

Valdez Fisheries Development Association Creates Opportunities

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, commercial fishing in Prince William Sound and around the state was failing due to a continuously poor return of wild stock salmon. It became apparent the State of Alaska would no longer be able to sustain a commercial fishing program if nothing was done. Fish hatcheries were believed to be the answer by leveling the returns and taking pressure off of the wild stock. This would enable the Department of Fish and Game to manage the wild stock creating a sustainable industry.

Planning for the Valdez Fisheries Development Association (VFDA) began in 1978 with a local group of fishermen, including father and son Max and Jason Wells. In 1981, VFDA became fully operational. Jason Wells was VFDA's first employee and has since been joined by his son, Mike Wells. Both are still with the organization today. VFDA

currently has between 30-55 seasonal employees and 12 full-time employees, several of whom have been with the organization for 15 years or more.

VFDA is a private non-profit, 501c(3) Aquaculture Association whose mission is 'to propagate salmon for the benefit of commercial and sport fishermen within the 200 mile limit of the Gulf of Alaska and to improve opportunities for the commercial fishing industry.'

VFDA is governed by a seven member Board of Directors made up of representatives from the community, local businesses, and the commercial and sport fishing industries. Funding for the organization comes primarily from its cost recovery program. Cost recovery is the process of catching and selling fish and fish products to make money that can be invested back into programs fulfilling the mission of the organization.

The ability to catch fish for cost recovery is actually provided to VFDA by state statute. Cost recovery typically begins in late June and continues until mid July as the pink salmon get ready to spawn. Then it is time to secure the brood stock that will be used to continue the cycle.

Over the last few years, VFDA's cost recovery efforts have become more aggressive through the development and sale of fish products including smoked salmon and caviar. The organization offers salted salmon caviar, smoked pink salmon, and several types of smoked silver

salmon including original, teriyaki, and cracked black pepper flavors, all under the Solomon Falls brand.

VFDA has been very successful in creating a market to fit the supply of fish they have available primarily because Solomon Falls fish products are made from fresh, wild Alaska salmon and are good quality and competitively

priced. Currently, the products are being sold locally and in the Lower 48.

The money made from the sale of these products goes back into the development and expansion of the program itself and can be used to open doors for other economic development opportunities for the local commercial industry.

While VFDA provides many value-added opportunities to local fisherman, raising and releasing salmon remains their core program. This is accomplished through a detailed process at the Solomon Gulch Hatchery. The hatchery is supplied water at no cost by CVEA

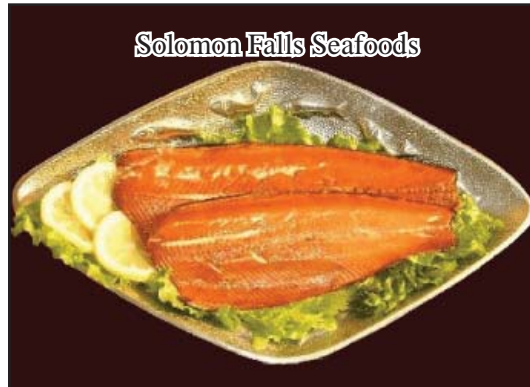
from the Solomon Gulch hydro plant. CVEA has a close working relationship with the hatchery and is an integral part of its meaningful operation.

The process is simple. Adult salmon return to the area and voluntarily swim up the fish ladder into the hatchery. At that time, the eggs are taken and put into incubators where they incubate until they become frye. The millions of frye are then put into net pins, fed for 30 days and released.

An amazing 230,000,000 pink salmon frye are released each year. VFDA typically sees between 11-28 million return, but the size of the return is affected mostly by ocean conditions. How do they know these numbers? The fish are thermally marked. The Department of Fish & Game can determine which fish are hatchery fish by the binary code. This code is a pattern of rings on the fish's earbone created from an intentional series of increases and decreases in temperature while the eggs are incubating.

Final numbers are based on poundage. Assuming the average pink salmon weighs 3.5 pounds, the poundage caught is divided by 3.5 to estimate the number of fish returning.

In addition to salmon propagation, VFDA programs provide opportunities for commercial fishermen to process and market their own fish. They provide the processing facilities and can even supply employees for them to use to complete the work. VFDA can also answer questions and



Above: Display of Solomon Falls smoked salmon. Opposite: Salmon find their way into the fish ladder at the hatchery. Photos courtesy VFDA



provide guidance on ways fishermen can market and sell their fish.

Another VFDA program is the Valdez sport fish program. This is a joint effort funded by VFDA and the City of Valdez. VFDA provides silver salmon for the program and supports the effort and costs associated with raising and releasing them. The City of Valdez provides funds to cover the cost of the fish food each year.

Annually approximately 2,000,000 silver salmon frye are released and 250,000-350,000 return. This program has a huge economic impact on the community and it provides an enhanced quality of life for residents and our regional neighbors.

At the end of the sport fishing season, the silver run provides an added benefit to the commercial fishermen as they are allowed to 'clean up' the area and market the fish they catch.

The Valdez sport fish program now has king salmon returning to the Port of Valdez. Lisa Von Barga and the City of Valdez developed the idea, the State Department of Fish and Game provide 120,000 king salmon each year, and Valdez Fisheries provides the nets and food, feeds the fish, acclimates the fish, and releases them. VFDA was also involved in the planning and design concept of the pond.

VFDA is expecting roughly 2,000-2,700 kings to return in 2008. Local sport fishermen have been catching them all season in the Port and should see them hitting the pond, located near the Old Valdez townsite, in August.

The VFDA clearly has a dramatic impact on the economy of Valdez. They help bring millions of dollars into the community through commercial fishing, sport fishing, and processing. They spend the majority of their \$2.7 million budget locally on products and services and they provide jobs to local residents. In addition,

VFDA provides a leadership role for development in the community by working with community groups, taking part in local activities, and providing fish products for many community events.

According to Dave Cobb, "Creating new opportunities for the commercial fishing industry and economic development for our community is something we believe we must do." Right now, VFDA has several new projects on the horizon that will fill a niche in the community and save users money.

One of these new projects is a small scale cold storage facility. This project is 60% funded by the federal government and 40% funded by VFDA. The project will provide freezer space, maintained at 20-30 degrees below zero, perfect for ice cream, herring, bulk meats, etc. It will be located on Loop Road at the current office location and made up of four 50,000 pound units and one smaller unit.

VFDA says this project can benefit businesses who need to order large, bulk amounts of frozen goods but don't have anywhere to store the excess. They currently have to order small amounts at a time and thus lose out on the savings of large volume orders. It can also benefit commercial fishermen who currently have to send their frozen products elsewhere to be stored while awaiting reprocessing. "Why not do it here," asks Dave Cobb. "We're trying to help make that happen." This facility is expected to be operational in 2009.

In addition, VFDA is working on a major cold storage facility that will operate using waste heat from the Petro Star refinery. It will be a 30 million pound cold storage facility that will include a fish reprocessing facility. This project will be created with not only local, but regional use in mind.

For more information on VFDA call 835-4874 or visit www.solomonfalls.com to learn about their products.