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## Alaska shellfish industry growing

By **NICK BOWMAN**

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Alaska shellfish growers set a few records in 2014.

In the first half of a two-day meeting of the Alaska Shellfish Growers Association in Ketchikan, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's Cynthia Pring-Ham highlighted some figures from last year's season.

The 28 farms that sold shellfish in 2014 broke \$1 million in sales — the highest total in the state's records, Pring-Ham told the audience of about three dozen people

Sales grew 24 percent from one year to the next, she said, hitting \$1.17 million for 2014.

That's an average of \$7,049 in sales per acre of active farm, but the majority of the sales were generated by only six larger oyster farms.

Margo Reveil, president of Jakolof Bay Oyster Co. in Homer, noted that in 2013 most of the statewide sales were generated by only three farms.

More than 90 percent of the sales were Pacific oysters, but production of the species decreased slightly from 2013 to 2014.

"So, you must be getting more money for your oysters," Pring-Ham said.

The average farm-gate price — the value a farmer gets from his or her product not including transportation costs — for a dozen oysters in Alaska is \$9.60, she said.

Overall production hit 8.3 million oysters and geoducks combined and 10,000 pounds of blue mussels and littleneck clams, which account for a much smaller portion of sales.

Shellfish growers saw increases in sales, employment, days worked, inventory and seed imports, according to the 2014 report from Pring-Ham.

The industry "is growing on all fronts," said Reveil, who is a board member of the Alaska Shellfish Growers Association.

Farmers also had a larger workforce than ever before, Pring-Ham said, and 62 percent of the labor was done by someone other than the owner of the farm.

In hatcheries and nurseries, seed sales grew 93 percent from 2013, up to \$304,174 last year. 2014 also saw the highest nursery sales ever.

Both hatcheries and nurseries produce young shellfish, but nurseries grow them to larger sizes before selling them to farmers.

“I've been in this position since 2005 waiting for you to peak like this, and you keep going,” she told the shellfish growers. “It's neat, for the past two years I've seen a lot of improvements.”

Among permitted businesses, there were 65 shellfish farms, seven nurseries and two hatcheries in Alaska, including Ketchikan's OceansAlaska hatchery.

However, only 85 percent of permits were active in 2014.

Alaska's shellfish farming industry is still small, taking up only 304 acres among all farms, hatcheries and nurseries.

Permitted farms dot the area around Revillagigedo Island and Prince of Wales Island, thinning out in northern Southeast Alaska, and many are located on the Kenai Peninsula.

Farms employed 166 people in 2014, while hatcheries and nurseries employed 34.