

The rise of Alaska shellfish farming

By Christine Blank

SeafoodSource contributing editor

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Alaska farmed shellfish production, an industry now in its infancy, could reach a value of USD 1 billion (EUR 725.5 million) over the next 30 years, according to the Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation (AFDF). It is spearheading the Alaska Mariculture Initiative to develop the state's mariculture industry beyond the limited current projects. "Across the board, people have been really excited," Julie Decker, AFDF executive director, told SeafoodSource. "Looking at what Alaska already does in terms of production, we have seafood processors and plants all across the state. In a lot of ways, it is very doable. The key is coordinating the stakeholders." To help develop mariculture in the state, AFDF is expecting to receive a NOAA Saltonstall-Kennedy grant in July for more than USD 200,000 (EUR 105,104). "We hope to add another USD 50,000 (EUR 36,276) or so in matching funds," Decker said. Several groups, including the Alaska Shellfish Growers' Association, the Southeast Alaska Regional Dive Fisheries Association, Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program, Haa Aani (a division of Sealaska), Juneau Economic Development Council, along with Senators Mark Begich, D-Alaska and Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, have also said they support the AMI. Many of Alaska's major seafood processors also want to get involved. "We know that most of the largest seafood processors are involved with some type of aquaculture in other parts of the world. It would make sense that they are eyeballing opportunities [in Alaska], but are waiting for some of the developmental issues to be worked out," Decker said. Meanwhile, AFDF will "continue to grow our network of partners, and hope to officially include the State of Alaska, NOAA, USDA, EDA, Southwest Alaska Municipal Conference, Community Development Quota (CDQ) groups, and the United Fishermen of Alaska," Decker said. AFDF would like to have the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the Governor's office on board as well. Developing the strategic partnership with these groups is key to growing shellfish production in the state, according to Decker. "No one is opposed to mariculture development, but we need active engagement and to designate folks to be the point of the contact. There have been some cases in Alaska in which individual companies and government were not on the same page. The key is that people are working together and agreeing on the path forward." Shellfish already being produced in Alaska include Pacific oysters and geoducks, along with experiments with King crab and sea cucumbers for restoration (released back into the wild).

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