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Alaska shellfish aquaculture initiative kicks into gear, eyes \$1bn revenues

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Jeanine Stewart

The Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation (AFDF) is gearing up to launch an Alaska mariculture initiative, which it says has the potential to create a \$1 billion industry.

“It may take 20 years to get to this point, but it’s very doable,” Julie Decker, who took over as executive director of the AFDF from Jim Browning earlier this year, told *Undercurrent News*.

AFDF recently won one of ten recommendations for grant awards out of a pool of 250 applicants. Its recommended award of \$216,812 – to be finalized after basic cost and legal analysis – comes from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Saltonstall-Kennedy Grant Program, and it launches a development project that has been in the works since March of 2013.

“What we’re hoping to do is put the bigger picture spotlight of the potential of mariculutre [aquaculture in saltwater] in Alaska to not just look at it as private aquatic farms but also enhancement of shellfish fisheries and restoration projects,” Decker said.

The funding award's finalization is still yet to come, but rest of the process is contingent upon minor technicalities, NOAA spokesperson Julie Speegle told *Undercurrent*.

"The projects need to go through the cost analysis and legal review, but we're pretty sure they're a go," Speegle said.

Although funding is slated for release July 1, AFDF plans to kick its Alaska Mariculture Initiative into high gear long before then.

The seeds, after all, have already been planted, on both regulatory and experimental project levels.

While the Alaska Department of Fish and Game prohibits finfish farming in Alaska, it states that "Alaska's remote coastal areas and pristine waters make it an ideal place to farm marine shellfish".

Even if one does not consider the Alaska salmon hatchery program — which produced roughly one third of the total harvest of 120 million fish in 2010 — as aquaculture, Alaska's production of oysters and geoducks is already off and running, having generated \$500,000 million last year.

King crab has also seen the seeds of aquaculture planted this year, as the Alaska Department of Fish and Game released the first hatchery-reared king crab into the ocean.

Given the vast amount of protected fjords in Southeast Alaska, the region is very well suited for mariculture, AFDF president Jan Jacobs told *Undercurrent*.

Launching a vision

Decker says her largest challenge is getting all parties together around the same goal, but she plans to meet that head on by getting a variety of stakeholders around the same table.

Among the organization's long list of target partners are community development groups (CDQ), native corporations, small and large sized businesses and multiple government organizations, including the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the Alaska Department of Commerce, NOAA and the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) rural development department, the latter of which has a \$181.1 billion portfolio of loans and plans to administer \$38bn in loans during the current fiscal year.

Another major goal is to identify which species should be farmed and where, she said. Some possible candidates include sea cucumbers, dungeness crab and king crab.

The region also has a wide range of species ripe for production in Alaska, with abalone and razor clams at the top of the list. The goal is to "open it up to everything that's allowed for under the law in Alaska," Decker said.

Areas of focus include not only traditional mariculture but also fishery enhancement, which would help boost the biomass in existing fisheries, and restoration operations, to bring back native Alaska fisheries that have declined to near extinction such as abalone.

Ripe for growth

With regulators open to shellfish mariculture and the AFDF equipped with funding to research the aquaculture projects that are most advantageous, the industry could reach \$1bn in revenues in 15 to 20 years, both Decker and Jacobs said.

"Just look around the world," Decker said.

She points to the rapid growth of New Zealand's aquaculture industry, which has grown in 40 years to become a \$400 million industry. According to Aquaculture New Zealand, fueling this growth was a concerted effort to build knowledge of the growing regions and harvest cycles of shellfish and salmon.

With ambitious goals to grow to a \$1.1 billion industry by 2025, Aquaculture New Zealand offers a startup guide for anyone interested in starting an aquaculture farm in New Zealand.

NOAA pumps funding into seafood

Of the 250 project proposals NOAA's Saltonstall-Kennedy grant program received, eleven were for Alaska-specific projects, and NOAA's subject matter experts are recommending 40 projects for the combined amount \$10 million.

Three of those projects were for Alaska fisheries, which in total received \$735,000 in federal funding. The other awardees included Regents of the University of Minnesota for a project on improving the profitability of fishermen in fisheries in Alaska by expanding fishing specific financial and business planning resources; as well as the University of Fairbanks, which received \$192,327 for a fisheries socioeconomic project on the social and ecological consequences of regulatory change in the Alaska recreational halibut fishery.

The Saltonstall-Kennedy grant program focuses on awarding projects that fell into one of the following categories: aquaculture, optimum utilization of harvested resources, fishery socio-economics, ecosystem studies, conservation engineering and territorial science.

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