AFDF Announces New Mariculture Initiative

The Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation, a private nonprofit foundation dedicated to creating new opportunities in Alaska's commercial fisheries, has announced a new initiative to expedite mariculture development in Alaska.

This is a 30-year plan, said Julie Decker, who took the helm as executive director of AFDF in January. Her hope, she said in an interview on April 15, is to target partners ranging from state and federal agencies to the Alaska Shellfish Growers' Association, seafood processors, fishing industry groups and local communities.

According to AFDF, the economic effect of mariculture, including wild fishery enhancement, shellfish farming, and restoration could double the current value of the Alaska seafood industry over the next three decades.

The ex-vessel value of all fisheries in Alaska in 2012 was about $2 billion, including millions of dollars in value from salmon hatcheries, according to AFDF's initiative.

As part of the initiative, AFDF plans to complete a strategic planning process inclusive of all stakeholders and agencies, including coastal communities, industry, state and federal entities and conservation groups, and develop partnerships necessary to implement the plan, Decker said.

AFDF has applied for a federal Saltonstall-Kennedy grant, for a little over $200,000, and has been recommended for funding, which would begin in July, Decker said. The Saltonstall-Kennedy grant program provides financial assistance for research and development projects to benefit the U.S. fishing industry. Those funds would be used for the coordination and strategic planning process, to begin to find areas for aquatic farm sites, she said.

Challenges to development of mariculture in Alaska, as identified in the AFDF initiative, include everything from environmental issues, including ocean acidification, to extremely remote sites, which increase costs and logistics, plus a workforce that will require recruitment, training and development.

Part of this initiative is to broaden the discussion and pull in the commercial fisheries, Decker said. Farming, enhancement and restoration are three categories of mariculture and they overlap, she said.