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Lights, camera, Alaska! Tax credit could draw \$100M

By Andrew Jensen

Alaska Journal of Commerce

Reality television struck gold in Alaska long ago, but a package of film tax credits passed in 2008 has the state ready to take its act to the big screen.

Two Hollywood films — "Beyond" starring Jon Voigt and "Everybody Loves Whales" starring Drew Barrymore — wrapped in 2010. An independent film shot in Barrow — "On the Ice" — by local director Andrew MacLean competed at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival this January.

"Everybody Loves Whales" has not yet submitted its final application for the tax credit, which will reveal how much the production spent in Alaska while shooting in Seward, Anchorage, Barrow and Fort Richardson. The movie had a reported \$30 million budget and the production was one of the first to apply for the Alaska film credit in May 2009.

Completed projects (\$14.9 million) and pre-approved projects (\$88 million) push the potential spending in Alaska to more than \$100 million.

"Beyond," which had a reported budget of \$10 million, spent \$6.6 million filming in Anchorage last fall and received a tax credit of \$2.14 million, the largest to date. The tax credits, which have averaged about 32 percent of total Alaska spending, are issued based on how and where companies work.

The base credit is 30 percent of Alaska expenditures, with a total incentive of 44 percent available with a 10 percent Alaska hire credit, 2 percent seasonal credit for shooting between October and March, and another 2 percent for shooting in rural Alaska. The credits are transferrable, which means production companies can sell the credits to Alaska companies for reductions in their state corporate income taxes.

Alaska has no state sales or income tax, so the credits will exceed a company's tax liabilities. According to the state Film Office website, the credits can fetch 80 percent to 90 percent of their value and provide an additional cash stream for production companies.

The largest credit by percentage issued to date was 37.67 percent to the production of "Disaster on K2" completed in 2009. The documentary, which did some shooting in Nepal, took advantage of Alaska's scenery to recreate the 2008 expedition that left 11 of 15 climbers dead.

Since the introduction of the credits, 15 productions have wrapped after spending \$14.9 million in Alaska. Tax credits have totaled \$4.9 million to date.

There are now 29 active projects pre-approved for the credit, including "Everybody Loves Whales," with total proposed Alaska spending of about \$88 million and \$29.4 million in potential tax credits.

Alaska Film Office director Dave Worrell cautioned that it is unlikely all \$88 million actually will be spent, but it indicates the growing interest in Alaska's film incentive program.

"As we see some productions happening, particularly feature films, it kind of feeds off of that," Worrell said. "People are a little hesitant to be the first on the block. Now



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The Tweto family (from left), Ayla, Ariel, Jim and Ferno are featured in the reality TV show, "Flying Wild Alaska," a series on the Discovery Channel about Bush pilots. It is one of dozens of productions filmed in Alaska, many of which are taking advantage of the state's tax incentive. AP Photo/Discovery Channel

we've seen a couple feature films come in and be successful here, I think the word will get out that, yes you can make a movie in Alaska."

Worrell was particularly excited about "On the Ice," which was shot on a budget of \$524,628 and earned a credit of \$171,145. MacLean is a native of Barrow who attended film school in New York and shot his senior project "short" in his hometown.

The short also qualified for Sundance, and MacLean was encouraged to shoot it as a full-length feature.

"That's exactly what we want to see," Worrell said. "We want to see Alaskans telling Alaskans' story."

With 43 states (including Alaska) and every Canadian province having some kind of film incentives, Worrell said it was "critical" for the Legislature to pass the credits.

"With the global economy the way it is right now, films are having a hard time getting a green light," he said. "It's an indispensable part of the business now. If Alaska is going to be competitive, we have to have some kind of incentive."

Alaska has work to do, though, in having sufficient numbers of qualified crew and movie infrastructure if it wants to attract additional big budget studio films. A variety of tasks are being pursued from the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, to the University of Alaska system, the nonprofit Alaska Crew Training Inc. and the recent partnership between NANA Corp. and Evergreen Films.

Being able to shoot indoors is another need, Worrell said.

"Right now we have to rely on what Alaska has always relied on, our amazing locations," he said. "That right now is the huge draw for us. But filmmakers need something to keep their crew busy on rainy days. Having sound stages where they can do interiors will be a big help for the industry. We recognize this is something that has to pencil in, so it's a little bit of building slowly. We think there's interest and a market for Alaska, but a business case has to be made to build the infrastructure."

The incentive has benefitted the wide array of reality shows that were already home in Alaska such as "Deadliest Catch" and "Ice Road Truckers."

In its sixth season, "Deadliest Catch" spent \$1.75 million in Alaska and received a \$584,562 credit. The third and fourth seasons of "Ice Road Truckers" wrapped in 2010 with a total Alaska spend of \$3.9 million and a credit of \$1.3 million.

A slew of new reality programs also hit the air in 2010 and 2011, including "Alaska State Troopers," "Gold Rush: Alaska," "Flying Alaska Wild" and "Sarah Palin's Alaska." Other shows such as "Ax Men," "Man vs. Wild" and "Top Gear" dropped in to film episodes.

Deadliest Catch, now filming its seventh season, has been a ratings giant for Discovery Channel. It ranked No. 1 in the coveted 25-54 demographic for 14 straight weeks on cable last season, drawing a record average of 5.4 million viewers and 8.5 million for the final episode that recounted the untimely death of Cornelia Marie Capt. Phil Harris.

Ice Road Truckers has steadily drawn more than 3 million viewers; Gold Rush: Alaska attracted 3.7 million viewers for its Jan. 7 premier episode; Alaska State Troopers pulled 6.2 million total viewers for the debut of its second season.

The state tourism office is trying to capitalize on the Alaska fascination with new promos running during the shows, and Worrell noted the boom to New Zealand tourism after the "Lord of the Rings" was filmed there.

