

More maple, please

New Brunswick syrup producers renew call for new Crown allocations

by Matt Jones

The New Brunswick Maple Syrup Association's 2023 annual general meeting, held Jan. 27-28 in Fredericton, was largely focused on ensuring continued growth and prosperity for this industry, but it was also a celebratory event marking the organization's 20th anniversary. About 100 delegates attended, taking in presentations on various aspects of the maple business, while enjoying some in-person socializing and networking.

"It went very, very well – a successful AGM," said Louise Poitras, the group's executive director. "Producers, equipment companies, guest speakers, people at the trade show – they were

monitoring, automatic equipment, and stuff like that."

Another important development was the 2015 allocation of an additional 4,400 hectares of New Brunswick Crown land for maple sugar production. Those leases were grabbed up very quickly, driving growth in the industry. In the past decade, production numbers have steadily increased every year except 2018, when an extraordinarily warm spring resulted in low yields.

The 2022 syrup harvest was the best yet, exceeding 800,000 gallons. "It was a good year," said LaPlante. "On top of that, every producer is now more connected with knowledge. It makes



The New Brunswick Maple Syrup Association is celebrating its 20th anniversary, and calling for an additional 12,600 hectares of Crown sugary licences. (Contributed photos)

all very impressed, and they were happy making connections again. There were definitely some deals that were signed there, I can tell you that. But there was also a lot of information that was given to the producers."

Jean-François LaPlante, secretary-treasurer and past president of the New Brunswick Maple Syrup Association (NBMSA), said the biggest change during the past 20 years has been the adoption of new technologies that improve efficiency. "Workers are becoming more rare," he said, "but now we have

the crop a bit higher. It's happening because of a combination of factors. The ones that we can control, we try to control as perfectly as possible."

One of the challenges the industry faces now is stagnation. Three years ago, the NBMSA requested that an additional 12,600 hectares of Crown land be made available for sugar bush leases. The group identified specific blocks that would be suitable, in many cases adjacent to existing maple syrup operations – but as of this year's AGM, the government had

not provided new allocations. According to Poitras, some of the candidate areas are being harvested for timber, while maple producers wait.

“They’re cutting into our profits and our growth plans,” she said. “That’s across the province, not just in the north. It’s really unfortunate, and we can’t stress enough that it’s our priority as an association.”

If the requested allocations were made available, the province’s syrup industry could grow, and any labour shortfall could be made up by temporary foreign workers, Poitras said. “In our industry, if you haven’t started looking into this, you’re already late,” she remarked. “Foreign workers will be part of the solution.”

AFR’s inquiries with the Department of Natural Resources and Energy Development did not shed light on the prospects for new maple sugar leases. “Managing the Crown forest requires balancing the allocation of maple stands to timber, conservation, and sugary users,” said a department representative. “As the government continues its long-term planning regarding these uses, it is very important that we consider and address our duty to consult obligations to First Nations before decisions are made.”

The spokesperson highlighted the department’s maple silviculture program, which provides \$280,000 annually to improve growth and productivity on existing Crown and private sugar bush operations – but there was no reply to a follow-up question about the timeframe for consultations on new allocations.

“We’re waiting for the DNR management plan,” said LaPlante. “It goes the same way for everyone – blueberries, maple, even the wood industry are waiting for that plan to come out. We hear that it should be out in the first quarter of 2023, so I’d like to see that.”

TECHNOLOGY


In addition to updates on association business, the AGM featured presentations on several issues related to the industry’s future. On the technology front, representatives of CDL Sugaring Equipment spoke about how maple producers in Quebec have made progress toward their goal of a 42 percent reduc-







Louise Poitras, executive director of the New Brunswick Maple Syrup Association, is concerned that Crown blocks identified for potential sugar bush development are being harvested, undermining the industry’s growth plans.



Stéphane Guay, a biologist and maple expert with Érabie et Chalumeaux, spoke at the New Brunswick Maple Syrup Association’s 2023 annual general meeting, held Jan. 27-28 in Fredericton.





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tion in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, thanks to new equipment such as advanced concentrators and evaporators. (CDL's publications state that the company can help producers obtain grants and financing for switching from oil-fired evaporators to units that run on wood chips or pellets.)

The CDL reps also discussed efficiencies and other benefits that can be obtained through automation and "nano-monitoring" technologies, for better control of sugar bush management. Finally, they spoke at length about a new product known as "maple nectar," produced through ultrafiltration and low-temperature concentration of sap, resulting in a stable liquid that can be stored at room temperature. At 60-70 degrees Brix (percent sugar), maple nectar is seen to hold potential in the food processing industry, as a natural sweetener that retains all the nutrients present in maple sap. CDL's technology centre is planning large-scale production of maple nectar for the 2024 season.

On the topic of training, Yvan LeBlond, from the Campbellton campus of the New Brunswick Community College, spoke about a maple syrup production program that is currently in development. The curriculum will cover all aspects of the industry, including terminology, forest ecology, the use of equipment, safety, and applicable standards and guidelines. The certificate program, comprising 467 hours of instruction, is best suited for "outdoorsy self-starters," LeBlond said, and it is scheduled to launch in 2024.

Looking further afield to address workforce needs, Gladys Aubé, a consultant for Arimé Canada, spoke to delegates about the company's programs for recruiting temporary foreign workers. Arimé's contracts are for 24 months, with deductions for a portion of lodging costs. Aubé emphasized that the company can recruit workers who meet specific criteria – such as being tall enough for tapping trees, for example. However, it is not possible to guarantee that workers will be able to speak a certain language, so some preparations may need to be made to ensure everyone can communicate effectively.

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Another perspective extending beyond Canada's borders was supplied by Jean Lamontagne, executive director of the International Maple Syrup Institute (IMSI). This group brings together producers, associations, processors, distributors, exporters, packers, equipment manufacturers, and technology institutions, to advocate on behalf of the entire industry. As an example of these efforts, Lamontagne recalled heading off a movement to place warnings about lead content on maple syrup bottles in California, under Proposition 65. Instead, the IMSI worked with the state to implement a lead elimination program to ensure that the product is safe, and the warning labels were avoided.

(Matt Jones is a freelance writer living in Fredericton, N.B., with a cat named Bowie. He writes for a variety of trade publications covering various sectors, including forestry, farming, service trucks, cranes, and aquaculture.)

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