Dan Aherne: So, my name is Dan Aherne. I'm chief exec [executive] of a seafood business in the UK [United Kingdom] called New England Seafood. We supply premium fresh and frozen seafood from all around the world to various UK supermarkets and some of the sushi bars and restaurants in the UK. I've been with the company now since 2003, so twelve years.

M: What is your background in [inaudible] marketing?

DA: Yeah. So, I come from a commercial background. I spend the first few years of my career with Unilever, doing sales and marketing of fast-moving consumer goods. Then, the lure of seafood was just too great for me to withstand, and I joined a couple of Scottish entrepreneurs in 2003, and we've grown the business over the last twelve years. So, it's been great.

M: [inaudible] Emmonak, specifically.

DA: So, New England's been selling and marketing wild salmon for many years, really, since about 1997, '98. Initially, we just started with very small quantities of fresh sockeyes coming in, and we expanded the business. In probably early 2000s, we started to sell some Keta salmon in the UK market just as an entry point, really, versus a more premium sockeye. Then we got to know the Yukon, the Yukon Keta, about seven or eight years ago. We started to buy small quantities, and the more we [inaudible] it, the more we liked it. Gradually, we found our way to Emmonak about five, six years ago.

M: For chum salmon?

DA: For chum, yes. We call it Keta actually in the UK because there is a dog food called Pedigree Chum. So, we prefer to call it Keta.

M: I understand.

DA: [laughter] Yes. So, my background is sales and marketing. I come from a commercial background. When I joined New England, and we were doing a little bit of wild salmon, I saw the opportunity in that species in the UK market because, really, salmon in the UK is Norwegian and Scottish. It's all Atlantic farm salmon, really. There's this beautiful natural wild salmon being caught in the Pacific and Alaska, with all the credentials and the freshness and quality, we just felt it was a story we wanted to tell in the UK market. So, like all things, you build them over a series of years, just bringing the public greater awareness of what Alaskan salmon is and what wild is. We've just got traction over the years, and it's grown with a combination of trading and persuading. You've got to get the right packs out, the right price points, but you also got to tell the story. Increasingly, that's where our focus is on telling the story. When you have great locations like Emmonak with a great story, great fishermen, and great product, it makes the job that much easier.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

M: Okay.

DA: So, we got to know about the Yukon salmon when we were buying it through a processor that was cutting fillets for us in Anchorage. We saw this amazing fish. It just had a deeper color than some of the other chums that we buy, but also this amazing fat content. It was just a fantastic fish. What we figured is, actually, the more we got to know it, the more we figured that actually we had a supply chain, which was slightly crazy because the fish was all being caught up here, and then it was being dressed to H&G. Then, at huge expense, it was being flown out often on chartered planes down to Anchorage, where it was then being custom processed with another fee. Then, as we gradually got to know about this area, we realized actually, there was a real lack of jobs, lack of opportunity for people. So, we got to know Jack and some of the board of KwikPak Fisheries. Fred, who's the founder of our business, and I came out to Anchorage probably now about seven years ago. With Jack, we put a proposal to the board of KwikPak to invest in cutting fillets directly up here, which was a big step change. But on the back of the cost saving that was going into other parts of the Alaskan economy and also the job creation, it was kind of a no-brainer, albeit a big challenge. So, our commitment at the time was that we would work hand in hand with KwikPak and support them to get the filleting operation up and running. We'd done that in other parts of Alaska with other processors, so we were quite experienced in knowing what it would take. But we weren't naive as to the level of commitment. The deal was quite clear. If they were going to put in the financial investment and the effort of doing it, we would stand shoulder to shoulder with them and give them a good home for their fillets in a market that can pay a fair price for them but also, more importantly, probably help them operationally and technically in the early phases. We've been coming up here every year since. This year, we had five of our team up here. It's a tough gig up here for a summer. But I think it gets under your skin, and we got to know the area. We've got to know the people, and it's very rewarding to see the progress that we make every year down to all the effort of Jack and his team.

M: Could you explain how cattywampus the supply chain was? Because you touched on it, but for people who have no clue, the fish are caught here. They are flown six hundred, four hundred miles, et cetera. Could you just go through that supply chain, so we understand the improvement you made on it?