"Having Alaska visible on the big screen and small screen, it reminds people, 'that's someplace I've always wanted to go,'" Worrell said. "Maybe the constant presence of Alaska will spur that little extra and 'OK, this is the year I'm going to go.'"

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Tax incentive program improves economy

BY HEIDI BOHI

Shortly after the movie "Everyone Loves Whales" began filming in September, Uptown Blossoms, a popular flower shop in midtown Anchorage, had its own brush with fame when the set decorator called to talk about flower needs for various scenes in the movie.

"When we first met him we were sort of nervous, but really he's just a person like you and me," shop owner Carol Trout says, adding that her business was recommended to the studio coordinators. "Wherever there was a need for flowers, we supplied them."

Set in Cold War era 1988, the film tells the true story of a small-town news reporter and a Greenpeace volunteer, played by Drew Barrymore, who enlist

the help of rival superpowers to save three gray whales trapped under the ice of the Arctic Circle as they made their way to Mexico for the winter. The national media, environmental activists, and the United States and Soviet Union – then in the middle of the Cold War – quickly descended on Barrow in an effort to escort the whales into open water.

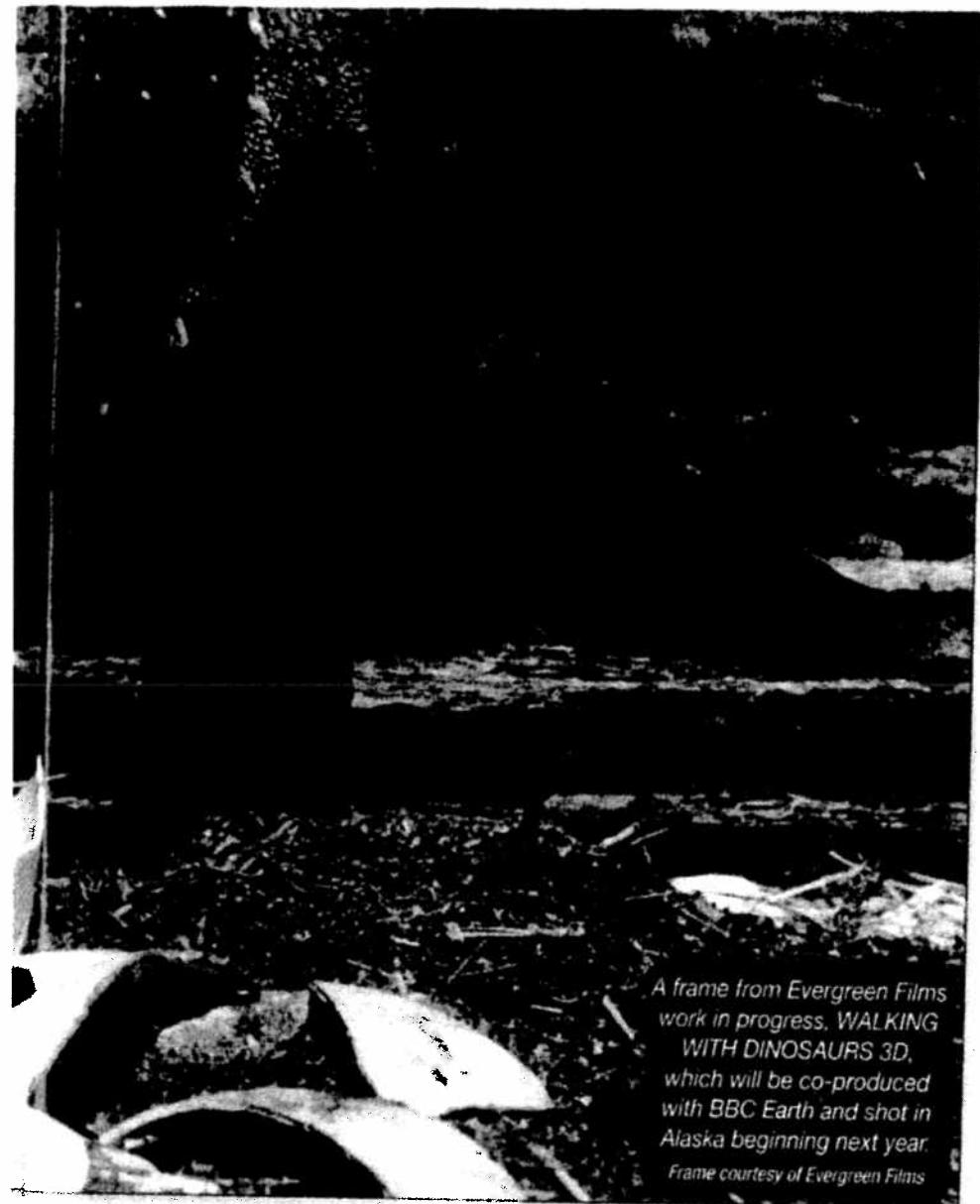
Trout says flower needs all had to be designed to reflect what was in style in the 1980s, and included centerpieces and arrangements for various scenes in the film. Some of the flower orders required working with the production person responsible for props any of the actors or actresses touched.

What it meant for Uptown Blossoms

was about \$4,000 in orders. Although Trout says her business is fortunate to have a steady stream of customers year-round, it was nice to have the extra bump.

ALASKA'S NEWEST INDUSTRY

Since beginning to offer financial incentives to studios that decide to film their movies in Alaska, as is the case with "Everybody Loves Whales," the State's resurrected Film Office is optimistically watching what is being dubbed as Alaska's newest industry. The hope is the economic development initiative will attract projects that mean millions of dollars in economic impact resulting from increased receipts for small and large businesses and local hire.



