

Lake fish may improve village economy

by John Creed

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"I think it's a revolutionary idea."

That's how a rural Alaska mayor sees a new commercial fisheries project being pioneered in Selawik, an arctic Bush community that plans to provide local jobs by harvesting "excess" whitefish from nearby Selawik Lake and processing it into a wide variety of commercial food products. Local high school students will harvest the resource, according to officials, under the direction of community elders.

"We have a new process for making fish patties and other items," says Chuck Johnston, Selawik mayor and well-known Alaska educator.

The Selawik Fish Project, dubbed that by Anchorage-based Rural Ventures Alaska, Inc. (RVA), which is managing the operation, involves groups and individuals ranging from a nationally known food technologist to the Selawik Elders Council.

For example, the University of Alaska's Marine Advisory Program (MAP) is working with RVA and local organizations on the project. Kotzebue MAP agent Dolly Garza, a fisheries biologist, works with local people to improve methods of harvesting, processing and marketing marine and freshwater resources in Northwest Alaska, and will assist with the Selawik fishery's development.

But the operation remains in its infant stages, as RVA only recently secured a \$210,000 grant from the American Native Association to investigate the feasibility of a commercial fishery in Selawik.

"There's still a lot of unknown," explains Susan Cohn, RVA's fish project manager. "Can it work? How can we get it to work? These are the kinds of questions this grant it designed to answer."

Cohn describes the fishery feasibility study in three phases: 1) product development, 2) a preliminary test in local markets of the developed products, and 3) an overall market-

ing strategy, including a resource availability study.

According to Cohn, RVA expects to apply the techniques of Emery Swanson, a noted food technologist in Minneapolis, to develop marketable products from the Selawik Lake resource. "Mr. Swanson can take any kind of fish and process it into uniformly good-tasting products" by adding different flavorings and textures.

Johnston estimates that about seven or eight processed fish products are being considered for the local market, including a "fish sausage that tastes remarkably like older products such as lunch meat. We'll be producing, for example, a fish-based 'turkey' loaf," and possibly sausage, cutlets and coldcuts made from fish rather than from beef or pork.

No reliable employment projections are available, but Cohn sees the project's greatest benefit to Selawik as jobs. "And this, of course, creates more income, which means people will buy more things from stores in the villages, and so on," she said.

Johnston, who launched Selawik's student-run Northern Lights Restaurant 10 years ago, sees the fisheries project as a way out of the rampant unemployment that plagues much of rural Alaska. He estimates that Selawik currently has only about 50 cash jobs, 30 of which are in the local schools.

Johnston expects his high school hunting and trapping classes to experiment with various nets to harvest the ton of fish that'll be used for the feasibility study.

Traditionally, Selawik Eskimos relied heavily on Selawik Lake to feed themselves and

"We're wondering," said Bert Greist, of Selawik, and a leader in its economic development, "if we could use the tonnage we used for dogs in another way. That is, for commercial harvest. There's a change in the region now.

We have electric bills, fuel bills, and there's no jobs to speak of. Essentially, we've made people poorer than they were ten years ago. And we'd

like to ease the amount of stress by bringing in a few jobs...

No one is sure yet how much the fishery will grow, though some are predicting

state and nationwide distribution of fish products from Selawik, while others are even looking as far away as Japan for the "golden Caviar" market

made from the whitefish roe. But initially, Johnston expects the processed products to remain within the region.