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Building a Company, Strengthening a Community:
Maine MEP Helps Seafood Pie Producer Invest in Washington County

Trescott, Maine: When seafood lovers’ take the first bite of a Maine Fresh lobster pie, they may appreciate the all-natural quality ingredients. And they may notice on the label that most of those ingredients are sourced locally from Maine producers. But what many consumers may not recognize is the remarkable vision that brought the seafood pies to market or the way in which the products’ sales are helping strengthen communities in Washington County.

Cobscook Bay Company, the seafood pie producer, was founded in 2008 with an explicit social mission: develop a sustainable business model, using local resources and employing local residents that can generate profits to help support a regional nonprofit organization.

The company was the brainchild of the founders of the Cobscook Bay Community Learning Center. For more than a decade the Center has served the region by providing a broad range of educational and cultural programs. Recognizing that fundraising for the Center would be constant challenge in one of the poorest counties in the United States, a group of the Center’s founders conceived of the idea of creating a business to generate revenue for the Center. The business could provide funding support, while creating a rural business development model that could help transform Washington County communities.

Guided by this vision, the founders led by Center Director Alan Furth partnered with local businessman John Phinney to establish the Cobscook Bay Company. Enlisting the active involvement of James Beard Award-winning chef Sam Haywood and the expertise of Jeff Johnson, founder and former CEO of Pemberton’s Gourmet Foods, the Cobscook Bay Company identified a unique market niche for seafood pies and began production in late 2010.

As demand for Maine Fresh products grew in the first year, the company turned to the Maine
Manufacturing Extension Partnership (Maine MEP) to evaluate its production processes. In 2011 Maine MEP Project Manager Bill Whittier undertook an assessment of the firm’s manufacturing activities from receipt of raw materials to the shipment of finished product. After inspecting the facility and its hazard analysis and critical control points (HACCP) program, Whittier worked with COO John Phinney to develop a Gantt chart-based work breakdown for each product under several demand scenarios. These charts enabled Phinney to adjust his staffing to reduce idle time and channel employee efforts to more value-added activities.

Whittemey and Whittier next developed a Statistical Process Control system to monitor the ingredient portioning at several key points in the manufacturing process. This resulted in more consistency and predictability in the plant, which generated significant improvements in production planning and waste reduction.

The Maine MEP project manager then created a measurement system to monitor the plant’s performance against its goals. Key metrics included labor utilization, seafood cost variance and total cost per case produced. Once implemented, this new system enabled plant managers to monitor results daily so that they could respond to trends immediately.

The Maine MEP initiative has achieved significant cost savings for the company. Cobscook Bay Company CEO Jeff Johnson estimates that the project activities have produced $25,000 in cost savings over the first year and helped him avoid a $5000 investment he had expected to make.

“Working collaboratively with Bill Whittier at Maine MEP has greatly enhanced our company’s employee productivity, production flow and operational efficiency. Not only has the initiative helped us analyze the critical details of our manufacturing process, but it has created a valuable partnership between our company and Maine MEP,” said CEO Jeff Johnson.

With increased profitability for the company, the entire region benefits, since 25 percent of Maine Fresh profits are allocated to the Cobscook Community Learning Center.

Maine MEP Chairman Bruce Pulkkinen hailed the venture’s success as a tribute to Maine entrepreneurship and a community spirit that brought people together to launch the endeavor.

“The Cobscook Bay Company demonstrates the importance of vision and partnerships in today’s competitive economy. At a time of fundraising challenges for every nonprofit, the Cobscook Learning Center hit upon an innovative idea for creating a revenue stream to support the organization. The social mission of the company attracted the involvement of an award-winning chef and a highly successful CEO who contributed their talents to the effort. I’m pleased that Maine MEP was able to bring our expertise to the company and help it build a foundation for future growth,” stated Pulkkinen.

Maine Fresh seafood pies can be found at any Hannaford Supermarket, Shaw’s Supermarkets in Maine, and Whole Foods markets from Maine to Virginia, as well as at selected independent grocers in New England.

About Maine MEP

The Maine MEP is an affiliate of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) under the U.S. Department of Commerce. The national MEP system is a network of manufacturing extension centers that provide business and technical assistance to smaller manufacturers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Through MEP, manufacturers have access to more than 2,000 manufacturing and business “coaches” whose job is to help firms make changes that lead to greater productivity, increased profits and enhanced global competitiveness. For information on the Maine MEP program, please visit www.mainemep.org, or phone 1-800-MEP-4MFG.