A frame from Evergreen Films work in progress, WALKING WITH DINOSAURS 3D, which will be co-produced with BBC Earth and shot in Alaska beginning next year.
Frame courtesy of Evergreen Films

which in the case of "Everyone Loves Whales," meant hiring 3,000 Alaskans statewide, though most were hired in the Anchorage area. Other businesses that stand to measurably benefit are airlines, hotels, freight handling and air cargo, along with smaller enterprises that include everything from courier businesses to seamstresses.

About 30 productions have been prequalified by the State Film Office, meaning studios have submitted applications, estimated budgets, distribution plans and script treatments for the projects. With \$100 million available and a minimum spending requirement of \$100,000, most projects qualify, including films, documentaries, commercials and video productions.

According to the legislation behind the Alaska Film Production Incentive Program, up to a 44 percent transferable tax credit is awarded within weeks once a rough-cut of the production is submitted and an Alaska-licensed CPA has audited the project. In addition to the 30 percent base rate, additional percentages are awarded for local hire, off-season production and filming in rural areas.

Although final numbers are still being tabulated to determine how much Alaska benefited from the recent production's use of local crew and services, after 10 weeks of watching those associated with the project frequent local restaurants, shops and hotels, Alaskans are seeing the potential contributions

of the industry, especially during the off-season months. "Everybody Loves Whales" filmed for 12 hours a day, five days a week for almost three months. (It takes about one day to shoot two to four minutes of film.)

As the preferred hotel for 200 cast and crew, the Captain Cook cannot discuss its agreement with Universal Pictures, though it has been estimated the property had 12,100 bed nights booked from September to December, which is historically a slow time after the peak visitor season. Add meals and incidental expenses, along with side trips that crew took on their days off, and it is easy to see how a film project can quickly contribute to the state's economic development.

EVERGREEN FILMS

"It's been a long time since there was a new industry in Alaska trying to build from the ground up," said Kate Tesar, business development director for Evergreen Films.

Evergreen, though not associated with "Everyone Loves Whales," is one of the industry's most watched developments. The Anchorage-based production company continues to make substantial investments in Alaska and is positioning itself to take advantage of the growing industry.

It has several productions in the works, one which will likely be the Kate Shugak television series based on Alaska author Dana Stabenow's mystery novels, including "A Cold Day for Murder," which won the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Award. Other titles that will be made into the series are "Whisper to the Blood," which made the New York Times bestseller list, and "A Night Too Dark," which is the 17th in the series.

Based in Anchorage with offices in Los Angeles, Calif., Evergreen was founded by Mike Devlin and Pierre De Lespinois. Devlin has a computer engineering background and Lespinois is an award-winning television and film director. Devlin fell in love with Alaska and decided to build his Anchorage Hillside film editing studio after selling his software company. The team also has a yacht in Seward with adaptations that can accommodate filming both on and under water.

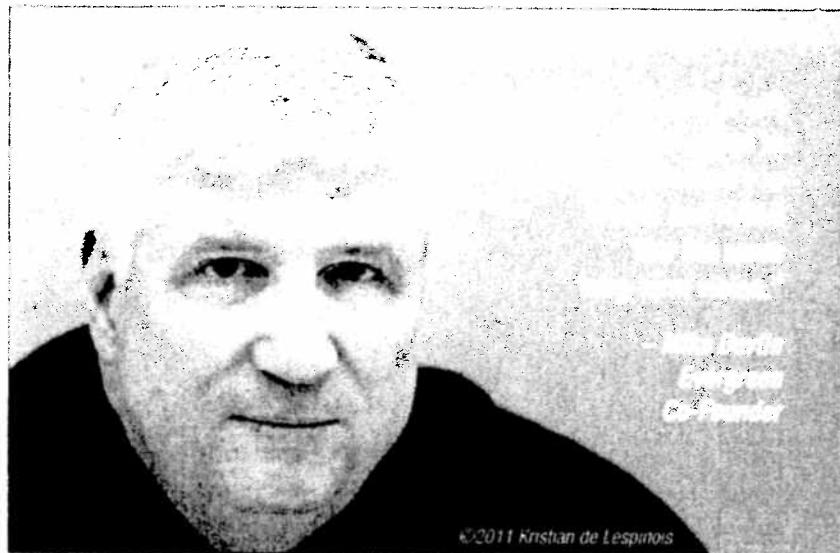
Another of Evergreen's biggest market advantages is the company's state-of-the-art digital and 3D studios, including 3D camera systems, groundbreaking LIDAR scanning technology, photo-real 3D Computer Generated Imagery (CGI), and an integrated 3D post-production workflow. The technology allows them to create a realistic portrayal of any location. This technology will also be used in "Walking With Dinosaurs," the Alaska-scripted and -produced, live-action dinosaur feature. That production will highlight photo-realistic 3D dinosaurs immersed in real, live-action 3D environments. This will launch in 2013 with 20th Century Fox securing the distribution rights. Evergreen is partnering with BBC Earth to produce the \$65 million feature film. Devlin says most of the live action for "Walking with Dinosaurs" will be filmed in Alaska to take advantage of the beautiful exteriors and the State's film incentives. The franchise model of the film means a new movie will be produced every two to three years. Evergreen and BBC are also partnering on the production of the \$25 million feature film "Africa 3D."

NANA PARTNERING

Responsible for helping create the incentive legislation, Tesar says Evergreen is committed to developing the industry statewide so that many communities benefit from the economic boost. To that end, it recently partnered with NANA Development Corp., an Alaska Native corporation based in Anchorage, which offers infrastructure and services that will help grow the industry and employ more Alaskans, including NANA shareholders.

"We are thinking it will take 10 to 15 years to build the industry in Alaska and NANA has the same long-term vision," Devlin says. "Together, the two of us are making a mutual investment to build the industry - we focus on film, they focus on building the service industry, and we will involve them in every production we're doing."