DA: So, prior to us working directly up here, what would happen is that there would be the fishing openings. Until you get out there, you never know what you're going to catch. It could be anything from a few hundred or so, a couple of thousand fish, up to three hundred thousand pounds worth of fish. You could get seventy, eighty thousand fish in a drop. So, the guys up here had limited capacity for dressing fish as H&G. They had no filleting capability. So, really, all they could do was fly fish out, and depending on whether it was a scheduled flight where they'd get maybe eighteen, twenty thousand pounds of back cargo, they'd pay at maybe thirty, forty cents. But then, if they were chartering planes out, they could be paying up to $1.00 a pound. Then they were paying someone else probably $1.50 a pound to contract process it. So, in a market that was paying between three and 3.50 a pound, they had $2.50 of cost in it before they'd even paid the fishermen or paid any of their overhead. So, it was just a case of how little could you lose. It was a crazy model. But by putting the filleting in up here, we can improve the quality. We could get the fish cut when it was fresher. Actually, crucially, we could employ a load of the locals and actually start to create some further prospects up here because it is a challenging place to exist. It's been really rewarding to see the growth of employment in the area

as a result of all the work that KwikPak had done up here. But also, it's great to see the quality of the product because it's a story that needs to be told. If you can improve the quality and create jobs and create something that's also more marketable, you get a really good win-win.

M: How did Emmonak impress you when you first landed on the strip and rolled into town?

DA: I think Emmonak is one of those places where you really don't know what to expect until you get there. I mean, I remember the flight up. It was the first time. It had just been literally me and the pilot on the plane. We're used to all the security of airports and stuff in the UK, and I remember he just – the pilot came into this room where I was waiting and just said, "Dan." I said, "Yeah, it's me." He said, "Stand on a scale with your backpack." That was it. And then we walked straight out to the plane. He opened the wing, put my big backpack in it, and said, "Jump in. You okay if we have an accident?" I said, "I'd rather we didn't." That was it. Then we were flying up, and it's this beautiful tundra. I could see the moose. I was really excited. Then, of course, you land on this dirt strip in Emmonak, and you get greeted by the friendly mosquitoes. A pickup truck pulls up to come and meet you. As you drive through the town, it's like many developing countries. You get a real mixed sense of emotions. On the one hand, there's a beauty of the place and the very rugged nature. On the other hand, the piled up old engines and the dump. You get that real mix, and you realize straight away that there're some challenges. I think that would characterize my feelings of Emmonak. It's both sides. I mean, it's beautiful. The people are beautiful. There's some really kind, good-natured people. But you can see that it's an area caught between new and old where there's some real challenges. It's difficult, I think, for the younger generation growing up here. Are they native Yupik Indians, or are they Americans caught in that sort of modern world? It's a challenge. You can see it's a challenge. But we've forged some really strong links. Although it's not the easiest place to come and exist for several days, weeks, or even months, actually it gets under your skin. I've been coming back every year since. I just can't resist it.

M: I would imagine some folks would be hesitant to – you know the product is there, but it's a dicey place to invest if you do not know it and know the people. So, your colleagues back home, how did the dialogue go over there?

DA: So, yes, New England's a fascinating business. I mean, our founder, Fred – I can't take the credit for this. I've been running it for twelve years or so, but the founder, Fred, who set the business up in 1991, I mean, he's a very intrepid guy. He's been around the world, searching out amazing fisheries and bringing them to the UK market. This is just one of them. But as you travel around the world, you make your judgments not always on obvious business logic, or if it was all managed by risk, we wouldn't ever have done anything. I mean, we've written checks for guys to build factories on deals done under a palm tree and a shake of a hand. Frankly, those deals and those human relationships are worth more than all the legal frameworks and complex agreements that you can draw up. It also becomes about one human being looking at another one in the eye and saying, "Does this make sense for you? Does it make sense for us? Okay. Let's do it." This really was carried out in a very similar spirit. But you don't make these things happen without a huge amount of personal commitment and effort. That's really the currency that we're dealing in here. So, it's been a combination of Jack and the team and his vision and all the hard work and commitment financially and effort that they've put in. We've backed that with

our people and our effort, which is where we can ultimately make a difference as well. Obviously, the fact that we've guaranteed the guys a market for their product has given them that safety net to say, "Okay, we need to be competitive in the overall marketplace." But knowing that they're going to have a good home for their products each year, I think, probably helps everyone to sleep at night.

