



Will Alaska finally embrace aquaculture?

New Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation head says expansion could have a huge economic affect on the fishing-heavy state.

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After seven years of being a part of the Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation (AFDF), Julie Decker **took the reins from previous**

Executive Director Jim Browning at the beginning of the year -- and she already has visions of where the Alaska industry can go.

The future for Alaska is aquaculture, Decker told **IntraFish**.

Decker, who served on the AFDF board from 2007 to 2011 and then was hired on as the development director, has been working with the foundation on developing aquaculture, particularly mariculture, for awhile.

"Mariculture has been around the sate of Alaska for the past 25 years in the form of shellfish farming and plants," Decker said. "It's at a stagnant half-a-million dollar a year production level and yet, Alaska has the most coastline of any state ... pristine waters, all the different things that would make mariculture work in Alaska quite well."

Decker said she is working to expand Alaskans' idea of mariculture, to not just meaning shellfish farming, but wild fishery enhancement and restoration, as well. She's been stressing the economic boost it could give the state's fisheries industry, as well. By law, the state of Alaska doesn't get involved in finfish farming, she said, but shellfish farming is allowed.

"When we talk about it in those broader terms ... you bring more people to the table," she said.

There are some smaller-scale projects that are happening -- AKCRRAB, for example. AKCRRAB, short for Alaska King Crab Research, Rehabilitation and Biology Program, has spent the past few years developing and refining methods of raising red crab larvae in hatcheries.

In a state where fishing is part of the culture and identity, Decker said she hasn't seen as many people thinking negatively of aquaculture as one may think -- they just don't think about it at all, and that's her challenge.

Then there's the challenge of getting any new industry off the ground and getting the right people together.

"You have to sell the idea, you have to get a better picture based on solid numbers of what the potential is and sell it to a larger number of people," she explained. "You have to pull all the players [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, the state and the industry] together and everybody plays their role in the coordinated effort."

Once they get over that hump, Decker believes the industry itself is interested in Alaskan aquaculture.

Energy-efficient vessels

While the aquaculture work takes up much of Decker's time, it's not her only pet project at the AFDF. While serving as the development director, she was working on a project to send an auditor onto fishing vessels to see how they use energy and make suggestions on how to be more efficient. The state of Alaska has invested money into similar audits for buildings, but before this, never for transportation.

An auditor came to Alaska three times to audit 12 vessels of varying sizes, and Decker said he is now crunching raw data.

"Once that's completed we're going to develop some materials and do some outreach on results and recommendations," she said. "It's like 'What you can do, what makes more sense.'"

Symphony of Seafood

Finally, and more pressingly, Decker is gearing up for the 21st Symphony of Seafood, where more than 400 different products have been entered. There was talk last March of [Symphony of Seafood not continuing](#), but AFDF managed to breathe life into the leading new products competition for Alaska seafood.

The 2014 event, scheduled for Feb. 5 in Seattle and Feb. 13 in Anchorage, helps bring the fishermen closer to the consumers, she said.

"From our perspective, at least, being close to the [fishing] communities, a lot of time you don't get to see that far down the road to the development of the product."

To prevent the lack of funds that almost caused the popular event to cease, Decker said she wants to begin collecting sponsorships much earlier into the year for the following year's event.

All in all, Decker, a Michigan native who stumbled into the world of seafood after a college summer break spent at a processing plant in Alaska, says she's looking forward to making a difference during her tenure as executive director.

"I'm really excited for this new direction," she said.
