

RPC helps businesses see plenty of green

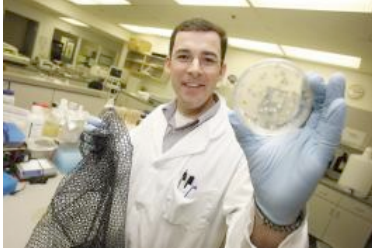
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Technology | Fredericton company offers natural solutions to technical challenges faced by N.B. businesses

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For The Daily Gleaner

The scientists and engineers at RPC hope to offer natural solutions to the technical challenges faced by businesses in New Brunswick.

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The Daily Gleaner/James West Pho

GREEN TEAM: Ben Forward holds up a container with bacteria removed from an industrial fishing net. Forward is part of a team at RPC that's trying to come up with a way to prevent seaweed, barnacles and other sea creatures from attaching themselves to fishing nets.

They're working to help the province's fishing industry become greener by developing bacteria to replace the toxic chemicals that keep its nets clean.

"This will be a much greener method, because it's derived from something that nature is already using out there," said Ben Forward, RPC's senior scientist for food fisheries and aquaculture.

Forward has spent the past two years researching different strains of probiotic bacteria for use in aquaculture.

The goal of this new project is to find marine bacteria that produce natural antifouling compounds that would help keep the nets and bottoms of boats clean of seaweed and barnacles.

Forward said seaweed buildup tangles nets and slows boats down, which is bad for business.

He said many of the antifouling coatings that prevent this buildup contain heavy metals such as copper, which is toxic. He said finding an alternative is simply a question of working with nature.

"If you look at something like a muscle shell, you'll find that there's no seaweed or barnacles on it," Forward said. "And the reason is that its surface has bacteria that produces compounds preventing those organisms from settling. So it's a matter of isolating that strain of bacteria and putting what nature already gives us to the best use."

RPC CEO Eric Cook said green initiatives are crucial to corporations that hope to stay in business.

"It's not just a fad. Consumers are beginning to demand businesses improve their environmental track records. You've got it coming from all sides," Cook said.

"Even in the investing community, you're starting to see venture capitalists looking for green companies and green solutions. I think it's critically important to be conscious of environmental aspects, because people are not going to be accepting of businesses that do otherwise."

This is just one of many initiatives RPC is pursuing.

It has operated in Fredericton for 46 years and works with businesses in the province's key industries including aquaculture, energy, and mining.

It has more than 900 clients, including Cooke Aquaculture, McCain Foods and NB Power, while helping hundreds of small businesses and entrepreneurs get their start.

Their collaborations are moulded to each company's needs, with the overall goal of helping to support the province's economy by offering aid to the technical problems New Brunswick's corporations encounter.

Cook said there are other business applications for bacteria.

Another that RPC is pursuing involves unleashing bacteria onto ores in order to break them down and leach minerals out - using less energy than drilling.

He added that being environmentally conscious, in more than one way, is an ideal lure for New Brunswick's scientists to stay and work in their home province.

"We're in a global economy now," Cook said. "So your competition's not just down the street anymore - it's around the world - and you need to have the best people and the best equipment in order to compete.

"We help provide those solutions to New Brunswick's businesses."

Forward Thinking is a Thursday feature that explores research and development, as well as new technologies in our community. Send your comments and story ideas to news@dailygleaner.com.