By making a financial investment, NANA is about a one-third owner and the company's partner in films that are shot in the Arctic environment, meaning it is the preferred vendor for those services it offers. The partnership is



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Mike Devlin co-founder of Evergreen Films, with offices in Anchorage and Los Angeles.

expected to create a lot of opportunity for shareholders - whether they are hired to work on a film project, or they simply benefit from dividends resulting from this newest investment.

When Evergreen approached NANA in 2009, it was looking for corporate involvement in specific high-budget films. NANA was less interested in being involved in specific films and more likely to invest in the company as a whole, says Robin Kornfield, vice president of communication and marketing for NANA Development Corporation. Although being involved in the film industry is not an area NANA has experience in, as it researched the opportunity it quickly became apparent that many of the services it had built up over the past 38 years are the same ones required in film production, including remote camp services, food service, security, transportation and staffing services.

"We already provide many of the back-of-the-house things that make it possible for those in the front to get their work done," Kornfield says. "We realized it was a better fit than we thought when we first went in - with just one phone call the industry can access all the film support services it needs."

Although the idea of partnering with Evergreen may seem like a big stretch to the business community, Kornfield says that, in fact, the board of directors was not completely unfamiliar with the benefits of the film industry. The group

travels to Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, regularly for business associated with Red Dog Mine and is used to seeing film crews shooting in the middle of the street. "The prospect of doing something in Anchorage was not foreign to them at all," Kornfield says.

One big draw for NANA was that the film industry offers more opportunities in areas younger shareholders will be interested in such as computer graphics.

Although acting is an obvious opportunity for shareholders, Kornfield says, the greater opportunity is for them to be involved in the service industries, which is the backbone of the corporation's success. Although the partnership will evolve over time, Kornfield says NANA will do whatever it takes to make film support services available, and at the same time will offer these same services to other film production companies that come to Alaska.

"Every time a shareholder gets a paycheck - that's part of what we do," Kornfield says, adding that part of NANA's plan is to eventually develop a line of services specific to the film industry that shareholders can be trained in.

Partnerships like the NANA-Evergreen one embody the intent of the original incentive legislation, which was designed to develop new business opportunities in Alaska by pairing the supply with the demand. From there, Tesar says, the jobs and on-the-job training for Alaskans will follow. □

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We're ready for our close-up, Mr. DeMille

COMPASS: Other points of view

By SUSAN BELL

(01/05/11 19:08:04)

Alaska's film industry has received much notice lately thanks to two feature films that have recently finished production here. Alaskans love watching as Hollywood discovers our state. We love the economic impact, too -- including jobs, spending on hotel rooms, rental cars and other goods and services - that comes when hundreds of people become our neighbors, if only for a short time.

Through the leadership of Sen. Johnny Ellis, the concurrence of the Alaska Legislature, and the support of Gov. Parnell, the state's recently implemented film industry tax credit has been instrumental in spurring the growth of this new economic sector. The film industry has the potential to provide diversity and meaningful contributions to the state's economy. When the film tax incentive bill was passed in 2008, the law provided a base credit of 30 percent to companies that film in Alaska and spend at least \$100,000 during a 24-month period. Additional credit could be earned for wages paid to Alaskans, as well as for productions made in rural areas or shot between Oct. 1 and March 30.

Tax credits have been a standard part of economic development strategy for years, as they stimulate additional investment and bring new businesses into the marketplace. Alaska offers similar incentives for mineral exploration, certain types of oil and gas production, and value-added salmon product development.

In the case of the film industry, attracting Hollywood north will help the state accomplish several outcomes:

- Encouraging and protecting a new industry in Alaska;
- Enhancing the economic viability of film projects attracted to Alaska;
- Boosting Alaska businesses and creating jobs for Alaskans; and
- Increasing interest in Alaska tourism from Outside audiences who are inspired to visit after watching movies filmed here.

From a competitive standpoint, it is important that we continue to build the physical infrastructure and human capital necessary to host major motion pictures and television programming. Growing this industry to the point that it is self-sustaining may take years to come to full fruition. But look what has already happened in the 30 months since the tax incentive was implemented:

- Two Alaska children are lead actors in two major feature films that will be released in 2012;
- Dozens of other Alaskans have earned speaking roles;
- Hundreds have signed on as extras, crew members, or both;

- Private industry is planning for a soundstage, a fundamental piece of infrastructure that will make Alaska more attractive to production companies;
- Films made by Alaskans are being screened at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival;
- Alaska's own film festival is growing rapidly;
- Film production management companies are starting to develop;
- Alaska cinematographers are working side by side with Hollywood's best directors of photography; and
- Alaska producers are busy working on films large and small.

What's next? We need to work hard to attract more productions and create paths of opportunity for Alaskans. The Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development, which houses the Alaska Film Office, needs to ensure that a trained workforce is ready for action. We are working to develop job-training programs for as many Alaskans as possible, in conjunction with the private sector, other state agencies and the university system.

These aren't going to be overnight, "just add water" accomplishments. We're nurturing this industry with plans for it to develop and contribute to Gov. Parnell's vision for a legacy economy that provides opportunity for this generation and beyond. It is time. For years we have watched as other locations, pretending to be Alaska, stood in our spotlight and reaped the benefits of jobs, spending and invaluable promotional exposure. No more. Alaska is ready for its close-up.

Susan Bell is the commissioner of the state Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development. Information about the state's film industry tax credits can be found at www.film.alaska.gov/incentive-program.htm.

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Bush Pilot[Print](#)

Alaska National Guard helps out with "Whales" shoot

Joshua Saul | Oct 12, 2010



An Alaska Army National Guardsman acting as a stand-in for the upcoming movie "Everybody Loves Whales" is seen climbing the ladder of a CH-54 Skycrane helicopter during filming at Bryant Army Airfield, October 4. Stand-ins are used as temporary replacements for stars providing the production crew a chance to rehearse before filming. Photo by Pfc. Karina Paraoan, Alaska National Guard Public Affairs Office

Barrow.

