanical harvester Roth bought a few seasons ago - a sort of super wet-vac - which allows him to collect and sell rockweed in massive quantities, some 200 tons this year. He dries it on outdoor racks and sells it as fertilizer, or as a nutritional supplement for cattle. He gets about \$1,100 a ton.

That's pretty good money, and Roth is not the only one who's expanding use of the resource. "We've estimated that the value of the fishery is probably like \$20 million a year - animal feed, supplements, nutritional foods, health items, those sorts of things," says

Linda Mercer, science director for the Department of Marine Resources.

Mercer says the number of seaweed harvesting licenses issued in Maine has been growing - to 114 this year. And while Mercer says that seaweed is abundant along the coast, there are concerns about overharvesting of the relatively slow-growing rockweed. The state now requires harvesters in Cobscook Bay to file management plans, following reports that some patches were damaged by aggressive cutting.

"The plants are at the very base of the food-web, so when you start talking about cutting down the base of the food-web, that's when people like me start to get very nervous," says Robin Seeley, a Cornell specialist based at the school's marine lab on Appledore Island, off the Maine coast. She says the growing rockweed harvest may be a threat to the entire ecosystem.

"Rockweed in particular has functions that range across 150 other species. So when you take the rockweed you start to affect potentially 150 other species that depend on it," Seeley says.

Seeley would like to see a moratorium on rockweed cutting until more extensive research is done on the effects of its harvest, and stronger regulations are created.

Harvesters like Tom Roth say that's not necessary. "People are starting to see that you can earn a living processing and handling sea plants. You've just got to handle them correctly. I think an apprenticeship, maybe, is something that should go into effect, like they do with lobsters. They have to serve an apprenticeship before they get a license."

DMR's Linda Mercer says an apprenticeship program might be a good idea. Her agency is working on an comprehensive assessment of the state's rockweed fishery and may propose a statewide management plan next year. After that, she says, the state will take a look at how best to manage other seaweed varieties as well.

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