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FISH FACTOR: Union seeking seafaring apprentices

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Alaska fishermen displaced by the COVID-19 pandemic are being recruited for seafaring jobs aboard U.S. cargo barges, tankers, towboats, military support vessels, research and cruise ships and more.

The Seafarers International Union is searching nationally for 300 apprentice workers on the vessels they are contracted to crew. Recruiters tout Alaskans as being at the top of their list.

"The reason for that is people from Alaska come with a work ethic already. They've been working since they could stand up. And that's why they're so good," said Bart Rogers, assistant vice president at the Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship in Maryland that has trained mariners for the SIU for over 50 years.

"It's very appealing to people who live in Alaska because they can sail in a safe environment, earn a very good wage, get benefits and medical coverage for them and their family, advanced training is guaranteed, then they can go back home and spend the money they make," said Rich Berkowitz, vice president of Pacific Coast Operations at Seattle's Transportation Institute, who helps recruit and assess potential mariners, adding that it also includes options for veterans and Native hire.

Currently, the call is out to train workers for positions as Able Seafarer Deck (a qualification needed to sail internationally), chief cooks and stewards. The training programs vary from several months to a year, Rogers said, adding that there is no tuition to attend the school but does require some incidental costs.

Berkowitz pointed out another lure for Alaskans. After they've made it through the training and onto the ships, they can schedule trips that still let them go fishing.

"Let's say they're in hospitality trades, they can work a good portion of the cruise season and then spend three or four months working in a fishing season," he said.

Ralph Mirsky, director of Ketchikan-based nonprofit Sealink has recruited nearly 600 Alaskans to the maritime trades over 20 years.

"And the reason for that is real simple," he said. "They make a lot of money in a short period of time, and they can still do what they want at home."

Women comprise about 15 percent of the U.S. seagoing workforce, estimated at 14,000.

"There's at least two or three in every class," Bart Rogers said. "And don't get me wrong, but the women are smarter and work harder than the men all day long."

Berkowitz added that Alaska gets an economic lift from its residents working in maritime trades.

"All the time on planes in Seattle I see oil workers flying back and forth to Alaska from Montana or Texas to work two weeks on and off on the Slope. What we're doing is the opposite," he said. "We're flying Alaskans Outside where they make all their money and then they bring it back. They're not spending anything while they're on the vessels. So this is a net contributor to the state's economy, rather than a drain on it."

Learn more at <https://mymaritimecareer.org/about/>.

Fishing updates

It's hard to believe, but in little more than a month, Alaska's salmon season will officially get underway when sockeyes and chinook return to the Copper River near Cordova. Meanwhile, there's lots of fishing action across the state.

It's been slow going at Sitka Sound where about 20 seiners continue to tap on a 67 million pound herring harvest. A herring spawn on kelp fishery also is ongoing at Craig and Klawock with a nearly 38 million-pound harvest, the highest ever. Kodiak's herring fishery is ongoing with a 16 million pound catch limit.

Divers continue going down for more than a half-million pounds of geoduck clams. The sea cucumber fishery closed on March 31 with an allowable harvest of 1.7 million pounds.