The stranded whales were discovered Oct. 7, 1988 by an Alaska Inupiat hunter after changing weather conditions and shifting ice trapped them in shallow water before they began their journey south to warmer waters.



Alaska Army National Guard State Command Sgt. Maj. Gordon Choate prepares a pair of Army cold weather gloves to be worn by an Alaska National Guardsman as an extra in the upcoming movie "Everybody Loves Whales." A team of Alaska National Guardsmen work daily to assist the production team with the military scenes to ensure the accuracy, attention to detail and correct portrayal of the

Here's the presser, and here's a story I wrote about the movie yesterday.

Alaska National Guard assists Hollywood in major movie production

CAMP DENALI, Alaska - The Alaska National Guard is working closely with production crews here in Alaska in the filming of a Universal Studios movie based on a whale rescue that captured the world's attention near the end of the Cold War.

The movie "Everybody Loves Whales," starring well known actors Drew Barrymore, Kristen Bell, Ted Danson, John Krasinski, Dermott Mulroney and Vinessa Shaw, brings together a Hollywood storyline with the true story of how people from around the globe came together in 1988 to free three gray whales trapped in arctic sea ice 18 miles northeast of

At the forefront of this international incident, the Alaska National Guard was pivotal in its role to help free the whales utilizing a CH-54 Skycrane helicopter, while working closely with members of President Ronald Reagan's administration and with the former Soviet Union.

Twenty-two years later, Hollywood has come to Alaska and has asked the Alaska National Guard to assist them in the filming of the movie.

"We usually have a Department of Defense representative from our Los Angeles office providing the coordination, advice and daily assistance to the production company," said Vicente "Vince" Ogilvie, deputy director of entertainment media, office of the assistant secretary of defense for public affairs.

"However, for "Everybody Loves Whales," that role is being provided by the Alaska National Guard."

The Cordova Times

"Everybody Loves Whales" film crew coming to Barrow

By ALASKA NEWSPAPERS STAFF

Anchorage's Grace Oirun of the Casting Department is calling for Barrow Inupiat and non-Inupiat residents to register with her this weekend to portray the many rescuers and reporters who went out to the ice to help free the whales or report on the story. Filming will occur on Oct. 29, 30 and 31.

Registration will take about five minutes, no audition is required - some paperwork and a photo. Grace will be at the Tuzzy Library Friday, Oct. 22, from 1:30 to 5 pm and Saturday, Oct. 23, from noon to 5 p.m. to sign up adult residents. Filming on Saturday October 30 will last approximately 10 to 12 hours with a hot catered lunch with fellow cast and crew at mid-day.

Come be part of the largest feature film to ever come to Alaska. Help us Alaskans show how robust and giving Barrow is. Please contact Grace by email at cupikwarriorproductions@gmail.com to secure a part in the movie. Only 72 residents will be hired to be in the film, slots are filling up fast.

Grace Oirun, Casting Dept. for "Everybody Loves Whales"

Contact us about this article at editor@thecordovatimes.com

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Boosters hope Alaska will be "Hollywood Far North"

Sat, Oct 2 2010

By Yereth Rosen

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (Reuters) - On a crisp autumn day, as office workers went about their business, one of Anchorage's major hotels became the temporary hub of what state leaders consider a promising new Alaska industry.

The lower level of the Hotel Captain Cook was occupied by a Hollywood film crew that converted rooms into movie sets, makeup and dressing areas and equipment-packed work sites.

In progress was filming for Universal Features' "Everybody Loves Whales," a movie starring Drew Barrymore and recounting a 1988 rescue mounted for three gray whales trapped in Arctic ice.

In a departure from past history, this Alaska-based movie is being filmed on location, rather than in a make-believe Alaska set constructed in British Columbia or elsewhere.

Alaska officials hope this and other projects will help diversify the state's economy from its precarious dependence on dwindling oil production.

"We wouldn't be 'Hollywood North.' Vancouver claims that. We'd be 'Hollywood Far North,'" said state Senator Johnny Ellis, an Anchorage Democrat and self-professed movie buff who authored 2008 legislation that established a special tax credit for big film projects and revived a state film office that had been eliminated during a past austerity push.

Ellis' measure entitles film companies spending \$100,000 or more in Alaska to transferable credits of 30 percent of those costs, plus 10 percent of money spent hiring Alaskans. Extra credits are given for expenditures in rural areas or outside of the summer tourist season.

Film companies in the past have largely avoided Alaska, citing the state's high costs, remoteness and overall inconvenience.

But the tax incentive has made a difference, said David Linck, unit publicist for "Everybody Loves Whales," a project Ellis refers to as "Northern Exposure Meets Free Willy."

"It's dollars and cents," Linck said.

Filming will run through November, he said. It has been an economic boon to Alaska, with several key roles filled by Alaska Natives selected after casting calls in remote rural sites, he said.

Among those sharing in the bounty is Su Gamble, owner of a hair salon in an Anchorage strip mall the producers selected for three days of filming because of its retro-1980s look. Gamble herself was cast as an extra, an experience that still thrills her.

"It's such a blast that they chose my place, and they chose me," she said.

OSCAR HEADED NORTH?

She recounted the two hours crew members spent creating her 1980s big-hair look, proclaimed the film producer and crew "so sweet" and "so patient," and predicted an Academy Award for the project.

"Drew Barrymore's going to be the best actress for the year 2012," she said.

It will be several years before Alaska is able to develop its own industry support system, with skilled workers and specialized contractors, anywhere on par with what exists in British Columbia, said Mike Devlin, chief executive of Los Angeles-based Evergreen Films.

Still, each new project moves the state incrementally toward that standard, he said.

"Every film means some Alaskans are in on the production," he said.

