

New life for an old industry

by Peter Metcalfe

A new fish buyer is on the scene in central Southeast Alaska. Kake fisheries, owned by Kake Tribal Corporation, opened its fish processing line in mid-May during the black cod season. According to Kake Tribal president Gordon Jackson, the plant processed nearly 300,000 pounds of black cod during that opening.

At the close of the June fishery, dozens of boats filled the bay in front of Kake, a small Native village about 40 miles west of Petersburg, waiting to unload their catch. Over 35 village residents worked furiously on the cold storage production line to process a quarter-million pounds of halibut.

The start-up of the Kake Fisheries Cold Storage marks the full-throttle entry by the village corporation into the fisheries business. According to corporate president Gordon Jackson, the cold storage venture is an effort to revitalize the once thriving fisheries industry that has all but disappeared from the village.

"Our corporation built the cold storage a dozen years ago, but it has only operated intermittently over the years, and always by a third party operator," Jackson said. "We had an under-used asset that we felt could be the cornerstone for rebuilding the fisheries industry in Kake."

The cold storage is a 22,000 square-foot metal fabricated building with a production capacity of approximately 150,000

pounds of fish a day. There are three unloading bays at the dock, a fish pump, and a brand new ice rake system that delivers thousands of pounds per hour of ultra-cold flake ice directly to boat holds. Capital improvement plans this summer included the addition of an egg-take house to process chum salmon roe from the expected return of fish to the city-owned Kake salmon hatchery.

Fuel and bait are available at the plant, and fishermen are welcome to use the laundry and shower facilities. The village of Kake has grocery and general stores to supply boats.

Last summer, Larry Cambronero was hired by Gordon Jackson to head the Kake Tribal fisheries division. Cambronero is a young but seasoned fish processing manager most recently of Chugach Fish, Inc. in Cordova where he supervised the cold storage and canning operations that processed up to 30 million pounds of fish in a season.

"I was considering other job offers when Gordon called me last year," Cambronero said. "I didn't make my decision until after I saw the facility. I studied it and saw the potential. It has an excellent location; it is relatively new, so there's a lot less maintenance; and there's the acreage to expand into canning and other fisheries."

When the black cod season opened in mid-May, Cambronero was hoping for a

modest delivery to establish the processing procedures, but the first boat brought in a deck load of 100,000 pounds. By the close of the black cod fishery the new operation had processed nearly 300,000 pounds of fish.

Cambronero brought along a half-dozen experienced fish processors who had worked under him at other facilities to help train the Kake crew. "These guys had two speeds: fast, and very fast," Cambronero said of the expert fish handlers he brought to Kake. "The people here recognize they were brought in to help out, not to take up jobs." With the expert help, the production line was processing up to 10,000 pounds an hour during the black cod opening, a rate that pleased Cambronero.

Jackson said Kake Tribal Corporation is committing its resources as an investment in the community. "Our corporation is making a transition from the timber business," said Jackson. "The cold storage is now providing jobs for over 35 people. But it is not going to do us or the local economy much good unless we can expand our processing season from the current five months to nine months, or better yet, year-round."

Jackson said the corporation's strategic plan includes expanding the operation to process value-added products like smoked fish, salmon ham, and specialty products like chum roe for the Japanese market.

Kake Tribal Corporation owns a one-third interest in Health Sea, Inc., a Juneau-based company that has created and is currently test marketing salmon ham, a lightly smoked, processed chum salmon product that looks similar to the more familiar pork ham. The mild flavored and fat-free salmon ham was received enthusiastically by consumers during a test market campaign in Denver, Colorado last December.

Cooperating with the village corporation, the city-owned Kake Hatchery is increasing its production capacity from about 20 million eggs to over 60 million eggs a year. Most of the production will be chum salmon.

In addition to opening the cold storage and developing value-added seafood products, the village corporation also facilitated the renovation of Kake's seine boat fleet. Several of the local boats need watertight compartments to hold refrigerated seawater or slush ice for keeping fish in top condition. Kake Tribal initiated a boat appraisal process that allowed the boat owners to resolve title problems with their boats so they can take out loans. Several local skippers expect to get their boats "tanked" next year. ■

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