

Guest column:

Sturgulewski, Ellis promote mariculture

by Sen. Arliss Sturgulewski
and Rep. Johnny Ellis
for the Tundra Times

After months of being buffeted by reports detailing Alaska's deepening economic woes, it might be easy to conclude our best long-term plan is to market the state as one large ghost town.

You may have missed among the headlines the many modest signals that our economy is improving. Diversification is more than a political buzzword.

Consider the mining industry in which two large-scale projects — Red Dog near Kotzebue and Greens Creek near Juneau — have been given the nod from investors, or the fishing industry, which is enjoying near-record prices and demand. Then there's the continued growth in tourism and steady recovery of markets for forest products.

These trends have been covered by the news media and are known to some Alaskans, but they somehow lack the appeal of the booms which have so typified our economy in the past.

Let's face it, discovery of a new Prudhoe Bay makes better headlines than development of a couple of mines and steady expansion of tourism and fishing. The real solution to our current economic problems won't be solved by another boom, however.

The answer is solid, steady growth in a number of industries, particularly those offering opportunities for development of many small to medium-sized businesses. One of the best economic development potentials now available to Alaska is mariculture — fish and shellfish farming. A recent fish farming seminar in Juneau sponsored by the Trade Commission of Norway underscored some of the reasons mariculture is an attractive option for Alaskans.

Norwegian salmon farming is one of the more amazing success stories in an industry that has achieved remarkable growth throughout the world. Production of Norwegian farmed salmon has grown from 9.5 million pounds in 1980 to a projected 121 million pounds this year; the annual production growth rate is running at 40 percent.

Norwegian officials say 3,000 people are directly employed in the industry. Indirect jobs push the

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total employment up to 8,000 to 10,000

Mariculture offers something for both urban and rural Alaska; most of the direct farming jobs would be located in outlying communities, while secondary jobs would be in the regional service centers.

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The long-range outlook for Norwegian fish farmers is very good. This is because of genetic improvements in farming brood stock, aggressive marketing, quality control and a commitment to research.

For example, after only a few years of large-scale production, Norwegian salmon farmers have improved food conversion ratios to surpass those of poultry farmers, the most efficient meat growers.

The participants in the Norwegian fish farming seminar in Juneau also presented a wide variety of technological innovations that suggest continued improvements are in store for salmon farmers.

Discussed were concepts that would revolutionize fish farming techniques throughout the world, such as controlled environment fish culturing systems and farming in bays sealed off by non-physical barriers.

Other seminar participants described innovations in packaging, air transportation, feed technology and fish farming equipment that will allow the Norwegians to remain world leaders in mariculture. The Norwegians also appear to be close to large-scale commercial production of halibut, sole and cod. It is not in our interest to allow their penetration of American markets to go unchallenged.

One thing seems clear to many Alaskans who attended the seminar; Alaska has the capability to become a world leader in mariculture.

Certainly, there are many policy questions that

must be answered, such as protection of the environment, control of disease, protection of existing uses of public water and recovery of state costs of regulating the industry.

We have much to lose by not pursuing the development of mariculture.

As one seminar participant put it, "Alaska has the opportunity to become a hammer or a nail in the sweeping changes aquaculture is bringing to world seafood markets. . . Alaska can protect its dwindling share of global markets by becoming a driving force in aquaculture production, or it can be hammered upon by other regions taking advantage of increasing consumer demand for fresh seafood."

The long-term health of our economy hinges on the vision and resourcefulness of Alaska entrepreneurs and the ability of government to work with the private sector to take advantage of opportunities such as fish farming. Mariculture development in Alaska is a unique situation; government isn't being asked to change world market conditions, offer subsidies or otherwise interfere in the marketplace.

The Legislature is now studying methods of ensuring that development of this promising new industry proceeds in an orderly manner that will assure maximum economic benefits to Alaskans.

The positive signals we're now starting to see — growth in fishing, mining, tourism and timber — are only a beginning to full economic recovery. Mariculture offers us another building block for a healthy and diverse Alaskan economy.

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