OCEAN FARMING - AFDF plans introduces mariculture initiative

The Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation envisions ocean farming as a future billion dollar industry for Alaska

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by - Margaret Bauman

A move to develop mariculture through the creation of partnerships and strategic planning, has been announced by the Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation, which envisions ocean farming as a future billion dollar industry for Alaska.

AFDF, perhaps best known for the annual Alaska Symphony of Seafood competition, feels that the economic effect of mariculture could literally double the current value of the Alaska seafood industry in 30 years, said Julie Decker, executive director.

Potential partners in the project have been identified as state and federal agencies, the University of Alaska, commercial fisheries associations, seafood processors, local communities and economic development groups, she said.

Funding of the initiative hinges in part on a federal Saltonstall-Kennedy grant of over $200,000, which would be issued in July, to work on the planning process. Saltonstall-Kennedy grant funds may be used for research and development projects to benefit U.S. fishing industry projects, in this case to build into the strategic plan how to find areas for aquatic farm sites. While the grant has not yet been approved, AFDF has been recommended for funding, Decker said.

Part of the AFDF initiative is to broaden the discussion and pull in the commercial fisheries to this aspect of farming, enhancement and restoration, the three overlapping categories of mariculture, she said.

The initiative outline from AFDF notes that the ex-vessel value of all fisheries in Alaska in 2012 was about $2 billion, with salmon hatcheries contributing roughly $100 million to $200 million depending on the year. Other regions with smaller shorelines have much more significant value in annual aquaculture production, including Washington State, $110 million; New Zealand, $400 million; Norway, $5 billion; and China, $54 billion, AFDF said.

Project goals include expanding the stakeholder base, creating partnerships and increasing capacity to be effective, and development of a strategic plan, including a written commitment to implement the plan by various stakeholders and agencies.

The initiative also calls for integration with policies and priorities recently adopted through the National Shellfish Initiative, the USDA Investment Strategy in support of rural communities in Southeast Alaska 2011-2013, and the Alaska Mariculture Development Prospectus.

The National Shellfish Initiative launched by NOAA Fisheries' Office of Aquaculture in 2011 aimed at increasing populations of bivalve shellfish through commercial production and restoration. The USDA Investment Strategy for Southeast Alaska's rural communities identified mariculture development as worth of further USDA investment. The Alaska Mariculture Development Prospectus, was a draft document published in June 2013 by the Alaska Department of Commerce as a means to generate discussion and ideas among mariculture stakeholders, with a goal of creating a unified approach to move the industry forward.

The initiative also identified several challenges that mariculture development in Alaska would face. These include increases in costs and logistics for extremely remote sites, and the need for infrastructure investment in seed production, growth techniques, and product development. Other challenges cited were coordination to address challenges, workforce recruitment, training and development, regulatory hurdles and environmental issues, ranging from sea otters to ocean acidification.

Decker, formerly the development director of AFDF, became executive director of the organization in January, with the retirement of James Browning, who had served as executive director of AFDF since 2008.

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