M: What is the feedback you have got from Yukon chum salmon across various parts of the world?

DA: So, I mean, the feedback in our market for Yukon salmon, if I'm being honest today, it's not a product that is well enough differentiated. It fits in a bracket of Keta. So, when we taste it internally, with buyers, with chefs, they love it. They can see the difference. Our job now, which is really where we're trying to work quite hard, is to try and create that differentiation and to tell the story because not all salmon are the same, and not all wild salmon are the same. So, really, our efforts in how we brand this and really communicate to the discerning British public what these amazing fish are up here is our job. I think as we build confidence in the production and the volume, we can be more confident investing behind telling the story. Because, of course, if you invest in telling a story and then you don't have the product or the volume or the quality to back it up, you have a problem. But with every year, we're increasing production and increasing quality. So, it's a challenge that we're really up for in the next few years.

M: I like what you said about the agreement is about two people looking each other in the eye and saying, "Is this good for me? Is this good for you?" I am wondering if you can just tell me a little bit more about, specifically here in Emmonak, how that agreement was developed and maybe give me a little bit more history about how it was developed and then what you guys agreed on and then where you are now. That is kind of the idea.

DA: Yes. So, the original agreement to do something together with KwikPak up here came when Fred, our founder, flew up here and met with Jack. It must have been seven or eight years ago. So, that would be probably about 2007, '08. He came up to meet with Jack and see the operation up here. He was immediately impressed at the quality of the resource but recognized the limitations of the lack of infrastructure here to really turn that great quality fish into the product that it could be. So, those conversations initiated then. Then, over the period of a year, we developed the plans, and then it really – the key moment was when Fred and myself flew out to Anchorage in the middle of December, which is always chilly at the best of times. We presented really a proposal with Jack to his board who all needed to back the investment. That's the way that the native corporations work. There's got to be a really strong, unanimous support. So, we presented our case as to why we felt this was in everybody's best interest, and it got the go-ahead. Really, it wasn't any more complicated than that, albeit that it was a big leap of faith on all parts, heavily born of trust, which is critical in all these things. But actually building the plants up here, clearly, they've got a window of time between the ice melt and the freeze when they can construct the kits or market-ready kit. It's just a case of how you tailor it and fit it into the space constraints that you have. The bigger challenge is just getting the engineers and the users trained up to manage all the equipment and get the process flows and the quality manuals all in place, which is where we played a very heavy role in sending our team up to come and work with the team at KwikPak.

M: So, the film is much about the people. I am curious what your collective experiences were when the rubber met the road, and you got up here. You guys came up, and you're like, "We're going to do things differently. We're going to go for a different level of quality with new methods." I mean, how was it coming in being a Brit and working with the Yupik and the locals who, like you said, they're proud, and they do things their way? What was that experience like?

DA: I mean, we've had some very, very interesting experiences and learnings in working up in Emmonak. The first thing that struck me about the people is just how warm and friendly they are. There's a real kind of joy when you meet people [with] an interest in where you come from. We're interested to hear their stories. They're very, very kind, friendly people. What we didn't realize is just how differently things work because you have a – even when you appreciate different cultures and different backgrounds and different challenges, I think there's a natural tendency for us to ought to think that we're driven in fairly similar ways. So, one of the first things that occurred to us as we began to work with people and train them on how to process the salmon, how to manage the quality systems, how to account for stock, manage the inflows and outflows, and all the good stuff that we have to do in a good manufacturing environment, the obvious thing that occurred to us is, well, we need to identify the talent and then really nurture that talent and build the team around it, which is just commonplace, common thinking for us. What we hadn't accounted for is that local people up here are naturally pretty uncomfortable with leadership, or certainly appointed leadership.

M: That is a good note. I just want to let that boat go by. The next thing I am going to ask if you want to just work into it is we got a tour of it yesterday. So, you are talking about the appointed leadership and the talent. But once they buy in, they take a lot of pride in what they are doing. These guys were very proud of the operation and everything like that.

DA: Yes, yes. I'll build that in.

M: Okay. We are good.

M: Okay.

