

The Incredible Vanishing Mr.Heim

By Lawrence Reichard

In Counterpunch June 24, 2021, I wrote about Big Aqua aquaculture sinking its fangs into my home state of Maine and into my midcoast home of Belfast, where Nordic Aquafarms of Fredrikstad, Norway, wants to build a colossal \$500 million land-based frankenfish farm. In dollar terms it would be the biggest industrial infrastructure in Maine - and physically bigger than Fenway and Gillette Stadium combined.

Ever since Nordic began to seduce Belfast's shot-callers five years ago, its Belfast schemes have been run by one Erik Heim, a sports-shirt middle age Norwegian who always looks like he can't decide whether to zip his fly now or wait till no one's looking. And Heim's wife, Marianne Naess, ran Nordic's delightfully incompetent PR department, which once sent a letter to every postal patron in Belfast, population 6,700. Four pages. Single-spaced. Misspellings. Tortured syntax. Bizarro layout. According to a recent Gallup poll, four people read it.

Before going public with its Belfast plans four years ago, Nordic and the City of Belfast wooed each other in a very effective echo chamber. Nordic said it was green and sustainable, and the city said there would be only a few crank opponents - everyone else will love you. It was love at first sight.

Five years and millions later, not one shovel in the ground. Oops.

And now Heim and Naess are suddenly gone. They announced their departure in a Facebook post that gushes about how they look forward to petting their pet chihuahua Harry, but it says squat about why they are actually leaving Nordic. And after four-plus years of pitting neighbor against neighbor here in Belfast, there will apparently be no farewell tour. Just post to Facebook and go back to, well, whatever.

It's hard to avoid thinking Heim got the guillotine for failing to deliver on Belfast. Five years in and they're still facing various lawsuits and permit appeals. Like black flies in a Maine spring, the shit just won't go away.

I was there when Nordic went public in February 2018. I entered the public information meeting in favor of the project, and I sat next to a wall sporting a big Power Point projection of the proposed plant area, around the southernmost mile of my beloved five-mile Little River Trail. The map showed the trail ending a half-mile before its current southern terminus. I asked Heim about that, and from across the room, with an arrogant chuckle and smirk, he said the map - right next to me - didn't show that.

That was the first of many Heim mistakes I would see over the next four years.

Like the time in his office in Fredrikstad when, without thinking, he gave up the name of Bent Urup, who designed, built, owned and sold to Nordic the company's plant in Hanstholm, Denmark. Heim's eyes immediately betrayed his regret at surrendering Urup's name. Heim stumbled and stuttered. "I don't know whether you'll find him. Last I heard he was bouncing around Southeast Asia." Google gave me Urup's phone and email in less than a minute, and a week later in his Fredericia, Denmark office, Urup said he had been following Nordic's Belfast hires and they simply weren't up to snuff.

When I published, a Nordic-Urup food fight erupted in the ubiquitous aquaculture trade journals. It was johnny-come-lately Nordic against the best land-based aquaculture designer, engineer and entrepreneur in the business.

But Nordic and Urup finally figured out they were both getting covered in flying food, so they kissed, made up and trained their guns on me. In another public information meeting Heim said I had misquoted Urup. I stood up, held my iPhone high and said, "It's all right here, on tape." Heim stood there wordless. Game. Set. Match.

But Nordic wasn't completely inept at PR. On that same 2018 trip to Denmark I interviewed a 14-year-old kid who had worked for Nordic, cleaning out empty fish tanks with Virkon S, a highly toxic industrial cleaner made by our good friends at DuPont. I asked the kid whether he used protective eyewear. No. So I called the Danish equivalent of OSHA. Under Danish law it's illegal to handle Virkon S without protective eyewear, and it's illegal for minors to handle it at all.

When I published that, Nordic said it had never hired underage workers - which I never alleged. Intro to PR 101: if you have no defense to the charge made, defend yourself from a charge that wasn't made.

Then there was the time Erik Heim filed an official court affidavit saying firebrand Nordic opponent Paul Bernacki had so intimidated the Maine Department of Environmental Protection that it, the DEP, canceled an official visit to the site where Nordic wants to spew 7.7 million gallons of effluent a day and disrupt and disperse God knows how much relatively settled and inert industrial mercury.

The only problem is DEP didn't cancel the visit. It was delayed one day by rain. And Heim was at the visit, as was I. I saw Heim there and his name is to this day on the official list of attendees, landing Heim's later affidavit somewhere between wildly incompetent and quite bizarre.

But blaming all of Nordic's chronic ineptitude on Heim and Naess would be a disservice to surviving Nordic officer Bernt Olav Rottingsnes, who was recently quoted as saying Nordic needs bank loans but banks are reluctant to lend to Nordic. Interesting approach: try to get a loan from Bank D after telling reporters banks A, B and C won't lend to you.

Not to mention the failure of Nordic and the City of Belfast to square their story when the city tried to soothe an ever-louder Nordic opposition by wasting \$8,000 on a puff-piece report on Nordic by global consulting firm Deloitte - which had repeatedly done work for Nordic. Then City Manager Joe Slocum said publicly he had never before hired a consulting firm. Indeed, Slocum didn't even know how to call Norway. Slocum nonetheless insisted he found Deloitte all by himself, but then Heim later told me in his Fredrikstad office he had given Slocum a list of consulting firms and Deloitte was on the list. Oops.

But don't worry, Nordic's endlessly amusing incompetence will likely survive if Heim is, as rumored, replaced by Nordic Chief Financial Officer Brenda Chandler. In sworn testimony in Waldo County Superior Court in Belfast, Chandler wandered way off company script and said ownership of intertidal land Nordic needs for its project was unclear. If the Maine Department of Environmental Protection played by the rules, Chandler's sworn testimony would have been enough to throw out Nordic's 2,000-page DEP permit application, for which one must - theoretically - demonstrate clear title to all needed lands. Fortunately for Nordic, DEP rules are strictly for suckers and losers, not alleged fat cats with burgeoning wallets no one has ever seen.

So we'll miss you, Erik and Marianne. Just about as much as we miss Joe Slocum. And just about as much as we'll miss Brenda Chandler when she's gone.

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