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Coastal marine advisers' jobs in jeopardy

By ROSE COX

Alaska Sea Grant's Marine Advisory Program office in Nome closed last week, becoming the first casualty in a budget crunch that is also threatening MAP offices in Unalaska, Cordova, Dillingham and Petersburg.

MAP is part of the Alaska Sea Grant College Program housed at the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus. Its 15 agents offer outreach and technical assistance in 10 coastal communities.

Agents serve as community liaisons on local issues ranging from marine safety to paralytic shellfish poisoning, from ecotourism to science education to invasive species monitoring and prevention. Most offices employ a single agent, often operating out of donated space.

"Our program is committed to helping Alaska's coastal communities and the marine resources they depend on remain strong and resilient," said program director Paula Cullenberg.

Because all communities and their issues are different, MAP agents tend to develop projects and programs uniquely geared toward local residents and industries.

"Everybody's doing something totally different," said Unalaska MAP agent Reid Brewer.

The Unalaska office opened six years ago with a two-year National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration grant for communities affected by the endangered species status of the Steller sea lion. Since then Brewer has been the go-to guy if a whale washes up on the beach, or birds suddenly die off. He's taught university-level courses to residents and started the high school's National Ocean Sciences Tsunami Bowl program. He organized the third annual Western Alaska Interdisciplinary Science Conference and Forum that will bring dozens of experts to Unalaska on March 24-27.

Early on, Brewer encouraged researchers working in the area to give community lectures, and MAP agents in Cordova and Nome followed his lead, Cullenberg said.

"It's been a great opportunity for researchers to talk to the community, and the community to talk to researchers." Cullenberg said. "They get that local input, and that influences how they think about what they do and the implications of their research."

Cordova's MAP agent Torie Baker teaches water safety skills in Prince William Sound, and helps fishermen direct-market their catch. She helped develop the Young Fishermen's Summit, an annual event that educates Alaska's next generation of fishermen on the technological, economic and regulatory aspects of their business.

The summit has drawn fishermen from 25 communities and 20 fisheries statewide in each of the past three years, Cullenberg said.



Alaska Sea Grant, Courtesy Photo

Unalaska MAP agent Reid Brewer talks to children about jellyfish at Tidepool Camp.



Alaska Sea Grant, Courtesy Photo

Cordova MAP agent Torie Baker discusses marine safety at a health fair in Cordova.

When Dillingham agent Izetta Chambers came onboard in August, she held workshops to help residents participate effectively in state Board of Fisheries meetings, and is now developing workshops for villages affected by North Pacific Management Council processes and NEPA laws with a grant from the National Sea Grant Law Center.

One of her special projects is fish-based fertilizer research, development and education.

"I see a strong connection between the rising costs of fossil fuels and the connection with our food supply," she said.

In June, she'll hold training sessions for Naknek seafood processors in hand-filleting techniques, seafood quality monitoring, keeping temperature records and inventory tracking.

Counting every dollar

MAP gets 35 percent of its funds in state dollars through the University of Alaska system, Cullenberg said. Another 15 percent comes from NOAA's National Sea Grant, a university-based program that supports coastal resource use and conservation.

These funds support nine MAP specialists with permanent positions, such as those working out of the UAF Fishery Industrial Technology Center in Kodiak, and agents in Ketchikan, Bethel and Anchorage.

State, federal and private grants have been cobbled together to pay the salaries of agents in Unalaska, Dillingham, Cordova, Petersburg, Nome and Kodiak, although the Kodiak position hasn't been funded for 13 years.

The MAP office in Nome opened three years ago, with a grant from the Norton Sound Economic Development Corp. that ran out last week.

Cordova and Petersburg have had MAP offices for at least two decades. Most recently, agents' salaries in those towns were funded by a five-year, competitive National Sea Grant that will end in April.

Brewer, Unalaska's agent, has been funded in part by proceeds of the settlement after the M/V Kuroshima, a freighter that broke away from its anchorage and ran aground in 1997, disgorging 39,000 gallons of bunker fuel.

Other grants have come from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the National Science Foundation. An Alaska Energy Authority grant in the works now will involve MAP agents in energy audits and energy conservation programs for the seafood industry.

A one-time \$100,000 windfall from Princess Tours kept agents in their offices last year.

"They've all been funded in slightly different ways, but none of them have any permanent state or university funding," Cullenberg said.

For months, Alaska Sea Grant has been seeking a solution to keep agents in the six communities. Now they're counting on the state Legislature to keep the program running.

Community support

The University of Alaska Board of Regents included \$614,000 in its 2011 operating budget request to Gov. Sean Parnell to permanently fund MAP agent salaries. That request, and about 40 other requests for University of Alaska programs, did not make it into governor's spending plan.

According to state office of management and budget director Karen Rehfeld, the governor wasn't picking particular university programs to fund or not fund, but was trying to limit overall spending increases to about 3 percent.

The House didn't include the MAP request in its draft budget, and the House Finance Committee voted down an amendment to add it introduced by House Rep. Neal Foster, D-Nome.

MAP funding was the budget item most mentioned during three days of public testimony before the House, according to a story in the Juneau Empire.



Dillingham MAP agent Izetta Chambers.

MAP has been a great partner for AMSEA efforts, said Jerry Dzugan with the Alaska Marine Education Safety Association when urging the Legislature to fund the positions. For 25 years, MAP agents in communities with high drowning rates have helped AMSEA train thousands of commercial, recreational and subsistence boaters.

The Legislature has received more than 50 letters from community leaders, fishermen's associations, seafood processors, Alaska Native organizations and others attesting to the important role MAP plays in their communities.

"The program links us with research around the state, encourages youth toward workplace opportunities in the seafood and fishing industry and responds to the needs of communities in cases of oil spills, marine mammal strandings and the effects of climate change on our marine environment," said Shirley Marquardt, mayor of Unalaska.

More public testimony will be heard March 25-26 by the Senate finance committee, which will review the governor's and university's budgets. Cullenberg is hopeful.

"Some of the Senate committee members are from these communities. I think we have a possibility on the Senate side to be successful."

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