

# From Maine to Alaska: A pitch for seaweed

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Alaska?shellfish farmers are exploring an ancient food as the next step in their small but growing industry.

In the Lower 48, farmers, foodies, environmentalists and entrepreneurs are trying to make seaweed the Next Big Thing for aquaculture.

The movement could be coming to Alaska.

Kelp and other sea vegetables are eaten much more widely in Asia, but they've long been a part of Alaska Native diets along the state's southern coast, whether harvested straight from the shore or used to collect herring eggs.

"I had the fortune of running into a Tlingit lady (in Juneau) and we had a whole Native Alaskan dinner with her red and black seaweeds," said Beau Perry, a California businessman trying to recruit Alaska shellfish farmers to grow seaweed. "I know that culturally Alaska is way out in front."

The Alaska Shellfish Growers included several presentations on seaweed aquaculture in its late November meeting in Ketchikan.

Alaska academics and farmers from Maine are trying to transplant an industry from the nation's coasts into the Last Frontier.

The primary speakers were Paul Dobbins, a Maine-based seaweed grower; Mike Stekoll, a marine plant researcher with the University of Alaska Southeast Juneau campus; and Perry.

They were brought to Ketchikan by the Alaska Sea Grant program, led by the University of Alaska, which is coordinating pilot projects to test the waters for commercial seaweed using several native species.

Paula Cullenberg, director of Alaska Sea Grant, said during the conference that the organization is sponsoring pilot projects to grow seaweed on the coasts through grant funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

One of those pilot projects is Ketchikan's OceansAlaska, which will begin experimenting with raising local kelp to provide to farmers next year.

Long lines are seeded and then suspended from buoys beneath the surface, and are the primary methods

used for growing seaweed in Alaska.

“We have funding for half a dozen to eight long lines of seaweed coming out of the OceansAlaska hatchery,” said Carter Newell, a Maine-based shellfish researcher who is participating in the Sea Grant experiments.

OceansAlaska won't be farming anything directly, said Gary Freitag, one of the administrators of the Sea Grant funding.

“OceansAlaska is just going to provide the string to propagate the algae. They're going to spawn the (kelp) and create the spools of line that will be put out to the farmers,” Freitag said. “We couldn't get algae from back east. It wouldn't be legal. You have to have indigenous seed in order to raise anything in this state.”

The presentation from Perry, of Premium Oceanic in California, was for the most part a business pitch. He's trying to convince Alaska farmers to grow seaweed as an experiment at their farms, eventually contracting to grow for his company.

He called seaweed farming a “hedge on bivalves” because it grows much faster and can be harvested multiple times in a growing season. Oysters, geoducks and other clams take years from when they're set to being sold.

The cost of doing business, a problem for every industry in Alaska, would be an issue for seaweed farmers.

Scale is another problem, as there are approximately 65 Alaska farms producing a limited amount of shellfish.

But Alaska's south coast has a broad variety of edible species — there are a dozen that can be used to make the nori sheets used for sushi, Perry said.

Dulse, a short plant that can be black to reddish brown, is among the most common seaweeds eaten in the Ketchikan area, and there are three edible species available, according to UAS' Stekoll.

“I know that culturally Alaska is way out in front,” Perry said. “That's a big boon for marketing, too.”

He continued that “this is something that you've always been into, and now you're bringing (it) to the rest of the country. I think people will really like that.”

The shelf life is another plus. Oysters can last just past a week once they're harvested, but once dried seaweed can stay edible for five or 10 years.

“Let me process on site as close as I can get,” Perry asked, “then let's bank it, create an inventory and I'll

figure out what to deal with it later. I know that all of these seaweeds are valuable.”