

Profile: Alaska's Traveling Seafood Workforce

By Susan Erben
Trends Editor

“It amazes me to think how it all works...”

Nelson San Juan says the real clincher is when people come into the office with pictures of the houses they just bought with the money they made – heading, gutting, boxing and freezing salmon, herring, black cod or pollock in one of Alaska's remote seafood processing plants. They almost always stop by to thank him.

“For me, it's a big accomplishment, to see these people make good money and be able to save it,” says San Juan, a seafood employment specialist at the Anchorage Midtown Job Center. “I love to see those things happen.”

San Juan isn't trying to promote the years-old myth that people make a killing working in Alaska's fish plants. It's just that the money can be good, considering the overtime, which is common, and the fact that many plants and all at-sea processors pay room and board (some furnish it, but charge workers a fee). People who work hard for multiple fisheries and are good at saving their money can wind up doing pretty well, he says.

San Juan is part of the Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development's “Traveling Seafood Workforce,” a program that was started in 1999. That year it arranged for the shuttle of 15 salmon processing workers from Naknek, where the salmon fishery had just ended, to Petersburg, where the plant there was desperate for experienced workers.

Last summer, San Juan, his co-worker Lisa Good, and another colleague in Kodiak, Maureen Butler, helped arrange for 330 workers to go from working primarily in Naknek – but also Togiak and Ugashik in the Aleutians – to other fish processing jobs at plants in Dutch Harbor, Kodiak, Chignik and King Cove in the Aleutians, Seward, Whittier, Valdez, Cordova, Yakutat, Excursion Inlet near Gustavus, Petersburg and Ketchikan, as well as to jobs on floating processors in the Bering Sea.

The three – San Juan, Good and Butler – talk to the seafood plant managers almost daily throughout the season to pin down who needs workers when and which workers finished the season (which is critical for the three to refer them to other plants). Then the three talk to the seafood workers to see if they're interested in flying to another company's processing plant



Photo by Lisa Good

Photo by Tracie Paladziejczuk



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Ocean Beauty Seafoods employee Carlos Gomez (left) operates a forklift to move boxes of processed sockeye salmon at the company's Naknek plant last summer in Bristol Bay. Lisa Good and Nelson San Juan (above) are seafood employment specialists at the Anchorage Midtown Job Center. The two, plus Maureen Butler, another seafood employment specialist in at the Kodiak Job Center, make up the Department of Labor's "Traveling Seafood Workforce." Richard Quemado (above right) handles sockeyes after they've been headed at North Pacific Seafoods' Pederson Point plant, three miles up the beach from Naknek.

for more work. Good has flown to Naknek, which has an early salmon run, for four days the past two Julys to talk to the workers and plant managers face to face.

Good tromps around Naknek's fish plants, talking to managers, but mostly to workers on their breaks about arranging jobs for them

