Martin Wagner doesn’t enjoy eating seafood.

It’s an odd admission from someone at the Alaska Seafood Processing Leadership Institute. For a week, 15 up-and-coming seafood processing managers have met at the Kodiak Seafood and Marine Science Center for in-depth lessons in management and leadership.

After the weeklong Kodiak session, attendees will attend four days of leadership training in Anchorage and a trip to the Boston Seafood Show, the largest in the United States. Outside class, each participant will plan and draft an improvement project for his or her company.

Almost all of the participants at a shared Wednesday lunch were in their 20s or 30s, rising stars in Alaska’s seafood industry. This is the fourth such institute conducted by Alaska Sea Grant and the University of Alaska. Program leader Paula Cullenberg said the idea is to help companies promote internally to turn experienced workers into leaders. “We just heard from plant managers who said, ‘we’ve got white hair and we’re not sure how long we’re going to be doing this,’” she said.

The “graying” of the Alaskan fishing industry is a well-known fact. The average age of Alaska fishermen is on the rise, and while private and public organizations have devoted millions of dollars to encourage young fishermen, less has been done to bring new processors into the picture.

Wagner, meal preferences aside, is precisely the type of person Alaska needs to reverse the aging trend. In his mid-20s, he’s spent five years aboard an at-sea processor with Icicle Seafoods.

After being hired as an ordinary processor, he has been promoted each year and is now assistant production manager aboard his ship.

Even with years of experience at sea, he said the Kodiak institute is worthwhile because it fills gaps in his education. While he knows Icicle’s policies, the course fills in the picture of why things are done. “Instead of hey, I just have to do this, it’s why you have to do this,” he said. “It turned out to be a lot...
more educational than I thought."

The institute also attracts those who aren’t at the start of their careers. Steve Tompkins just turned 50 and has almost three decades of experience in commercial fishing and processing. Employed by Alyeska Seafoods in Dutch Harbor, he is married and owns his own home in Unalaska.

He took the institute’s course of study once before, but had to drop out halfway through. “I’m the only one here who knows how it will help my career because I was here two years ago,” he said.

While he doesn’t need much instruction in the basics of processing, Tompkins said the institute is valuable because of its networking opportunities. Today’s students are tomorrow’s managers, and Alaska’s seafood industry is a tight-knit community. “You kind of run into the same people in different places,” he said.

For that reason alone, “the exposure to this training is good,” he said. “It has been good for my career.”

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