Fisheries seafood initiative stalls in higher education halls

U of A slow: The University of Alaska got a friendly kick in the pants from some of its seafood industry partners in their joint “Fisheries, Seafood, and Maritime (FSM) Workforce Initiative” to improve and expand academic and vocational training and recruitment.

“I think some of us were disappointed in where we had ended up, that we didn’t think we had gone far enough yet,” said Larry Cotter of the Aleutian Pribilof Island Community Development Association and one of 10 industry participants in the Oct. 2 session.

Beyond finding a way to bring more young people into commercial fishing, the project is part of an ongoing seafood industry effort to get the university to build career-oriented degree programs in seafood business management. They also want more technology courses in the School of Fisheries curriculum.

The university came to the meeting seeking comments on eight or nine possible legislative funding requests, according to Cotter.

“I think what we expected was not that as much as a plan that begins to articulate how this program would be organized and how it would look,” he said.

Dillingham Rep. Bryce Edgmon called the university proposals “comparatively modest” in his October newsletter. “Some participants voiced concern that, even when viewed as initial steps in the process, they did not signal clearly enough the far more comprehensive approach that many members envisioned,” Edgmon wrote.

He noted that the university “addressed these concerns well,” and that industry participants offered to “strengthen their role in defining the initiative’s overall aims so that a truly integrated and far-reaching action plan can be developed.”

Cotter acknowledged that he may have had “mistaken expectations” and said, “To the extent a course correction was necessary, I think it’s been made.” He also stood by his concerns.

“I may have been the one doing most of the talking, but believe me, the concerns I raised were felt by others as well,” Cotter said.

School of Fisheries Dean Michael Castellini declined to be interviewed or to provide copies of the proposals reviewed at the session. A two-page summary of the session noted that “candid discussion ensued on a broad range of subjects” when participants reconvened to share the results of small group discussions.

It said an “Industry Advisory Committee” would be created with the job of “providing an inventory and needs assessment” for the initiative and help with preparation of an action plan.

History suggests the university enjoys inventories and working groups. In 2006, it received $5 million, still the largest single project grant ever, from the Rasmuson Foundation, “to reinvigorate the undergrad fishing program at UAF,” according to Cassandra Salzer, spokeswoman for the foundation.

An October 2011 executive summary of the “Allied Fisheries University of Alaska Partnership with the FSM Industries” announced the results of an inventory of existing UA training and education capacity by an 18-member, cross-campus working group of deans, directors, and faculty.

It found that the existing programs “lack coordination, planning, and a cohesive identity.” Among others, its recommendations included completion of an occupations inventory and workforce assessment and development of “an integrated and comprehensive action plan.”

The Rasmuson project formally ends in 2013, but Ian Dutton, foundation vice president, welcomed the increased industry involvement.

“The major outcome of the last workshop was the fact that the university recommitted to working more closely with the industry,” he said on Oct. 25.

The new advisory committee could set some timelines for the project, but Dutton noted that the range of increasingly high-tech skills needed in FSM industries makes curriculum design difficult.

“Probably that is why the university only put forth a modest proposal,” Dutton said.

Monitoring the initiative: Lawmakers from Alaska’s Bristol Bay region got the job of monitoring the Fisheries, Seafood, and Maritime Workforce Initiative and offering recommendations for “legislative contributions” — i.e., money.

Sen. Lyman Hoffman from Bethel and Dillingham Rep. Bryce Edgmon were named, in September, as liaisons to the initiative as required by HCR 18, passed in April. The resolution calls for quarterly reports on project progress and recommendations by Jan. 20.

Hoffman has been co-chairman of the Senate Finance Committee since 2007, though he would likely lose that powerful seat if an all-Republican majority replaces the current bipartisan coalition. Edgmon is one of four Native Democrats in the House Republican majority and joined its Finance Committee in 2011.

Graying fleet worldwide problem: The “graying” of Alaska’s commercial fishing fleet and low interest among young people in seafood industry careers is an international problem, according to Gunnar Knapp, an economics professor at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

Knapp reviewed seafood career education programs of Norway, Scotland, Iceland, Australia, and New Zealand for participants in the university/industry “Fisheries, Seafood, and Maritime Workforce Initiative” at an Oct. 2 forum.

An “apparent worldwide decline” in interest in fishing and processing careers is not only a response to “relatively low pay, long hours, hard work, [and] difficult work environment,” Knapp said. A growing dependence, in Alaska and elsewhere, on foreign workers is a reflection of the “declining social status of the seafood industry,” he found.

Knapp also cautioned that even the FSM initiative project’s best efforts may not get the gray out.

“We can’t assume that if we offer it, they will come,” he said in his presentation.

He found no perfect model for Alaska and suggested an international workshop on seafood industry education and training, plus visits to and from successful programs.

Knapp noted that formal education has never been a requirement for success in the seafood industry. “What matters most is what you can do,” he said.

While practical, that philosophy raises a potential chicken-and-egg difficulty to the FSM initiative, Knapp said. “Many” countries have “far stricter” licensing and training requirements for fishing or processing jobs, he said, but also noted that the requirements generate the demand for their classes.

“The Alaska seafood industry is worried that opportunities for training (a good thing) can too easily turn into requirements for training (a bad thing),” Knapp warned in a PowerPoint slide.

Pacific Fishing columnist Bob Tkacz covers the Alaska Legislature and publishes Laws for the Sea, which focuses on seafood, fisheries, and environmental issues.