BCSGA AGM & Conference
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Building the Next Generation of BC Shellfish Farming

Opening Keynote Address — Nico Prins, Executive Director, BC Shellfish Growers Association

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to our 2026 AGM and Conference.

It's great to see so many familiar faces, and hopefully a few new ones as well. I'd like to welcome our growers, industry partners, government representatives, researchers, sponsors and everyone who has taken the time to join us today.

First and foremost, I'd like to acknowledge our members. Shellfish farming in British Columbia is built on the commitment, investment and hard work of individual businesses, families and communities. Many of you have been involved in this industry for generations, while others are relatively new. Regardless of how long you've been involved, you're all contributing to an industry that has a tremendous amount to offer this province.

I think it's important that we start by recognising that.

We have an industry worth being proud of, and an industry with considerable potential.

BC has an extraordinary marine resource, a long history of shellfish cultivation, experienced growers, established businesses, a strong reputation for quality and access to international markets.

We produce a product that increasingly aligns with what consumers, markets and society are looking for: nutritious, sustainable, low-impact protein.

Our industry supports coastal communities, creates employment, contributes to local economies and provides an important connection between our coastal environment and our food system.

And yet, despite all of these advantages, I think we need to be honest with ourselves about where we are today.

Where are we as an industry?

BC shellfish farming represents a relatively small part of the broader agricultural and seafood economy, but its importance shouldn't be measured by its size alone.

The industry comprises approximately 155 businesses, operating across a diverse range of coastal communities and growing areas. BCSGA represents more than 65% of BC shellfish licence holders and over 90% of production.

In 2024, the reported farm-gate value of BC shellfish production was approximately $36 million. We have thousands of hectares of licensed growing area, established hatchery and nursery operations, processing infrastructure, and businesses supplying both domestic and international customers.

Oysters remain the backbone of our industry, accounting for the majority of production, but we also have important mussel and clam operations.

We have businesses that have developed recognised brands and established export relationships, and we have operators who have invested heavily in developing new products, production systems and markets.

But there is another side to this picture.

We are an industry that has struggled to realise its full potential. Production growth has been challenging, business confidence has been affected by uncertainty, and the operating environment has become increasingly complex.

We have businesses that want to invest but are reluctant to do so without greater certainty. We have growers dealing with licensing and tenure delays that extend over many years. We have experienced significant food safety disruptions, environmental pressures and increasing costs of doing business.

And we have to ask ourselves: Are we creating the conditions necessary for this industry to grow, invest and succeed?

I don't think we can confidently say that we are.

The challenges we need to confront

Over the past several years, much of the BCSGA's work has focused on a number of recurring issues.

Regulatory certainty is probably one of the most significant.

The licensing environment for shellfish aquaculture in BC is challenging. The division of responsibilities between federal and provincial agencies, lengthy processing timelines, expired tenures and uncertainty around applications all create difficulties for businesses trying to plan for the future.

For an industry that relies on long-term investment in marine infrastructure, growing areas and production capacity, this uncertainty has real economic consequences.

We cannot expect businesses to make significant investments when they don't know whether they will have the regulatory certainty or tenure security to support those investments.

Food safety is another area where we have experienced significant challenges.

The norovirus-related disruptions over the past couple of years have demonstrated just how vulnerable our industry can be to regulatory decisions and market access interruptions.

The economic consequences of extended closures can be enormous, particularly when they affect concentrated production areas such as Baynes Sound.

We absolutely recognise that public health protection and consumer confidence must come first. That is not in question.

But we also need food safety management systems that are proportionate, evidence-based, transparent and informed by a sound understanding of shellfish production, distribution and risk.

We need to continue working towards better investigation processes, better data, improved scientific understanding and more consistent decision-making.

Environmental management is another important consideration.

Our industry depends on healthy coastal ecosystems. We have a direct interest in protecting the waters in which we operate, understanding cumulative impacts and ensuring that environmental decisions are supported by appropriate monitoring and science.

But environmental protection and responsible aquaculture development should not be competing objectives. We need the information and regulatory frameworks that allow both to advance together.

And then there are the challenges that exist within our own businesses.

Seed supply, hatchery and nursery capacity, mortality, changing ocean conditions, labour availability, infrastructure, access to capital and the cost of production.

These are interconnected issues. A constraint at one point in the value chain can have consequences throughout the entire industry.

And this brings me to something I think is particularly important.

We cannot look at shellfish farming simply as a collection of individual growing licences or individual businesses. We need to look at it as an industry and as an interconnected value chain.

Moving beyond the status quo

If we are serious about building the next generation of BC shellfish farming, we need to think about how we improve the entire system.

Let's start with production.

There are significant opportunities in genetics, selective breeding, broodstock development, hatchery and nursery technologies, and improved production systems.

We need to understand why mortality occurs, how we can improve survival, and how we can make production more predictable and resilient.

We have research institutions, scientists, hatchery operators and growers with considerable expertise in these areas. There are already some promising initiatives underway.

But we need to ensure that research translates into practical improvements for businesses.

We need better collaboration between researchers and growers, better access to production data, and a stronger focus on the technologies and practices that will actually improve productivity.

We also need to look at markets.

For an industry that exports a substantial proportion of its production, market diversification and resilience are increasingly important.

