

Bering Sea fish potential examined

Allan Ridder was on the phone to a Mr. Itachi who was calling from one of California's largest banks. A pile of phone messages - - "Please call, ASAP" - - littered his desk.

Ridder, who works for the Alaska Native Foundation (ANF), is in charge of coordinating one of the largest bottom fisheries conference ever to be held, and certainly one of the biggest such gatherings in Alaska's history.

The conference, formally entitled simply "Fisheries Development Conference", is scheduled for Sept. 5 through 7 at St. Paul on the Pribilof Islands. Mr. Itachi wanted to come, and it was a pretty good bet that all those who left messages for Ridder wanted to come too.

We've got about a minimum of 150 so far," Ridder said. "And we've chartered two Reeve planes, one with 68 seats and the other with 38. That's only 106 seats."

Going by Reeve, unless one uses a private charter, is about the only way to get to remote St. Paul. But, in terms of the potential Bering Sea bottomfishing industry, St. Paul isn't remote.

It sits smack dab in the middle of the action, action that could be worth anywhere from \$1.7 billion to \$2.8 billion dollars a year on a sustained yield basis, depending upon whose estimate one reads. Whatever, it's a lot of money any way one looks at it, and in those terms St. Paul isn't remote. It's the places all

those visitors are coming from that are remote.

And they are coming from New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Washington, D.C., Scandanavia, and Japan. Bankers, boatbuilders, and bureaucrats, processors, equipment manufacturers, experts, fishermen, and representatives from all the Native corporations, profit and non-profit, regional and village, large and small from the Aleutians and the western coastal areas of Alaska that might be affected by the fisheries development.

"What excites me about this is that it's a unique opportunity to get everybody together for once," said Roger Lang, president of ANF and who will be

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chairing the conference. "Hell," he said, laughing "if I were a politician, I'd be there; you'd probably save about \$5,000 in campaign expenses right there."

But, it is not a political gathering. The invitations went to only "a select group of people" who were asked to attend "because of your expertise and area of involvement, potential or real, in the development of this valuable resource."

The primary goal of the conference is "to acquaint the villagers and other interested parties with the many aspects of bottom-fishing and to provide a vehicle whereby a realistic analysis and appraisal of future development and investments in bottom-fishing can be made."

A secondary goal is "to develop an awareness of the community and social impact that bottomfishing will have from a tangle perspective in the future concerning the Natives of Alaska and their village(s)."

Translated, that seems to mean: what is the scope of the action, what are the options, and what might be their effects;

"The largeness of what we're talking about is one problem in and of itself," Lang said. Lang estimates the potential of the Bering Sea Bottomfishery at about \$2.8 billion annually on a sustained yield basis. "That puts it in the category of Prudhoe Bay. It is probably the most exciting thing to happen in Alaska."

"It's a chance to turn fish into gold; there's a lot of bang for your buck out there," said Lang. "If you capture the market, that's the gold, not in black gold."

But, if the opportunities and potential are immense, so are the investments needed to take advantage of them. And that is mainly what the conference is about.

"The focus of the seminar is to dispense as much information as possible so plans can be made for the future," Lang explained. "We'll demonstrate the impact options and delineate involvement — the areas where they should have an influence themselves."

The "they" Lang talks about are the Natives of the region, whom, he feels have really not received the benefits of already existing fisheries. "Look at Bristol Bay; there's been little benefit to residents; maybe we can do it a different way this time."

Lang pointed out that Alaska's almost one-fifth of the total U.S. coastline is or could be involved in the prospective bottom-fishing industry and that land ownership patterns could or should dictate in which direction that development might go. Much of the land is owned, or will be, by Native corporations.

"Alaska's fortunate in that four out of five of the species most agreeable to human consumption are located in the Bering Sea," Lang said. The primary targets for exploitation are halibut, shrimp, King crab, and pollock. "Alaska has one-twentieth of the total world fish resources," said Lang, pointing out that one third of the fish currently taken world wide "go to feed dogs and cats."

The problem with this potential bonanza is that it takes a lot of bucks and some careful planning to get into it. "Investment in

gear, boats, etc., that's the unknown," said Lang. And he pointed out that the state and those wishing to take part in the development of the fishery only have about two years to decide how they are going to do it.

"We ain't the only ones looking at opportunities," Lang said, "Seattle has 10 times the mobile freezing capacity as compared to two years ago."

An essential decision that has to be made is between floating processors or Alaska based on-shore processing plants. Lang indicated he thought the on-shore plan was the best for the region. That and using smaller boats with quicker turn-around times, boats the residents of the region could more easily afford.

He said the state was watching the Scandinavians, particularly the Danes, very carefully. The Danes, Lang said, with their smaller boat and shore-based processing system were getting 90 per cent utilization out of their bottom fishing efforts, while the Japanese, with their large factory ships were getting only 65 per cent utilization of fish

caught.

"We're dealing with whole new products; we have to go where the money and technology is," said Lang. "Our complex of fisheries is undergoing radical change." There's no reasons there can't be boat building in Anchorage," said Lang when asked about about where all these boats and gear might come from if the region decides to exploit the fishery whole heartedly.

"It's like Alaska's energy, all the facts are there, but nobody is stylizing an approach," said Lang about the complexity of the problems, though he did complement the state government for taking the lead in developing what information and plans that currently exist.

"The state is leading trying to establish an Alaska industry complex," said

Lang. "Whether you agree with the state plan or disagree with it, at least there is one. Edenzo (Jim Edenzo), the governor's bottom fish coordinator) and the governor due all the brownie points you can award for doing something."

Lang said the state has to act one way or the other on developing the Bering Sea resource, otherwise others will come in, domestic or foreing. "And, once they get in, you can't get em out, because they will control the market."

Lang says it will take a tremendous amount of money to get into the development and exploitation of the resource, but that the returns could justify the initial expense. He estimated a completely self sufficient shore based processing facility could be built for about

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\$250 million, but that it would pay itself off in five years or so.

He suggested that one way of coming up with the necessary start-up money would be for the various regional corporations to join some sort of financial pool, and he said there were various state and federal loan and development funds already in existence.

On the other hand "They may not want it," said Lang, referring to residents of the region. "They may say concentrate all that

urban sprawl in Dutch Harbor, or they may want it all."

"We own the coast," said Lang, referring to the regional and village corporations, pointing out that St. Paul where preliminary harbor studies have been made by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, is "as far west and north an ice-free harbor

as you can find in Alaska."

Lang emphasized also that the direct fishing and processing effort is only part of the game. "If there's so many boats, so many people, someone has got to feed them, supply them," he said.

"If we don't do it, someone else will," Lang said.