DA: So, what we hadn't accounted for was that people here can be very uncomfortable with sort of appointed leadership. There's very much a togetherness in terms of the camaraderie, decision-making. We win together; we lose together. When you promote someone to a position of obvious responsibility or accountability, it can be a lot less comfortable for them than when they're just showing natural leadership as one of the troops. I think we learned that to our detriment where we identified in the first year a really good guy as a sort of production leader. The reaction when you make someone a leader, both they can be very uncomfortable with it, and the people around them could be uncomfortable. There's some interesting historical reasons I believe for why that is the case, which I won't go into here. So, we had to really learn what made the people here tick. I think what makes them tick really is the pride in their product in what they're doing. We try and share with them as much as we can on where their product goes, and they find it hard to believe that the fish from up here is making it onto a premium supermarket counter or shelf in the UK. It was great fun to bring that experience to life. I remember in the

first year, I came up with one of my colleagues; he likes to think he's a DJ in his part-time. There's this kind of incongruity because you've got the basic accommodation and living standards, yet one of the workers had his wireless speaker boombox thing. So, we were hooking up an iPad to the boombox, and one of my colleagues was spinning tunes on his decks. These guys knew all of the Western music and all of the songs and were making requests and dancing away on the line. There's just a really good spirit to the place. I just remember we went from – if we could get eight racks of fillets done in a day, that was awesome. Then we got up to ten, fifteen, twenty, and the guys thought at twenty, there was practically a strike. We can't go past twenty. And then, nowadays, the guys are regularly pumping out thirty. So, it's amazing to see what belief level does for people's confidence and their kind of satisfaction. There's no shortage of things that amaze me. But culturally, just the idea of shift and working a day has taken a bit of time for a lot of the guys here to get used to. There was one day where we were slammed with fish. We had a lot of fish coming in. We'd had a good morning. We got up to about seven or eight racks of fillets. We were there after lunch, keen as mustard, ready to get going, and where were the team? We subsequently found out that one of their cousins had a basketball match eight miles upriver in the next village, and they'd all gone to watch. This was just absolutely normal. Why wouldn't we? The concept that they had hours and commitments just didn't occur. But there's something very, very kind of – without being patronizing, something kind of very sweet about that sort of camaraderie. One of their cousins and everyone piles in to watch. There was a sad story a couple of years ago where a relative of one of the crew passed away, and literally half the factory vanished for a week for the funeral. Very challenging to manage an environment when you've got fish landing, and you don't have all the crew to process. But that's the marvel of Jack and his team up here that they do find a way to navigate around this. But it's not for the faint-hearted. It's a challenging area to operate in. But it's also part of the allure, I think. You never quite know what's going to happen.

M: So, if you're writing a short story about an Emmonak fiction writer, tell me how you would describe Jack Schultheis.

DA: How would I describe Jack? That's a very good question. I don't know. Jack is a cross between an old-school detective. I could see him in a spy novel in terms of that sort of gruff, very leveled demeanor that he has. But he's also a real father figure. He's really an inspiration to the people around here. They all hold him in the utmost respect, which I think is down to his manner and his character. He's very straight-talking. He calls the spade a spade. But I think people can look him in the eye and know that if Jack says something, it means something. So, yes, he's kind of unique. In my fictional character, I'd have him somewhere between the wily, seasoned spy and the fatherly figure.

M: That's good. We'll let this boat pass. That's nice.

M: So, to flip that other question kind of around, what do you think you have taken away? I mean, you talked about some of the cultural differences between adapting a more western capitalist agenda to a working culture here. What do you feel like you have learned from the working culture here?

M: Can we hold?

M: Yes.

M: This thing chewed through some battery. So, I do not want it to die in the middle.

M: Sure. [RECORDING PAUSED] Good.

