

Lowcountry shrimpers in Alaska?



It sounds unlikely, but it's true. In March, five shrimpers trekked to Alaska to learn about best practices in seafood processing, storage, distribution and marketing.

In case you haven't noticed, Alaska is the poster child for fisheries redevelopment. When farm-raised salmon crowded the market several years ago, it left wild-caught salmon product out in the cold, so to speak. And it kind of ruined the typical Alaskan salmon fisherman's business model.

The farm-raised stuff had everything going for it. Cheap prices. Attractive packaging. Consistent product. Predictable volume. What's not to like?

There was no way wild salmon could go head to head with the farm-raised fish. Competing on price would have been impossible. It's more expensive to hunt for wild fish than it is to factory-feed the ones on farms, so you have to charge more for the wild stuff. If you want to stay in business, that is.

To compete with the salmon farmers, the salmon fisherman had to make their product stand out.

The outside part of the project was easy. Developing competitive packaging was a no-brainer. Just take a cute box or bag or whatever, slap a snappy logo on it and there you go. The wild stuff looks as fancy as the farm-raised.

It was the insides that were the real problem. You see, it doesn't matter how exquisite the package is. If the quality of the product inside the package doesn't match the exterior packaging, it's just a waste of packaging.

And to be blunt, some fishermen don't produce quality product. Producing quality seafood products takes time and handling care which sometimes don't coincide when a fisherman is worried about his bottom line.

When you catch something, you have to take care of it from the get go. You have to process the stuff fast. You have to get rid of the parts that will decompose quickly, and then you have to store the product in clean, cold conditions.

But in Alaska not everyone was doing that. Despite the fact that Alaska is such a clean, cold place to begin with.

This product inconsistency was a roadblock to success because one mouthful of bad fish can ruin the reputation of an entire fishery. So it took some effort to educate fishermen and processors so that they would produce something that was worthy of all that pretty packaging.

But there was an even bigger roadblock. To get the state-of-the-art product quality that consumers expect, you have to use state-of-the-art production facilities. But most fishermen are not wealthy enough to acquire a plant and buy machines on their own. Each fisherman, as an individual business person, doesn't produce enough to make it worth his while to make an investment in a processing plant. It's an investment that makes sense only when you have a pool of people sharing the facility and sharing the risk.

Sharing a facility requires a lot of negotiation, an ability to play well with others, and a willingness to reach a mutual agreement on how things should operate. And that was the weak link in the supply chain.

It's hard to get a bunch of independent, hard-headed Alaskan salmon fishermen to agree to anything. Alaska fishing communities overcame this obstacle by developing community owned

cold storage facilities and developing direct marketing chains allowing fishermen to sell directly to consumers.

This example rings true in South Carolina where our fishermen are, like Alaskan fishermen, just as independent and leery of anything that may cause things to change in their industry – even if it may improve their industry's situation.

But the Alaskan salmon fishermen made it over the hump and developed a distinguished wild salmon product. And South Carolina shrimpers, if they will come together, can do the same. I'm looking to the five shrimpers who went to Alaska to lead the way.

Shrimpers here are in a situation much like that of the Alaskan salmon fishermen: imports have flooded the market, it is impossible to compete on price, and creating a reliable, high quality product will take a level of cooperation hitherto unknown in these parts. And cooperation is key.

Yes, competition from farm-raised shrimp hurts the South Carolina shrimp industry. But what is even more damaging has been the industry's failure to come together to develop and improve processing, storage, distribution and marketing.

But maybe that is changing. The South Carolina shrimpers who journeyed together to Alaska are symbols of hope for the local shrimp industry. The trip was funded through the USDA Trade Adjustment Assistance program, which became available to shrimp fishermen in the region in 2004 and 2005 to provide economic assistance and technical training to the industry. The grant was awarded to the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service and the program was delivered cooperatively with the South Carolina Sea Grant Consortium Extension Program, which has a fisheries specialist located here in the Beaufort County Clemson Extension office.

What will it take to make the SC shrimp industry here profitable? All the best-laid plans are constrained by a lack of infrastructure, including in-state processing facilities, working waterfront areas and modern cold storage facilities.

In the next column I'll be writing about a community cold storage facility in Alaska. Building a cold storage facility in Alaska may sound as pointless as carrying coals to Newcastle. But it seems to have been the right move for the Alaskan fishermen who, until recently, had been using antiquated weapons in the war to win over modern consumers.