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FOR THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

My Turn: Banking on Alaska's fishing future

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Many people our age have written wills. Have you? It's a good idea, of course, because wills preserve family harmony while planning for ways our youth can prosper.

Many in the fishing industry feel the same. As fishing leaders gathered in Juneau this week for the United Fishermen of Alaska board meeting, Symphony of Seafood and other events, we have to look past our industry's near-term challenges and focus on our collective "will" to ensure Alaska's local fishing legacy lives on.

Local permit ownership – keeping the family assets in the family, if you're thinking in terms of a will – is essential to a thriving fleet and sustainable local economies.

We know our fleet is greying. The average age of fishing permit holders in Alaska is 50, a rise of 10 years since 1980. The number of Alaska residents under the age of 40 holding fishing permits has fallen to 17 percent in 2013. Aging trends are especially pronounced in rural fishing communities.

Commercial fishing is the lifeblood of dozens of Alaskan communities. Clearly, we need to think about passing our fishing industry on to the next generation of fishermen.

Vast numbers of fishing permits have left Alaska communities in recent years. Between 1975 and 2014, Alaska's rural fishing communities felt the net loss of more than 2,300 (limited entry) fishing permits (27.8 percent). Since the implementation of the halibut and

sablefish IFQ program in 1995, the number of fishermen in small Gulf of Alaska fishing communities holding quota in these fisheries has declined by 50 percent. In the Bristol Bay salmon fishery, local permit ownership declined by 50 percent between 1975 and 2014.

This isn't exactly the same as selling family treasures in a garage sale, but it does feel like our Alaskan "family" is losing out.

The average limited entry permit costs as much as an upscale home — and involves a lot more risk. Fish abundance and prices fluctuate annually. An engine breakdown before a critical opening can cost a new fisherman the opening, the season and the permit. Both upscale homes and permits are out of reach of many young or new fishermen. This means that new fishermen are unable to enter into commercial fisheries happening right outside their door.

Loss of fishing access degrades a community's economic opportunities, heritage, infrastructure and health. This leads to an inability to keep the value and economic benefit of Alaska's fish resources within Alaska communities, businesses and families.

Alaska must make a concerted effort to help preserve local right to fish. Some state legislators are proposing a fish permit bank that creates a way for communities to buy permits and lease them to new fishermen who otherwise could not afford them. It would offer several types of fishing permits that would be proportional and reflective of regional fisheries.

By owning permits and leasing them to entry-level local fishermen year-in and year-out, permit banks work to launch young and new fishermen, create resiliency in their strategies and help them become profitable for the long term.

Alaska needs to create strong local Alaskan fishing economies. To get there, Alaska needs diversified fishing businesses, a multi-age fleet demographic that includes new entrants and mentors, an ongoing commitment to resource stewardship, and a resilient community of fishermen working together.

This week's UFA meeting included 40 member groups from throughout Alaska and the Pacific Coast. Let's "write our will" and find ways to strengthen local fishing businesses, protect Alaska's fishing resources, and keep fishing as a way of life in Alaska by facilitating entry for younger fishermen.

Local fishing permit banks are one way our family legacy — our shared Alaskan fishing heritage and economy — can be passed on for generations to come.

- Linda Behnken of Sitka, Edward Davis of Hoonah, Duncan Fields of Kodiak and Norman Van Vactor of Dillingham are long-time leaders in the commercial fishing industry.



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