DA: There's obviously a number of things that we've had to work with the team up here to put in place to kind of meet the standards that we need to be able to import fish and sell it to some of the discerning British supermarkets. The team has been really receptive to that. It's not always been easy, but we made steady progress every year that we've been working up here. But you're always conscious when the traffic starts to feel quite one way in terms of what we need the guys here to do. We've had to also, I think, listen very carefully to what they need us to do. To me, it's been really clear that my burden of responsibility, if you like, when I go back to the UK is to make sure that we sell this fish in the best way that we possibly can. So, I'm motivated to do the best by these guys. That can be quite challenging when you're in the day-to-day grind of dealing with challenging supermarkets. Sometimes, you bear that burden because I know that ultimately, I've got to be able to come back and give Jack a chunky order year after year to support the investment that he's put in. But we're lucky we have some very fair customers who do value what we do and what the guys up here are doing, which makes that a whole lot easier. But some of the other things I've learned just from operating up here really does put stuff in perspective. That goes for many of the places that we buy fish from all around the world. At the end of the day, this is real life. It's these guys' livelihoods. It's what keeps them warm and fed throughout the winter months, which up here is a matter of life and death. So, it does humble you. It puts stuff in perspective when you're moaning about some of the daily grind and the commercial pressures you can have. It really does put things in perspective. When I come up here each year, and I meet the people again, and I reconnect with what we're doing, it gives me that extra fire in my belly to make sure that we actually turn it into something that creates value in our market, which, as I said earlier, is about telling the story. I really think it's a story that consumers will be interested in as we all strive to learn a bit more about where our food comes from. It's not just another pack of salmon. This is special.

M: What would you like to see if you jump ahead five years, and you're back in Emmonak? What would you like to see as far as the growth, the quality of life, that kind of thing, the economic development?

DA: I mean, every year when I come to Emmonak, I'm struck that things just do move forward year on year in terms of building investment. This year, they've relocated the dump, which has been a positive step. There's a relief and emergency center that's gone up with the new build factory. So, I'm struck that every year, there's progression. When you think about the relatively small window for things like construction, I think they do an incredible job. The biggest thing that I'd like to see is I'd like to see the project that we've got here with fish and fish processing really become a bit of a metaphor, if you like, for sort of personal ambition and raising standards because I think there's a really good opportunity for the kids coming up through to realize, actually, they can come and work for four or five months of the year. They can earn some good income, and actually they can build something. I'd love to see the leaders of the future coming

from the local community so that you don't need to be supplementing the workforce here with people from outside to make the thing tick. If I'm honest, I think we've got a ways to go there for that to become reality. But I'm absolutely confident that the people here have the wherewithal and have it in them to do that if they want to. This project gives them a great opportunity to really step up and build something for themselves in the community.

M: Cool.

M: Yes. I am curious, next question, to hear more – can you just describe as concisely as possible what …

[RECORDING PAUSED]

DA: So, New England's business model is pretty straightforward, really. We bring fish in from about thirty-five countries around the world, plus we deal with some locally caught UK fish as well. All that fish comes in various formats, either fresh or frozen, to the UK. We have a processing unit just outside London where effectively what we're doing is cutting the fish up into various different formats and pack sizes, and in some instances, we're adding other ingredients and value to the product. Then we're putting it onto either fish counters or into pre-packaged chilled fish that goes out to our seven customers. In terms of the salmon specifically, what we do up here is we would turn the fish from a whole salmon into a fillet, into a side of salmon. Those are then frozen. They come into us in forty-foot containers, so about twenty tons of container. We refresh that in a very controlled fashion, and we portion it up and put it typically into two portion packs labeled out into the market. So, the salmon follows a pretty straightforward journey after it's caught. Probably the more complex journey is the journey it's taking back to the river system in the first place. But it's a growing business for us. Wild salmon in the UK is only about three and a half percent of the salmon market. So, there's loads of headroom for further growth. But for us to get that growth, it's not just about trading. It's about really persuading the customer that it's a great choice for them to take, and that's what we plan to do.

M: How does salmon rank –? This is personal curiosity, but how does it rank among the other food fish in the global market? You might as well answer that, just in case we find a place for it.

DA: Yes. I'm not too sure on global. I can talk about the UK.

M: Okay. You can answer that later. I am not sure how important that is.

DA: So, salmon's got a massive place in the UK market. It's about a third of all chilled seafood sold in the UK. So, it's by far the leading species, and really, it's become the major protein within fish, mainly because of the economics of its proximity. It's farmed in Scotland and Norway. So, it's a very straightforward supply chain, and there's plenty of it.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

M: That is a wild one

DA: So, when Fred founded New England Seafood, his goal was to bring premium fish from all around the world that UK consumers weren't necessarily getting a chance to taste and add it to the cod and haddock and all the other white fish that was typically on the fish counter at that time. There's many, many people importing salmon from Norway or bringing it in from Scotland, and really, New England Seafood would have no real competitive advantage in that sphere. But as people travel the world more and we're experiencing different types of seafood, Fred founded New England really to bring that to the fish counters and shelves of the UK. That's what we've done. Wild salmon and especially wild Alaskan salmon, it's just a great story. It's a differentiated product. In a world where consumers are looking to try different stuff, new stuff, and expanding their repertoire of fish, it fits really, really well. It's very different tasting as well, so it's not just a replication. It's very different in its taste, and it's got a great story behind it.

