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Points for the Ministers Svolvær 160412

Dear Sirs/Madams

Firstly I would like to apologise for not being at the conference today, but unfortunately it would have cost me 2 nights away from home or driving for 12 hours and two ferry rides to join you. This brings me to my first point.

Logistics

For the past 10 years I have worked as a specialist small supplier of seafood to the gourmet markets in Scandinavia and Europe. This has not been an easy journey, with much of my time spent learning the logistics routes of north Norway to allow my products to reach my customer in pristine condition. This has been a hugely time consuming and sometimes very expensive affair. Most people I know within the same sector have given up (or not even started) solely because the logistics are too expensive or the routing makes it impossible to reach targets set down by the government.

A good example of this would be shellfish and water testing requirements set down by the Norwegian food health authorities, which require me to send samples to one laboratory in Bergen (NIFES) within 24hrs. For me to reach this target I have to fish the sample during the night, pack it and then drive some 4 hours to reach a flight in Bodø where the sample could then be sent by courier to the Lab in Bergen during its opening hours.

This gives me a working day of 12 hours for a 1kg sample and a cost of approximately 15 000 NOK.

You must understand that I work with products from the sea which are not commonly fished in Europe, and that as a small company which has not had any financial assistance from either the government or the private sector, this type of expense has put me into a situation where I will not be able to expand my business beyond the level it is presently at. Which is a shame due to the wonderful quality of products I have found here in northern Norway.

This brings me onto my second point.

Governmental assistance for micro businesses in the shellfish sector.

It is my opinion, the shellfish sector is one of the areas where north Norway has a chance to become a global leader. There are a few reasons for this. Traditionally in north Norway, people have not eaten shellfish due to both cultural and environmental issues. Culturally people have always eaten fish in the north due to its prolific abundance and simplicity of catching. Shells on the other hand have mainly been used as bait. This has led to vast resources of high quality shells ready to be harvested, untouched for hundreds of years.

Getting into the shellfish industry for small companies is just about impossible due to the limited knowledge found within governmental bodies. This is from shell testing bodies which don't appear to understand basic anatomy, to sales organs which have a limited knowledge of the products and what can be expected as a fair real end price. The governmental organisation Norges Sjømatråd (tidligere Eksportutvalget for fisk) seems to have even given up on more difficult products, with the earmarked funding being spent on farmed halibut instead.

When I started doing sea urchins 10 years ago people in the north laughed at me, having watched one failure after another in this sector. Within the first year I was selling to nine 3-star Michelin restaurants (there were 18 at this time) in France. I approached Innovation Norway (SND) for funding, but they told me that no funds were available for this sector at the time. They did however find the funding for a competitor who went bankrupt the year afterwards.

If Innovation Norway (SND) had given me the funding I was asking for I'm quite sure that I would be running three stations in Nordland by now, but they didn't. The problem I have with this is that there seems to be no program which directly funds small start-up businesses with grants of say 100 000 NOK spread over the first 2 years. This grant would then allow the micro business the chance to invest in where they felt it was needed i.e. plant, marketing, administration etc.

At present it seems as though all funding is spent on sending people on management courses or consultants who write reports about how to run your idea. The actual business owner's needs are skipped and the money does not achieve what it was intended to do.

I have more constructive criticism about Innovation Norway but here is not the place to write it.

For the marine sector in which I work, there is a need to rationalise the players involved. At present I have to work with the following governmental bodies.

Fiskeridirektoratet, Mattilsynet, Råfisklaget, Norges Sjømatråd, Fylkeskommunen, Steigen kommune, Fylkesmannen og Skattedirektoratet.

They all have different requirements but there is no manual to follow and each has to be dealt with individually, which is extremely time consuming for a sole trader who also has to focus on the operational business as well.

I hope this gives you some ideas and thoughts for the future. If you have any questions please don't hesitate to write or call me.

Yours sincerely

Roderick Sloan