Alaska Young Fishermen's Summit graduates put conference skills into practice

Juneau entrepreneurs Iris and Chris Nash know a thing or two about juggling home and work life. The married couple is raising two young sons while power trolling for coho and king salmon during the summer and dinglebarring for lingcod and rockfish in spring.

Graduates of the Alaska Young Fishermen’s Summit, the Nashes own a 47-foot sailboat troller, the F/V Orion. They used to live aboard the boat, and plan to again, but for the winter, they’re settling in with family in Juneau to keep costs low and have help raising Yakobi, 4, and Espen, 2. This allows them to invest more in their new direct marketing venture after spending the past three years living and fishing out of Sitka.

Armed with knowledge and connections from the Alaska Young Fishermen’s Summit, the Nashes are steering their family’s fishing business in a new direction. With the goal of spending less time apart, the couple is planning to market their own catch.

The idea is to get the highest price per pound by offering consumers top-quality pressure-bled fish, rather than selling to tenders for dock price. Boats that serve as tenders buy fish, mix the various catches they get from fishermen, and sell the product to onshore processors. When selling to tenders, there’s little incentive to raise the quality of the fish because the product is all mixed together, according to the couple.

By direct marketing, the Nashes hope to be able to catch less fish, offer consumers the highest quality, and make more money by cutting out the middle men.

“We want to make it a viable lifestyle by reducing our dependence on a large catch and volatile markets,” said Chris Nash, 31.

A fishing family: The couple fished together, but after the boys came along, Iris stayed ashore to care for them while Chris went
fishing. He was at sea for nearly five months this past year, which wasn’t conducive to the family life they wanted.

With direct marketing, “we can do it as a family, like we’ve always planned,” said Iris Nash, 26. Their plan is to run the business like a community-supported agriculture operation, where consumers purchase subscriptions and get fish delivered directly to their door. Fishermen can command a higher price per pound of fish this way compared to selling to wholesalers.

Both Iris and Chris come from fishing families. Chris was born and raised in Juneau and grew up fishing with his father and brother. Iris was born in Petersburg to parents who started an oyster farm they later sold. Her father also gillnetted and longlined in Southeast Alaska, and crabbed in the Bering Sea.

The Nashes attended the Alaska Young Fishermen’s Summit in 2016 with Yakobi, then an infant, to hear from veterans and experts and to meet others getting into the industry.

While attending the summit, the Nashes met Stephen Rhoads, a Sitka fisherman who introduced them to the Alaska Longline Fishermen’s Association’s ocean-floor bathymetry. The tool offers high-definition views of the ocean floor through a shared data set of depth information and GPS coordinates.

“It helped me find new fishing grounds and know where to steer clear of,” said Chris Nash.

They also met Seth Stewart, owner of Yakobi Fisheries in Pelican. Last summer, the Nashes sold Stewart some 10,000 pounds of fish and they are hoping to supply him with more fish this coming summer.

The Nashes again plan to attend the upcoming young fishermen’s summit, organized by Alaska Sea Grant, a partnership between the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the University of Alaska Fairbanks College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences. The three-day workshop, which will be held Jan. 21-23 in Juneau, builds leadership skills, provides training and networking opportunities, and offers practical information on marketing, taxes, finances, permits, regulations, and interacting with government agencies.

“This time we’ll go without the kids,” said Iris.

**Graying of the fleet:** John Christensen Jr., tribal president of the Native Village of Port Heiden, is another graduate of the Alaska Young Fishermen’s Summit. Christensen is working to get a tribally owned fish-processing plant off the ground in his Western Alaska community. The plant would create about 10 jobs and help local fishermen.

“It’s important to get more young people into fishing especially with the graying of the fleet,” he said.

The graying of the fleet refers to the ongoing loss of fishing permits and quota from Alaska’s coastal communities and the rising age of quota and permit holders. University of Alaska research indicates that Alaska’s rural fishing communities have lost nearly 2,500 locally held commercial fishing permits since 1975, when Alaska began restricting access by establishing limited entry fisheries.

The Alaska Young Fishermen’s Summit was organized to help reverse those trends through information sharing about opportunities in commercial fishing, a multibillion-dollar industry in Alaska and the state’s largest private sector employer. More information about the summit and how to register are on the Alaska Sea Grant website.

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