M: Where does your model …

[RECORDING PAUSED]

DA: Yes. Our commercial model is absolutely predicated on whatever species of fish being sustainable. So, whenever we look around the world, we're always looking to work with the best-managed fisheries operating out in the best countries with people that really understand how important it is to manage the resource effectively. There's probably no better example of a well-managed fishery than Alaska. Of course, certain stocks and populations at different times go through their challenges. But if fish stocks are properly managed and the controls are in place, most stocks prove themselves to be quite resilient. If you have to ease back on fishing for a few years, as has happened with the kings up here, then that's the right thing to do. In all our experience, the Alaskan management is exemplary with the Department of Fish and Games. They make the tough decisions, and that's what's necessary. I think the great thing for me is it's not a battle between the fishermen and Department of Fish and Game. There's a really healthy respect both ways. Everyone takes ownership for managing the fishery because, ultimately, the future of a thriving fishery is essential for Alaska's economy. It makes it a very straightforward choice as a buyer to work with the guys up here. When you see all the evidence of the systems, the fish counters, the controls, there's not that many places in the world where you'll see better controls or controls to match what they have in Alaska. [RECORDING PAUSED] So, Emmonak is not the easiest place to come in and operate each year. This year, we've had five of our team up here. A couple of them were living up here for six weeks. It's a tough gig to ask someone who's used to all the comforts of London or around the suburbs of London to come and base themselves up here for six weeks to get us the right quality of salmon and make sure that all of the systems are in place. But we've got a lot vested up here. It is a world where there's a growing population, and there'll be a growing demand for good quality seafood. When you find a relationship like this where you know that year after year, if you continue to work together in the right spirit, dealing fairly with one another as solid commercial partners and then the friendships that you build, you know that that resource will be there to support your business and your market for many years to come. The days of just being able to pick up the phone and trade fish, I think, are going to come to an end. I think people will ultimately have more choices with expanding markets in China and the Far East about where to do business, and it's important for a business that's as small as New England Seafood with all of our ambition to make sure that we really look after our valued suppliers. We've been dealing with many of the same people since

Fred started the business in 1991, and it's what makes it a special place to work as well because, as Fred would always say to me, there's not many places now in the world where he doesn't know someone or have a friend. That, to me, is what makes the fish business so unique, and it's certainly what's kept me here for twelve years. It wasn't what I grew up dreaming of doing. As a boy, I wanted to play football like most other kids in the UK. But I wasn't good enough. So, fish ended up being my home. The more I come out here, the more you realize you just got so much vested in it, and there's such deep ties that you just keep coming back and keep building. That's what it's all about. [RECORDING PAUSED] We want to bring that to retail because we do it to the chains. The other one is wild salmon. Then the other one is a specialty fish brand. Ultimately, we're looking for the architecture at the moment. Is there one brand that can be a halo over all of it, or is the sashimi kind of brand going to be different to the wild salmon and specialty? So, it'll be, worst case, two brands. I'd love to get it all into one, but I don't want to dilute the effectiveness. But wild salmon will be a very pure message. If I'm honest, I'm holding back a little bit the story of – we tell all our retailers about Yukon as part of the mix, but I've held back giving it to any one of the UK supermarkets just because I know that when it's in their label, they'll never do it justice, and this is a story that needs to be done justice. The way that we'll do it justice is by having really compelling packaging, which is one of our best tools, ultimately telling the story, getting the digital kind of support, and use [RECORDING PAUSED] exec of New England Seafood, which is a U.K. London-based fish business which imports fish from all around the world and supplies to the premium UK retail sector. My name is Dan Aherne. I'm chief exec of New England Seafood, which is a fish business based in London, UK.

M: Good. Awesome.

DA: Okay.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Molly Graham 3/29/2024