Evergreen Films is so bullish on Alaska it has located a studio in Anchorage. The studio occupies a vast and elegant house perched in the mountains overlooking the city, glacier-fed Cook Inlet and a panorama of snowy mountains, including active volcanoes and Mount McKinley.

The studio doubles as Devlin's residence.

"I'd rather get up in the morning here than in L.A.," he quipped, taking in the view from a bank of windows.

Evergreen Films has produced nature documentaries, among other projects, and is working on a television series based on mystery novels by Alaska author Dana Stabenow.

Last month, NANA Corp., owned by Inupiat Eskimos from the state's northwestern region, announced it was investing in a joint venture with Evergreen. The project will "create jobs and economic growth," a NANA statement said.

Alaska already is experiencing a boomlet in reality-TV productions such as "The Deadliest Catch," the fishing series produced by the Discovery Channel, and former Gov. Sarah Palin's controversial series being produced by TLC.

"Alaska is the talk of the nation, in many ways, good and bad. But most of it good," Ellis said.

For some Alaskans, the desire to lure film projects goes beyond money.

Hollywood's habit of using non-Alaska sites to film Alaska stories -- even the iconic television series "Northern Exposure," which was filmed in Washington state -- has long been an irritant.

Some on-screen results made Alaskans cringe. Pine forests and wooded hillsides stood in for what was supposed to be open Arctic tundra. Asian actors portrayed Alaska Natives. And there were improbable story lines, like running gags about snake problems in the reptile-free far north.

The final insult, said Ellis, was learning that a major romantic comedy starring Sandra Bullock was being filmed in Massachusetts even though the story was set in Sitka, Alaska.

"That aggravated me, and it aggravated others," the senator said, referring to "the Proposal," released in 2009. "There's a long, sad history of Alaska losing out. But I hope we're starting to change that."

(Editing by Steve Gorman)

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NANA gets into showbiz

By **Victoria Barber**
Sep 20th, 2010

Published in ***the Arctic Sounder***

Alaska is jumping on the movie business bandwagon, and Native corporation NANA is hoping to help lead the charge.

The company announced that it's invested "several million" to purchase 33 percent ownership of Evergreen Films, a high-tech Alaska production house with studios in Anchorage and Hollywood.

"Frankly this is a pretty exciting field," said Helvi Sandvik, president of NANA Development of NANA Regional Corp.

Sandvik said Evergreen approached NANA Development about a year ago with a proposal and business model. NANA has several subsidiaries that look likely to benefit from the partnership, including those that supply catering, construction and remote camp services. However, NANA doesn't have exclusive rights to those contracts.

Sandvik said that she also hopes NANA Development's stake in the film industry will open up an exciting new career field for shareholders.

"Really the sky is the limit. Sometimes it's a matter of helping people visualize what those opportunities may hold," Sandvik said.

Building a movie pipeline

NANA's announcement came just days before filming in Anchorage began on "Everybody Loves Whales," a movie starring Drew Barrymore and John Krasinski (star of "License to Wed" and the TV show "The Office"). The film is based on the true story of three grey whales stranded in the sea ice off Point Barrow in 1988.

"Loves Whales" is the first high-profile movie to come out of the tax incentive program introduced by Sen. Johnny Ellis in 2008. Senate bill 230 rebuilt the Alaska Film Office and created a program that offers tax credit to movies, documentaries, commercials, and video projects that spend at least \$100,000 in Alaska.

Stories about Alaska have long attracted filmmakers and movie-goers, in large part because of the state's spectacular and risk-filled landscapes. But before the incentive program, the vast majority of movies about Alaska were filmed far away.

Recent thrillers "30 days of Night" and "The Fourth Kind," were set in Barrow and Nome but filmed in New Zealand and Bulgaria, respectively. The 2009 blockbuster "The Proposal," starring Sandra Bullock, was set in Sitka but filmed in Massachusetts.

That means the state is losing out on a lot of money that could be going to Alaskans, said Carolyne Robinson, owner and executive producer at Sprocketheads LLC, an Anchorage-based film company.

A major production like "The Proposal" spends, on average, about \$100,000 a day, Robinson said. Not only does that pump money into local businesses - from hair salons to construction companies - it also creates jobs for young professionals who would otherwise have to leave state to work in that industry.

"Think of this can of movie film as a barrel of oil," Robinson said, waving a reel at a recent meeting of Anchorage businesses. "We can build a new kind of pipeline."

Robinson said we'll be seeing more movies - and moolah - coming down the pipeline soon. An movie executive and an "international team" were scouting locations for another big film earlier this year. The trip included a dog sled ride at Iditarod champion Martin Buser's kennel. Details are still under wraps, Robinson said, but discussions are underway with leading men Viggo Mortensen, Liam Neeson and Jeff Bridges.

Pre-production might begin as early as this fall, and filming in early 2011. But that's not because of the scenery or any dog sled ride, Robinson said. In the end it's all due to the incentive program.

"The film executive told me flat out that they did a multi-country, multi-state comparison. And calculating in our film incentive program, the bottom line was - shoot in Alaska."

That was the same bottom line that decided the NANA board to invest, said a very un-star-struck sounding Sandvik.

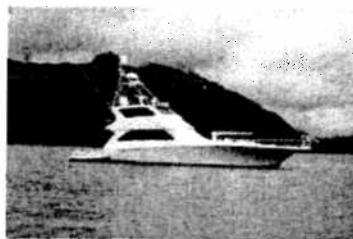
"We're very analytical in everything we do. NANA has an incredible number of opportunities that are presented to us today. This was no different than any of the rest of those," Sandvik said.

New Hollywood North

Anchorage will never be Hollywood - and most Alaskans would agree, that's a good thing. But Mike Devlin, one of the founders of Evergreen Films, said Alaska might look instead to Vancouver as a portent of what's to come if all goes well.



