

Pressing matters

Maine Natural Oils makes seed-based oils right at the farm

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Doug Callnan and his partners expect their pressing business will grow with Maine farms

Four business partners in northern Maine have launched a new mobile business that, ensconced in an 18-wheel trailer truck, is four times as large as a milk van or ice-cream truck, and certainly doesn't announce itself with a cute jingle. But it nonetheless offers the same type of old-fashioned, door-to-door service.

The movable business, Maine Natural Oils LLC, presses canola and mustard seeds into culinary or commercial oils. Rather than having farmers truck their seeds to a pressing operation, Maine Natural Oils will transport its press, hopper and other equipment along Aroostook Country's long roads to remote farms. The business either buys the oil, or leaves vats of it with farmers to use as biodiesel. (The cold-pressing technique makes oil ideal for both sautéing gourmet dishes and powering a beaten-up old tractor.)

The partners — Doug Callnan of Houlton, Steve DeMaio of Wade, and Peter Sexton and John Cancelarich of Presque Isle — designed the portable processor as an easy way to launch their business. The mobile press is also a way to introduce farmers to the press itself, which they plan to sell for \$8,995 apiece as a dealer for AgOil, an Indian company with an American distributor based in Wisconsin. Callnan says he's not worried about copycat competitors. "I think if we're the first ones out there, we'd be more established," he says, adding that he expects most farmers would buy the press to make biodiesel for their own use.

Being located in a truck, too, is a cost-saver. “To get started, we don’t need that much space,” explains Callnan, a lanky Houlton native who last year sold half his company, Aroostook Milling. The four partners invested about \$50,000, and expect revenues in the first year to reach \$45,000, before doubling the second year and climbing to \$250,000 the third year.

Callnan says he hopes, though, that the mobile press is just a temporary phase. “I’d like to grow out of it soon,” he says, and move into large, stationary facility once orders start flowing.

This month, Maine Natural Oils revved up the seed press for the first time in its huge parked truck, beginning the process of transforming 24 tons of canola seeds and six tons of mustard seeds into oil. The seeds — which are not genetically modified -- were bought last year from three County farmers.

A gallon of either the canola or mustard oil will be priced at \$25, Callnan says. The press can process one ton of seeds a day, producing 1,400 pounds of meal and 600 pounds of oil. After bottling the oil, Callnan and his partners will sell the meal as animal feed or to improve soils.

While most Americans are accustomed to canola oil, they are less familiar with spicy mustard oil, a popular cooking oil in India. Callnan says Maine Natural Oils will largely market this oil to Indian-Americans in Boston and New York City.

At the moment, the company has no sales contracts. But then again, the company hasn’t had a product up to now. The owners hope to woo salad dressing companies and fine food purveyors. So far, Trader Joe’s and distributor Crown o’ Maine Organic Cooperative have both expressed interest, according to Callnan.

Meanwhile, Callnan says his business could benefit Maine farmers. There are between 4,000 and 5,000 acres of canola in Maine, but all the crop — about 7 million tons — is sold to companies in Quebec. “We’re the first company to buy from these farmers here,” Callnan says. And if all goes well, they’ll be buying more of the crop in the future. “If a salad dressing company wanted to buy from us, we could buy a bigger portion of canola,” he says.