


## Seal pelts selling briskly



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### Industry has taken a tanning, but processor thinks it's bouncing back

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The seal tannery is bustling on a sunny September morning, as workers handle large stacks of pelts in various stages of processing.

The work here continues year-round as workers tan and dye the tens of thousands of seal skins that were harvested this spring on the sea ice around Newfoundland.

"This is a production facility more like Terra Nova Shoes than a fish plant," Carino Processing Ltd. CEO Dion Dakins says as he takes The Telegram on an exclusive tour of the facility.

It's steady work, and it employs around 25 people full time in the community of Dildo. The people in the plant are happy for the work and the contribution to the local economy.

"Lot of caring people; good outport people," says worker Tony Johnson as he walks by.

It's labour-intensive too, he says.

The pelts get tossed in sawdust, soaked in brine, treated with tanning chemicals, shaved, dried, dyed and then examined and graded before they're ultimately sold and shipped to market.

But the whole works of it exists on a precarious position; Dakins says matter-of-factly that if the company hadn't

received a loan from the provincial government this spring, the plant wouldn't be operating this year.

That would likely have been disastrous for the province's seal industry; minimum processing requirements forbid the shipping out of raw pelts, and the Carino facility is the only tannery currently operating in the province.

"In 2006 we had five tanneries operating in Newfoundland and Labrador on seal products employing the same number of people in five communities around Newfoundland and Labrador," Dakins says. "This industry will be successful when that many tanneries or more are operating again in Newfoundland and Labrador. That will be true success — taking the available quota based on sound science."

Right now, that goal is a long way away. The hunt this year was fairly successful, but harvesters still only took a fraction of the total quota set by DFO.

And while Dakins is at great pains to make it clear that the provincial government loan was not a subsidy — it bears interest, and the terms of the loan require repayment — he also wouldn't be in business without it.

Workers are very much aware of the political position of the seal hunt. They keep track of the Russian seal ban, and ongoing issues in the European Union.

"We hang in here," says Wayde George, who's been working in the industry for more than 30 years. "We have ups and downs. ... I just hope it's going to keep going the same."

Animal rights groups like the Humane Society International and the International Fund for Animal Welfare have painted the government loan as a subsidy to the industry. Workers at the plant are very aware of the loan, and thankful for it.

But Dakins says the subsidy label has been a major problem for him in other parts of the world; it makes it more difficult to sell the pelts at market value.

In nearly every aspect of the tannery, the politically charged position of the seal hunt lurks.

Some of the pelts get dyed a light silvery "polar" colour, dilute enough that you can still see the animal's spots. That product is very popular with many Newfoundlanders, who are proud to wear seal products.

But many, many more pelts get dyed dark brown or black. Those are more popular internationally, and they're often used for hats and the trim on coats as a cheaper fur that's comparable to mink.

When asked where they're selling the pelts, Dakins flatly refuses to say.

"It's been a standard thing within the industry, we're not divulging our markets anymore," he says. "What we don't want to do is give animal rights groups the opportunity to find out where our markets are and go in and undermine our marketing initiatives."

Wherever they're going, business seems to be good for the moment. When Fisheries Minister Darin King announced that the government would be putting up a loan to Carino in April, Dakins told reporters the money would be paid back by Christmas.

He says they're still on track for that; they've sold their entire backlog of previous year's pelts, and at the current pace, they'll sell out of this year's stock by the time the hunt begins again next spring.

When asked how he characterizes the current business climate around seal products, he responds with one word: "optimism."

He says he's talking more and more about the ecological aspects of the seal hunt, and how it's a sustainable source of fur, oil and meat.

"The explosion of seal populations globally and the decreasing availability of wild-caught fisheries. That's what's changing. People are starting to realize you can't ignore one species," he said. "People are starting to realize that

management has to be considered on all levels of the ecosystem. You can't manage one portion and ignore all the rest."

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