NANA Development has invested "several million" into minority ownership of Evergreen Films, an Alaska production house that is creating a TV series based on Dana Stabenow's popular series about a Native woman detective. (Courtesy Photo, Evergreen Films)



Evergreen is a production house seeking to rival high-tech production houses. Part of its outfit is the Strider, a Viking 74 Sport Fisher with mounted and underwater cameras. (Courtesy Photo, Evergreen Films)

Since "The X-Files" began filming in Vancouver in the early '90s, the Canadian city has built up the infrastructure to pull in over a billion dollars a year (British Columbia has sometimes been the stand-in for Alaska in the movies). The number of productions taking place there has earned it the nickname "Hollywood North."

Alaska still has a long way to go until it can rival that kind of success. It still lacks the things that are critical to the film industry, such as a CGI shop, trained personnel and sound stages (Robinson said Anchorage needs at least four).

Also, Alaskans would have to get used to how Hollywood works - fast. And with "a high level of customer service," Robinson said.

NANA's investment in Evergreen Films means they'll participate in building up that capacity. Evergreen is a high-tech studio that specializes in digital 3-D technology. The company is partnering with BBC Earth to produce "Dinosaurs 3-D" and released a few 3-D concert videos for bands including Phish and Dave Matthews.

"We can do Avatar class films, and we can do them for a much lower budget and we can them here in Alaska, which is very different than the way the world was 10 years ago," Devlin said.

Evergreen also films for television. The company has optioned Dana Stabenow's best-selling Kate Shugak mystery novels. The books' heroine is an Aleut woman who solves crimes on the last frontier with help from her Mutt, her half-wolf, half-dog partner.

But whether it's for big or small screen, Devlin said that the more Alaska can encourage high-quality, scripted shows, the more the state will reap the benefit of its inherent charisma for movie-goers.

"This will not be a short job. It'll be a 10-year job to build this industry. But it'll be a lot of fun," Devlin said.

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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Sundance 2011: 'On the Ice' Spotlights Alaska



Poster for "On the Ice"

premiering this week at Sundance.

The Wall Street Journal: Did you write your short with the idea of turning it into a feature film?

Andrew Okpeaha MacLean: My short was first written as writing exercise. I had a pretty bad case of writer's block when I was working on a different script, so I took those characters and put them in a weird situation and wondered what would happen if they stumbled on a murder. As I started working on the short and started showing first the script, and then edited cuts to people, a lot of them had the response of wanting to know what happens next, or if this could be part of a larger story. So, by at the time the short was done, I was aware of the possibility of continuing the story.

Tell me about your background.

I was born in Fort Wainwright, an army base [in Alaska] and I grew up in Barrow and Fairbanks, the town near Fort Wainwright. It's a university town; my parents were both university professors.

When did you know you wanted to be a filmmaker?

About 10 years ago, I decided to apply to film school. I'd been living in Seattle for a few years after getting my undergrad degree at the University of Washington in theater. I was more in the theater world when I decided to move back home to Barrow. I moved for a number of different reasons, but part of it was that I wanted to reconnect and learn to speak Iñupiaq better because a lot my generation is losing the language skill.

Plenty of independent films that play the Sundance Film Festival can boast of being shot in remote and exotic locations, but Andrew Okpeaha MacLean's coming-of-age drama "On the Ice" is probably the only film this year that required an AK47-wielding guard to monitor the set for wild animals.

Having grown up in Barrow, Alaska, the setting of "On the Ice," MacLean knew that bears were going to around and had his production coordinator on polar bear watch. "I wasn't overly concerned about it because we were such a big group of people and normally they'd stay clear of us," he said. "But if you get a juvenile or one that's especially hungry, they can get a lot more aggressive."

Based on MacLean's award-winning short "Sikumi," "On the Ice" follows the story of Iñupiaq teenagers Qalli and Aivaaq, who accidentally kill their friend James during a seal hunt. Scared and worried, the boys decide to ditch their friend's body and pretend he died in an accident. Qalli, the college-bound friend who actually pulled the knife, must deal with his guilt as Aivaaq beats himself up, his father gets suspicious, and he decides what kind of man he wants to become.

We recently spoke to MacLean about his debut narrative film,

When I was growing up there, there was no real system for teaching it — my generation is the first generation not to take it as our first language; we were the first generation to grow up with television and that might have been part of it. In fact, there was a pretty strong sentiment at the time that it was bad to teach kids anything other than English; my parent's generation was punished for speaking Iñupiaq at school.

So, I wanted to try to correct that and came home. While living at home, a cousin of mine who's very active in the community said to me, 'You've been doing theater, I did a play once in school — let's do plays together and let's do them in Iñupiaq. So we started adapting old stories and coming up with our own, and getting them translated with the help of our elders. Performing them was great — I felt really connected to my culture but we would put a lot of work into these shows and only four or five hundred people would come and then it would die. So I started thinking about film as something that has a lot more permanence and potential to reach people. I decided to apply to film school and looked for ones that didn't require film experience. I barely knew the front end of a camera from the back, and NYU is one of those schools and they accepted me and offered me a scholarship. Next thing you know, I was moving from Barrow to New York City.

Shooting in Alaska can be tricky given the absence and abundance of light, given the season. Did you have to shoot within a very specific time frame?

We shot in April and little bit of May... the timing was vital — that was one of the things that both caused us a lot of stress, but also propelled us into making it happen because we could only shoot during one season: spring. It was partly because of the temperature, but also for the combination of sea ice and light. In the summertime, the sea ice melts and the script called for a lot of ice — I mean, it's called 'On the Ice' — so we needed it. By the time the sea ice forms in the winter, it's completely dark all day long and remains dark out for several months. It's not until March that you start getting the 12 hours of sunlight, then darkness, so it shifts very rapidly from there. By the time we finished, we were in 24 hours in daylight, which was a lot of fun for the film crew.

