William “Middy” Johnson has been around the commercial fishing industry his entire life, but he is relatively new to the management side of the business. He was the perfect candidate for the Alaska Seafood Processing Leadership Institute (ASPLI), a one-year pilot program launched last spring to provide professional development to up-and-coming leaders in Alaska’s seafood processing industry.

“ASPLI was looking for participants in the industry, and our general manager thought it would be good for managers to participate. We’re so scoped on doing what we’ve been doing, and this was a good way to broaden our horizons, meet other people and see what else is out there,” says Johnson, plant manager at Norton Sound Seafood Products in Unalakleet.

Johnson, along with 13 others, just completed the program, which strives to meet the unique needs of an industry that primarily relies upon on-the-job training. ASPLI participants came from Unalakleet, Nome, Naknek, Homer, Juneau, Petersburg, Kodiak, Quinhagak, Akiachak and Chignik to participate in the program.

“Seafood processors generally are based in small, coastal communities, working long hours while the fish are in. There aren’t really any traditional college degree programs useful to them. These things combined make it tricky to find good professional development opportunities for members of Alaska’s seafood industry,” says Paula Cullenberg, Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory program leader.

This need, combined with the importance of the seafood industry to the state, motivated the development of ASPLI, which is a collaboration between UAF’s Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program and the State of Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development.

“The seafood industry is the largest private employer in Alaska, and it is extremely valuable to the state, both in terms of export product and employment. Keeping this industry strong is one of the more important goals in the state. ASPLI is an important part of that effort. It is giving younger, upwardly mobile Alaskans the skills they need to be successful in the industry,” Cullenberg says.

Increasing the number of Alaskans involved in management of the industry is an important aspect of ASPLI.

“Many people in Alaska’s seafood industry come from Outside. It’s important to train Alaskans to work in this industry. We’re looking at capacity building of younger Alaskans in the seafood processing field,” says Cullenberg.

ASPLI began with a two-week session in spring 2006, where participants received training in seafood processing at the Fishery Industrial Technology Center in Kodiak. During the summer, the participants worked at their seafood processing plant with a mentor. The group met again last October for a one-week session in Anchorage, where they learned about the business of seafood, leadership, personnel management, and plant management. The program wrapped up in March 2007 with a 10-day trip to the International Boston Seafood Show, and to Iceland to visit other cold-climate seafood processing facilities.

“In the Alaska seafood industry, we can be so isolated. It’s easy to forget we are part of a huge, international market,” Cullenberg says. “This trip opened participants’ eyes to the international market, and allowed them to see how other plants are operated.”
In addition to seeing how things are done at large processing plants, Johnson says the opportunity to network and see other processing equipment and techniques was also very valuable.

“I know I learned a lot and I think other people did, too,” Johnson says of the year-long ASPLI experience.

Cullenberg says initial feedback about the program has been very positive, and that organizers will continue to evaluate the first year of the program. She also says they are looking at ways to implement ASPLI on a semi-annual basis.

For more information on the Alaska Seafood Processing Leadership Institute, contact:
- pcullenberg@uaa.alaska.edu or 907.274.9691 or visit http://seagrant.uaf.edu/map/aspli/

ASPLI participants engage in a team building exercise. Photo by Deborah Mercy.

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