

By [SHOMIK MUKHERJEE](#) | smukherjee@times-standard.com | Times-Standard

Nordic Aquafarms pressing ahead on Samoa Peninsula plans

Aquaculture company enters permitting stages for \$400M venture



Nordic Aquafarms executive Marianne Naess said the company is hitting the ground running with its permitting process. (Shaun Walker — The Times-Standard file)

Terra-Gen hoped to build a \$300 million wind farm in the Eel River Valley. After Humboldt County's Board of Supervisors voted last month to reject Terra-Gen's proposal, leaving the company with millions of dollars in sunk costs, 1st District Humboldt County Supervisor Rex Bohn worried aloud the decision would deter similar big projects.

"Too many unknowns," he said.

Nordic Aquafarms still hopes to build a nearly \$400 million land-based fish farm on the Samoa Peninsula. And while Nordic Executive Vice President Marianne Naess declined to speak directly about Terra-Gen's project, she said her own company knows how to avoid a similar outcome.

"It's important to show benefits to the community," Naess said. "The team that we're employing will actually be living in Eureka. You have to be part of the community and, of course, be a steward of the land."

While Nordic and Terra-Gen both promised Humboldt County local jobs, fresh industry and tax revenue, area officials have noted important distinctions between the companies.

“One of the things Nordic does well — I think Terra-Gen did try to do it as well, but maybe not as successfully — is embedding themselves on the ground in the community,” said Humboldt County Supervisor Virginia Bass, whose 4th District includes the site of the proposed aquafarm. “Nordic has been exceptionally good at the outreach.”

On Thursday, Nordic announced the hiring of a new executive, Shawn Harriman, who’s already moved to Humboldt County and starts work Monday as senior vice president of projects of the company’s California venture. (The Norwegian company is also seeking to build a fish farm in Maine.)

Eureka-based engineering firms GHD and SHN have partnered with Nordic as it begins the early stages of permitting. The company recently entered a dialogue with the local engineering union about hiring only prevailing-wage labor for construction.

“Early on, the communication is a lot better with labor than what the Terra-Gen folks did,” said Jeff Hunerlach, a district representative at Operating Engineers Local 3. Hunerlach cited the company’s efforts to engage the unions right away as a positive step, noting that Terra-Gen waited until a late hour to finalize talks.

“The way I see Nordic Aquafarms going about things (compared to Terra-Gen), it’s two whole different companies,” he said. “I think (Nordic) is saying and doing all the right things at this time.”

Terra-Gen project official Nathan Vajdos declined to comment.



Nordic Aquafarms plans to construct a land-based fish farm on the Samoa Peninsula. Pictured here: an aquaculture operation in action. (Nordic Aquafarms contributed)

Humboldt County Planning and Building director John Ford worked with Terra-Gen until the very end. He’s already begun the same with Nordic executives, discussing project elements that could draw public opposition.

Ford said his concerns included hazardous materials on the Samoa Peninsula, part of a toxic brownfield left behind by defunct pulp mills. He said the farm's impact on Samoa's viewshed could be another issue.

"But I don't think Nordic is going to raise the same degree of opposition (as Terra-Gen)," Ford added. "I can't say it won't, but it doesn't have the same kind of impacts where broad segments of the community see it and are affected by it."

Wiyot tribal administrator Michelle Vassel said she hasn't closely looked into the aquafarm proposal; like many others, she opted to attend Terra-Gen's public hearing in November instead of Naess' cross-town meeting the same night. Terra-Gen's wind project had been planned for the Bear River and Monument ridges, land sacred to the tribe.

That the wind turbines involved so much sunk cost and grief at days-long public hearings was regrettable — and avoidable, Vassel said. All any developer needs to do is take Native American concerns seriously, she said.

"It's really important to seek out the tribe on the front end of these development phases and work with us as an equal," Vassel said. "Come to the table at the beginning, rather than superficially checking a box and providing us with information."



Nordic Aquafarms signed a lease last year to build at the Samoa Peninsula. (Times-Standard file)

As Nordic moves forward, it may face other opposition: Humboldt County's commercial fishing industry. While some fishermen have publicly worried about what some see as a looming threat to their livelihood, others have joined Nordic officials in downplaying talk of competition.

“While the Humboldt Fishermen’s Marketing Association does not endorse this particular project, we believe and hope that we can come to some sort of mutually beneficial relationship,” said association vice president Ken Bates.

“Nordic Aquafarms are real people,” Bates added. “They’re super reasonable, and they’re coming to the table to talk to us with the same goals in mind.”

Shomik Mukherjee can be reached at 707-441-0504.