Your cast consisted primarily of first-time actors — was it a challenge to find the right combination of players?

We did a fairly long casting process. My producer Cara [Marcus] and I flew all over arctic Canada and all around Alaska looking for potential actors, including Anchorage and Fairbanks and Nome and Point Hope and finished in Barrow — we went to at least 10 to 12 cities.

The actor who plays Qalli's dad is quite good.

We didn't even see him in the first round of auditions. Someone had told him about the auditions and we had casting information on our website. He sent us an email and I sent him a copy of the script — more specifically, the sides we were working from — and then called him and I directed him from the phone. He then taped himself and uploaded it to YouTube. I really liked what he did and I liked his look, and based on that, we flew him along with the top contenders from the casting process to Anchorage. We did a week-long intensive casting process that doubled as a basic acting workshop, so we were able to really put them through a lot of work and see how they would respond to different ways of working. At the same time, we able to start working on the characters with them. Everything really paid off later. That whole casting experience was key to getting the film done — we did casting before we had the money to shoot the film. Afterward, we got a grant from Princess Grace USA Foundation that allowed us to go and make the film.

There's a lot of original music in the film. Were the featured songs written prior to filming, or were they improvised?

No, that was written out. The dances at the very beginning of the film were traditional dances that are kind of in the public domain. There are a lot of those dances that are personal and owned by specific people and we would have needed permission to use those, but the two we used are fun dances for anybody to do. The Singspiration — a hymn that translated into Iñupiaq — was a song by the actual church choir up there, and the rap [the one of the characters performs at a party] was written pretty much by the actor and it's meant to be a moment of just freestyle improv — he's not supposed to be coming off as Lil Wayne. I just thought that that's an interesting aspect of the youth culture up there and was interested in how people express the culture through music. It's three very different ways of performing music and it's coming from three different sources — but they're all being kind of appropriated, being taken into the culture.



Story last updated at 5:59 PM on Wednesday, January 12, 2011

Student filmmaker brings project home

BY MICHAEL ARMSTRONG

STAFF WRITER



Photo by Michael Armstrong

Homer News Katherine Brennan, cinematographer for "What May Be True."

New filmmakers making films on a tight budget often get creative. Some max out their credit cards, hoping the film will win awards at Sundance or other film festivals. Others get arts grants. Almost all recruit family and friends to help out. Katherine Brennan, a 2005 Homer High School graduate in her senior year at the Academy of Art University, San Francisco, has come up with a new twist.

Pay your own way to Alaska and help me with my film, she told friends from San Francisco, and I'll get you room and board for 10 days.

"I've been so lucky and so blessed to work with so many talented people," she said of the students and teachers she's met in San Francisco.

Brennan, 25, graduates this spring with a bachelor of fine arts in cinematography. She's the director of photography -- the woman behind the camera -- of "What May Be True," a 7 to 10 minute short film about "how people cope with betrayal," Brennan said.

Born and raised in Homer, Brennan, 25, is the daughter of Patricia Brennan and the late Hugh Brennan. In December and January she has been visiting family and friends in Homer and scouting locations for "What May Be True," to be filmed this June. One scene will be shot at the Homer Harbor and another in a forest. She also needs an office or room that can pass as a therapist's office.

"What May Be True" has about five or six acting roles, including the main character, Gabriella, a girl about 16, and a woman therapist about 40 to 50. On her film's website, Brennan describes the project as "a powerful story about a woman who goes through emotional and physical trauma and the journey that she goes through to overcome the after effects."

A small-town woman starting a career in film is just part of a growing film industry in Alaska. Under the Alaska Film Production Incentive Program, Alaska offers generous tax credits to motion picture companies filming in the state. Last week, Sen. Johnny Ellis, D-Anchorage, and Representatives Bob Herron, D-Bethel, and Chris Tuck, D-Anchorage, prefiled legislation to extend those tax credits past its sunset date of 2013 (see Business, p. 6).

"The recent film industry boom in Alaska has benefited Alaskans and local businesses across the state, and it could grow much more," Ellis said. "Extending these incentives shows film producers Alaska is serious about building this industry for the long run."

Brennan wants Homer to be part of that boom, particularly for its scenic setting. For "What May Be True," she wants to use the landscape as a strong part of the film.

"I think Homer has a lot of potential and doesn't get the attention it deserves beyond 'Deadliest Catch' and 'Sarah Palin's Alaska,'" she said.

As a cinematographer, Brennan would like to see more Alaskans — and more women — behind the lens. Alaska only has about 25 professional camera operators that she knows of, Brennan said. It's also hard to rent professional quality cameras. Brennan plans to shoot her film using a Canon 5D high-definition, single-lens reflex video camera, one of the more common high-end cameras used in the industry. She's been lucky that the Academy of Arts has so many cameras for students to use, she said.

"I feel like a gear head nerd with cameras and not cars," Brennan said.

After graduation and making "What May Be True," Brennan said she plans to work for a while here to get ahead on bills. Eventually she'd like to get an entry-level job in the film industry — which could mean moving to Los Angeles. Although the Academy of the Arts is an art school, she said her education feels more like going to trade school. It's a lot of hands-on, learn-the-craft work.

"Every day I am doing something with film or video production," Brennan said about the school.

It's an art where the education continues.

"You're going to be learning, no matter what profession you're in," she said.

Brennan has a website set up through IndieGoGo, a web service that allows filmmakers, writers, musicians and other artists to make a pitch for support. Artists describe their projects, what they need in cash and other support, and how contributors will be acknowledged. While Brennan's new San Francisco friends will be helping her out, she's also looking for some hometown help. Anything locals can do in providing meals, lodging and other support would be appreciated.

She also has a site on vimeo.com showing some of the films she photographed or was involved in.

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