Fish on, speak up

By Hannah Heimbuch

When I sat down for the start of the Alaska Young Fisherman’s Summit in Anchorage last Tuesday, I didn’t know a single face at my table. I’d driven up from Homer alone in the wee hours, preparing to absorb as much information as one fisherman/reporter could.

But as introductions were made, I realized that I was far from the only local to show up. Six other Homer women stood to give their names and fisheries, which ranged from Cook Inlet to Bristol Bay, with Gulf and Western territories in between. There were about 60 young fishermen present from all over the state, and the Homer contingent made up the majority of the women. Four young men from the village of Razdolna also made the trek north.

I couldn’t help but harbor a small spike of hometown pride when I recognized so many fellow fishermen from the lower peninsula. Many of them own and run a boat or set net site, or are working toward it. They are getting acquainted with the complexity of the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council and serving in various leadership positions — like Alaska Marine Conservation Council board member Marissa Wilson and Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute’s Halibut-Sablefish Committee member Claire Laukitis, both of Homer.

Over the course of three days, representatives and guests of the Alaska Sea Grant program presented a wealth of information that anyone investing in the fishing business needs to know — financing, management policies, fish politics, laws, biology, markets, health and boat insurance, safety, aquaculture — the list goes on.

These subjects are old hat for many who have been making their living on the oceans in Alaska for years, but a lot of us, those that are newer to the arena, still have a lot of questions. Am I equipped to take on the tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt that today’s entry level fishermen must to get started? What will my taxes look like? Is the fishery I’m investing in sustainable in the face of internal and external strife? Will the economy I market my fish to hold up enough to carry me through a small-run return, or a major breakdown, or a disaster or the needs of a growing family?

The problems and issues fisheries leaders will be asked to deal with over the coming decades will inevitably be some of the age-old dilemmas, along with a whole host of new ones. We cannot rely on the current management engine alone to take us through those problems. We must use our personal experience to guide it, and when necessary, to change it. It is imperative that the younger generation of fishery workers and consumers shows up for this process. If we don’t, those questions won’t be answered. And the voices best suited to advocate for our future — our own — won’t have a place at the table when the hard choices are made.

The thought of taking on my own fishing operation in the coming years is a daunting one, for a lot of reasons. A task that I realize I’m not up for unless I am also invested in all of the fishing business that happens when the boat is high and dry for the off season. These summits aim to prepare Alaska’s young fishermen to operate within and help shape our state’s vastly complex fishing industry so that — despite flaws — we may maintain our legacy as a world leader in strong and sustainable wild fisheries.

Regardless of where you fall on the issues of fish and ocean in Alaska, your way of living depends on the effort you are willing to offer up to make your concerns heard. And beyond that, to hear the concerns of others. Perhaps others whose priorities you don’t share, but whose resources you do.

Our fish resources sustain us in countless ways. Tonight for dinner I ate salmon that I caught. The rent on the home I live in is paid in part with income I earned as a deckhand and permit owner in Cook Inlet. Tomorrow I will turn in a grad school essay centered around how commercial fishing and the North Pacific define my existence. And as I continue to write for the Homer Tribune, I will inevitably find myself writing, hopefully well, about fish.

Compared to most of the hardy ocean people of my community, I am an amateur fisherman. But despite that fact, the health and fate of Alaska’s fisheries is one of the single most important things in my life. And I know I’m not alone in that. It is no longer an option for me to work only on the back deck.

When the last cork winds onto the reel in late summer, I need a place in front of a microphone at a board of fish meeting. I need a job in the fisheries for a sustainable future. One that allows this way of living and eating and working and breathing in and out on the ocean to continue.

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