

The next boom in Alaska



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BY MARKOS SCHEER

Commercial fishing in Alaska is a fundamental part of the fabric of Alaska and has been since the time when then-Secretary of State William Seward and Russian Minister to the United States Edouard de Stoecki signed the 1867 agreement for the United States to purchase the great state of Alaska from Russia. Over the next nearly 150 years, the fisheries, commercial and subsistence, have undergone many changes, both in harvesting and processing methods, and availability of and value of species.

In Alaska we harvested vast volumes salmon, herring, shrimp, crab, halibut, roe on kelp, pollock, cod and any number of other species of the bounty that Alaska has been blessed with. Fortunes have been made and lost. Colorful characters, pioneers, innovators and more than a couple outlaws have contributed to the industry's intrigue and helped make it the most consistent pillar of the Alaskan economy for more than a century.

Monumental changes in stock dynamics, regulatory changes and market driven realities have fundamentally changed Alaskan fisheries.

Regulatory changes have stabilized and created a reliable, safer and sustainable fishery. Cod, herring, salmon and other species are cyclical, but the management regimes for each are remarkably stable and sustainable and set the standard for management the world over.

Historically, we harvested pink shrimp and king crab in the Gulf of Alaska. Blackcod were once discards and a low-value species, but have risen to the top as one of the most valuable products, on a per pound basis, that we produce. Pollock went from a primarily foreign

fishery to a domestic juggernaut. The market mandated changes, such as the elimination of dry boats, and the advent of value-added production, like the volumes of smoked fish and other ready for retail products.

Technology, like pin-bone removal and mechanized filleting, has changed the fisheries in Alaska and the economic model under which it operates. The fisheries that form the backbone of the industry have matured, through regulation and technology. However, opportunities to diversify the slate of products are almost without limitation.

The Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation, a nonprofit regional fisheries development organization, made promotion of the Alaska Mariculture Initia-

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tive its primary focus for the last several years. The foundation received multiple grants to conduct economic studies on the viability of the production of non-fish species. On Feb. 26, 2016, Gov. Bill Walker created the Mariculture Task Force to produce and provide recommendations for how to “develop a viable and sustainable mariculture industry producing shellfish and aquatic plants for the long term benefit of Alaska’s economy, environment and communities.”

The Task Force’s recommendations for a final and comprehensive plan are due March 1, 2018. Each of these concepts expressly precludes farming anything with a fin. No salmon or any other fin-fish species can be farmed, as it remains, and should remain, illegal in Alaska. Additionally, state law precludes the propagation of species that are not indigenous to Alaska (the Pacific oyster is the one exception).

The process is well on its way, and growth in this sector is absolutely necessary as an economic driver for Alaska’s coastal communities. Indeed, there have been and continue to be shellfish and kelp mariculture operations in Alaska. Roughly 30 farms already exist, with kelp test operations starting in a number of locations. The leasing, licensing and permitting structures are already in place for private mariculture to grow. Mariculture and commercial fishing in Alaska are symbiotic. Every troller, gill-netter, seiner and longliner could have a mariculture site to raise.

When we look at the commonalities in both the infrastructure and the industry, it appears to be a perfect fit and provides another way for fishermen to diversify their fishing operations, find another use for capital assets (vessels) and trade on their seafood industry know-how and relationships. Even better, because mariculture does not require day-to-day oversight, fishermen could continue with their existing operations and still use their vessels and equipment to tend to the mariculture operations.

The processing and transportation infrastructure in Alaska is a natural fit to process and market mariculture products, which reduces the associated capital costs Alaska has more than 30,000 miles of coastline, with nutrient-rich waters, much of which is ideal for mariculture operations. The net result will be economic development; creating year-round jobs throughout the state; sustainable, environmentally friendly products; sustainable economic support for local communities; and revenue for the state.

There are still hurdles, like the development of in-state facilities to produce spat and seed of sufficient quantities to supply a growing industry and providing outreach and education to teach people how to develop these operations, but they are not insurmountable.

As my friend so succinctly put it, mariculture in Alaska is the single largest untapped fisheries resource in the world. Alaska already produces 50 percent of the nation’s seafood. It is uniquely positioned to be the largest producer of aquatic plants and shellfish in the world, and fishermen can lead that development, if they choose to take the yoke. ■