Aquaneering: Filtration, live haul specialist

SAN DIEGO, CA - If you’ve ever had a chance to talk business with Mark Francis you know why his company, Aquaneering Inc., is so appropriately named. He is an engineer with the hands-on savvy that is especially important when you’re working with live animals. Aquaneering uses an engineering approach to design and manufacture equipment for the specific needs of fish and shellfish growers.

One other thing that is apparent when you talk with Francis, he believes in the aquaculture industry. As it has grown and been redefined by technological advancements, Francis has shaped his company in response to that progression.

Aquaneering was started in the mid-1980s as a backyard fabrication shop making equipment for local California fish farmers. Today it is internationally known as a manufacturer of custom systems for biological water filtration along with its staple live fish transport equipment.

“Our systems are for high water quality applications,” explained Francis. “People who demand very clean water, such as labs and hatcheries, can benefit from our systems.”

The Aquaneering fluidized bed biofiltration systems can be integrated into existing operations, custom designed for research or commercial projects, or purchased “off the rack” by a new facility.

“We took bio filters, added bead filters and pumps, and created systems that work together for a variety of applications, so that our customer doesn’t have to be an engineer,” Francis said.

Francis said that he somehow knew at an early age that he wanted to be involved with fish, “even though there wasn’t much fish farming” going on at the time.

“I had an interest in agriculture, had raised animals. So I just had to figure out a way to do it.”

His undergraduate degree at the University of Maine was an odd combination of coursework, since there was no aquaculture curriculum available at the time.

“I was a little bit of a loner in my degree,” Francis said. “I took all the fish science courses I could find, and agriculture engineering courses, then tried to define a career in aquaculture.”

Out of college, Francis was hired by George Ray at Fish Producers in Niland, CA. Ray was expanding his catfish operation, and it was an opportunity for Francis to learn practical pond culture and live fish transport from every possible angle.

“All of the equipment was hand-made. Everything. They made their own feeders, paddlewheel aerators, everything was hands on,” said Francis. “I was hauling fish, and then, when we needed equipment, I learned how to weld and made it.”

The next step for Francis and his young company was exposure to recirculation technology that he gained working with Dr. Dallas Weaver, owner of Scientific Hatcheries Inc. in Huntington Beach.

The fluidized bed biofilters developed and refined for production aquaculture by Weaver proved to be a good fit for Francis and Aquaneering. The company added the design and manufacture of filtration systems to its live haul tank specialty.

Aquaneering Fluidized Bed Biofilters are available in complete system packages or as stand-alone biofilters. The company also offers a combination package that includes a bead filter for mechanical separation and the fluidized bed for biological filtration to guarantee superior water quality in a recirculating system.

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Aquaneering provides technical support to help customers select the package that meets the feed rates and water quality demands of their operations.

The company’s live haul tanks are high capacity, fully insulated, and all-welded, double-wall aluminum construction. They are available in both pickup and bobtail models, as well as in custom sizes and models.

Standard tank features include recessed stainless steel slide gates and T-handles for personnel safety and to eliminate snagging of catch nets and loading baskets.

The tanks are sold to commercial fish producers and state and federal hatcheries throughout North America.

**Business strategy**

In 1997, Francis made a decision for “planned growth” and took his company from relying on domestic sales, to international status, step by strategic step.

“I couldn’t keep up with the demand,” he explained, “so we knew we had things figured out. We were getting repeat business and good feedback.”

Francis purchased equipment to do all of the metalwork in-house, and moved Aquaneering headquarters into a 6,500 sq. ft. location with a setup for metal and plastic fabrication. He also embarked on a national advertising campaign, set up a marketing plan, and generated higher visibility for his products.

It worked. Francis, who speaks Spanish, along with Aquaneering’s recirculating systems specialist Sam Courtland debuted their equipment in South America at the Aquaculture Congress in Guayaquil in 2000. The Aquaneering list of clients and filtration installations now includes operations in Honduras, Panama, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Saudi Arabia, the US, and most recently, Japan.

**Customer satisfaction**

The picture of Aquaneering is not complete without talking about customer satisfaction and service.

Francis said that repeat business is the company’s stock in trade. He learned early on that service and product development go hand-in-hand.

“When a piece comes back and you have to fix it, you learn real quick what not to do. Our reputation is based on quality products and service.

“I can walk into my shop at any time, any day of the week, and over 90 percent of the work is repeat business,” said Francis. “Our products are good and they last, so the people who come back are either replacing old equipment or expanding.”

Future plans for Aquaneering are, at this point, more of the same, with expanded international sales to producers in Central and South America, and now Japan.

California’s power crisis is a consideration for Francis.

“We were looking to go into water gardens, more along the lines of aquariums,” he said. “But people in California can’t afford the power to keep everything going.”

Francis said he has seen the aquarium growers hardest hit so far, and his own live seafood display tanks for restaurants are in less demand.

“They’re expensive to keep,” he explained of the electric power requirements.

New products will emerge from Aquaneering, such as additions in instrumentation and control equipment. Francis is optimistic about the market for his products.

“Business is good for aquaculture equipment manufacturers. There’s a good, strong climate for aquaculture right now.”

Zoë Alexis Scott

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