We have a strong reputation for BC oysters and other shellfish, but we should not assume that our existing markets will always be available or that existing products will always deliver the best returns.

There are opportunities in product development, value-added processing, new export markets, improved branding and developing stronger relationships with buyers and distributors.

Growth doesn't necessarily mean producing more shellfish. It also means capturing more value from what we already produce.

And importantly, we need to consider the economics of our businesses.

We need to understand where value is being created and where it is being lost. We need to consider how we improve margins, reduce production risk, attract investment and make businesses more resilient.

Ultimately, we need shellfish farming to be an attractive business proposition, not simply an attractive industry in principle.

The role of government and the regulatory environment

Of course, none of this happens in isolation. Government has a critical role to play in creating the conditions for industry development.

We need regulatory certainty, more predictable licensing processes and better coordination between the agencies responsible for aquaculture.

We need modern food safety management that is informed by science and proportionate to risk.

We need environmental monitoring and decision-making that are supported by appropriate data and indicators.

And we need to see shellfish aquaculture recognised not simply as a regulatory responsibility, but as an economic development opportunity.

I have often made the point that aquaculture is agriculture.

We are producing food, creating employment, investing in businesses and contributing to food security. Shellfish farming deserves to be considered within the broader context of agricultural development, food production and economic growth in British Columbia.

That means having a more coordinated approach to industry development, research, investment and market access.

It also means recognising that the industry cannot be expected to grow simply because there is available marine space or because there is international demand.

There needs to be an enabling environment.

This is an important distinction: we are not asking for less regulation. We are asking for effective regulation that protects the public interest while allowing responsible businesses to operate, invest and develop.

What does the next generation look like?

So, when we talk about building the next generation of BC shellfish farming, what are we actually talking about?

I don't think we are simply talking about the next generation of farmers, although that is certainly important.

We are talking about the next generation of businesses, production systems, technologies, markets and regulatory frameworks.

We should be aspiring to an industry where:

- Businesses have confidence to invest and make long-term decisions.

- Growers have access to reliable seed, improved genetics and better production technologies.
- Research and innovation translate into measurable improvements in productivity and resilience.
- Food safety systems are modern, science-based and proportionate.
- Environmental sustainability is supported by meaningful monitoring and good management.
- Processing, distribution and market development create greater value for BC-grown shellfish.
- There are opportunities for new entrants and the next generation of farmers to build successful businesses.

And perhaps most importantly, we should be building an industry that is economically viable and attractive enough for the next generation to want to participate in it.

Because ultimately, an industry cannot have a future if it cannot attract investment, people and businesses willing to take it forward.

I also think we need to be more ambitious in how we approach industry development.

We spend a considerable amount of time dealing with the immediate challenges facing our businesses. Much of that work is necessary, and the BCSGA will continue to do it.

But we also need to lift our heads and ask what a stronger BC shellfish industry could look like in five or ten years.

Could we significantly increase the value of our production? Could we improve productivity and reduce mortality? Could we develop new markets and products? Could we attract more investment into hatcheries, nurseries, processing and technology?

I believe there is considerable opportunity, but realising it will require a more coordinated and deliberate effort.

The role of BCSGA

As an association, we have an important responsibility in this process.

Our role is to represent growers, advocate for the interests of our members, bring forward solutions and ensure that the industry's voice is heard by government and other decision-makers.

But I also believe our role needs to extend beyond responding to problems as they arise.

We need to help shape the future direction of the industry.

That means strengthening our relationships with government, research institutions, industry partners and other agricultural organisations. It means identifying opportunities for investment and development. It means supporting innovation and helping translate research into practical outcomes.

And it means continuing to bring growers together to identify shared priorities and work towards common solutions.

We won't always agree on everything. Our industry is diverse, with different species, business models, growing areas and commercial interests.

But we do share an interest in having a strong, viable and sustainable shellfish farming industry in British Columbia.

That common interest needs to be the foundation of our work.

Closing

I want to finish by coming back to the theme of today's conference: **Building the next generation of BC shellfish farming.**

I think we need to ask ourselves some difficult questions:

- Are we satisfied with the current trajectory of our industry?
- Are we creating the conditions that encourage the next generation to enter shellfish farming, invest in businesses and take over from those who have built this industry?

- Are we making the most of the natural resources, knowledge and opportunities available to us?
- And perhaps most importantly, are we thinking ambitiously enough about what BC shellfish farming could become?

I don't think the answer to all of those questions is yes, but I also don't think we should lose sight of the opportunity.

We have the natural resources. We have the people. We have the knowledge, the experience, the research capability and the markets.

What we need now is a collective commitment to address the constraints, make better use of our opportunities and create the conditions for this industry to succeed.

As we go through today's discussions, I encourage everyone to think beyond the immediate challenges facing their own businesses.

Think about the entire industry. Think about the opportunities that exist across the value chain. Think about what needs to change, what we can do differently and what we need from one another.

We won't solve everything today. But we can start identifying the priorities, building relationships and developing a clearer direction for where we want to go.

The opportunity is there. The question is whether we are prepared to do what is necessary to realise it.

I believe we can build a stronger, more productive, more competitive and more resilient BC shellfish industry.

And I believe that is something worth working towards.

Thank you for your continued support of the BCSGA, thank you for your commitment to this industry, and I hope you have a productive and constructive conference.

Welcome, everyone.