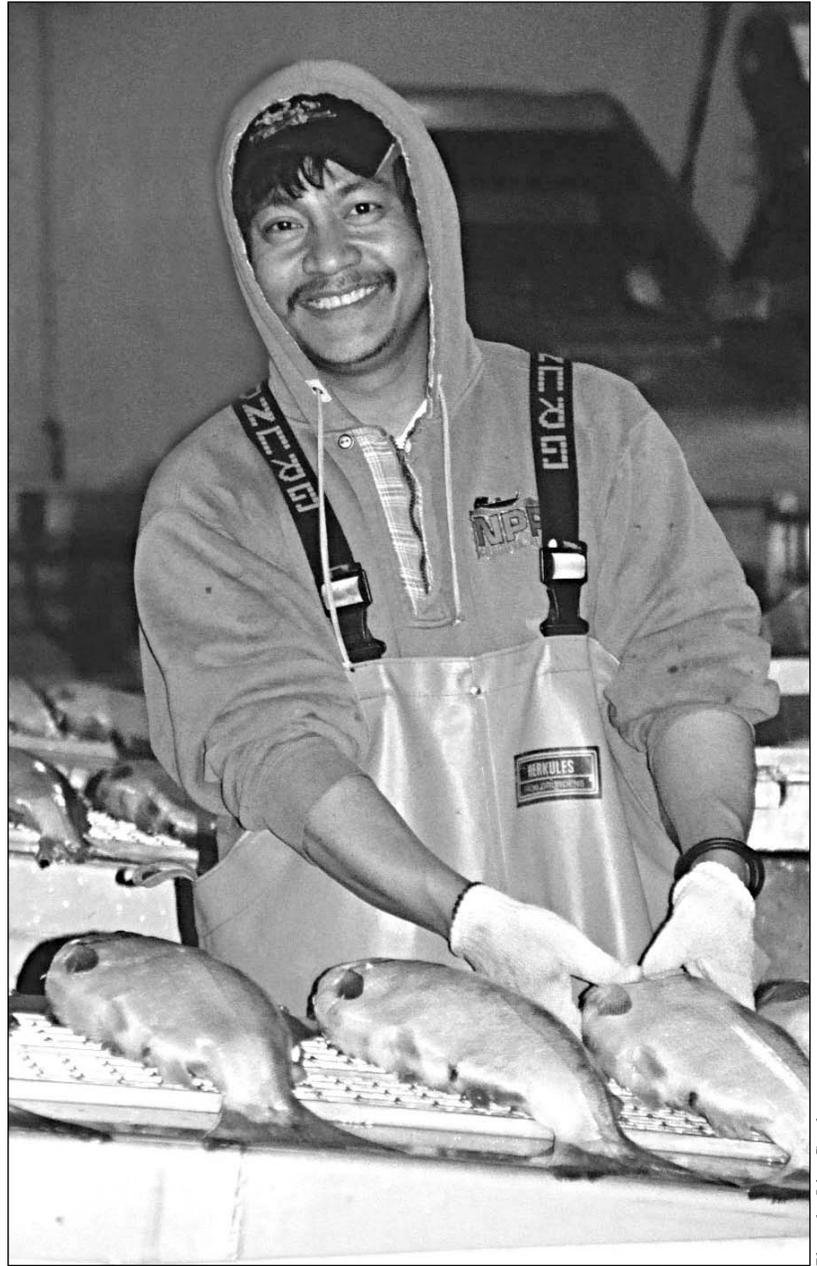


Photo by Lisa Good

elsewhere when their current seasons are over. It gets fast and furious: Good, on the phone to San Juan in Anchorage, and Butler in Kodiak, coordinating all the dates, flight times and discussing which company has spots for which workers and who's paying whose airfare.

Good says it gets crazy, whether she's in Naknek or at her desk in the Anchorage office.

"If you think about it, that involves a lot of phone calls, a lot of merging of information," she says. "It amazes me to think how it all works."



Photo by Lisa Good

Gillnet boats going for sockeye during a July opening (above) at the mouth of the Naknek River. Workers handle sockeye eggs in the egg room (right) at Ocean Beauty Seafoods in Naknek. The Department of Labor's San Juan says some people tell him that the money they make in the fish plants pays their kids' college tuition.

San Juan says it's common for two processing plants – a Naknek plant, for instance, and the plant where the worker is going – to split the cost of the airfare. Most seafood employers pay workers' roundtrip airfare, because Alaska law says that if an employer pays, promises to pay, furnishes or advances the money for an employee to get to a job site, that employer has to pay for that employee's trip back to the point of hire (or any other agreed-upon place) as long as the employee successfully finishes his or her "contract" – working until the end of the processing season.

Sometimes two seafood companies will even chip in to charter a plane to move a bunch of workers. San Juan says Butler organizes a charter each summer to shuttle workers from Kodiak to Naknek for the two-week herring opening that begins in April.

San Juan says employers love the program because they get workers when they need

them. Plus beginning workers are experienced by the end of the first fishery. That's crucial in a remote area with few other workers to step in when beginners can't handle the work.

"They're saving money too," San Juan says, because the companies share the airfare to somewhere else in Alaska, then the new plant pays their way home.

The official goal of the program is to increase the numbers working in the seafood industry for rural and other Alaskans, as well as to get more Alaskans into the industry's technical positions and higher-paying jobs.

San Juan and Good helped coordinate 169 "moves" from Naknek at the Anchorage Midtown Job Center last summer. They also helped arrange for six workers to go to a third processing plant after they finished their contracts at their second plant.

Everyone who applies for seafood jobs through Alaska's job centers has to submit an application and go through an hour seafood orientation. Many seafood companies hold interviews right at the Anchorage Midtown Job Center. San

Photo by Lisa Good



Juan says he tells the applicants during their orientation that if they're good workers, they can be transferred to another plant to work longer and make more money.

San Juan says the pace is absolutely nonstop, especially considering that in their job center office alone, he, Good and receptionist Merlyn Yambao – the seafood employment crew in the office – see a stream of 100 seafood processing applicants a day.

"The phone won't stop ringing," San Juan says. "And they never stop coming. We have a big room – a conference room – and it's packed every day. Every single day. Sometimes we have three [seafood] employers interviewing at the same time [in the room]."

And fish processing isn't just in the summer, either. For instance, A-season pollock starts in January, Naknek and Togiak herring are in April, B-season pollock starts in mid-June and runs through mid-November.

A lot of workers want to eventually get work on a floating processor, San Juan says, because they tend to make more money, and they don't have to pay room and board. San Juan says the biggest player in Alaska, Unisea, has a land-based processing plant in Dutch Harbor that's like a small city – including a gym and mini-theater for the workers, plus food like a buffet in a nice hotel.

The Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development has 15 seafood employment specialists working at the department's 24 job centers throughout the state. In 2005, they made referrals that resulted in 3,300 seafood hires, according to Laurie Fuglvog, a Department of Labor seafood employment analyst in Juneau.

For more information about seafood jobs, contact any Alaska Job Center, call (800) 473-0688 or go to the Alaska Job Center Network's Job Bank at www.jobs.state.ak.us and click on "Seafood Jobs." For more information about the Traveling Seafood Workforce, contact Nelson San Juan or Lisa Good at the Anchorage Midtown Job Center at (907) 269-4708 or email them at Nelson_San_Juan@labor.state.ak.us or Lisa_Good@labor.state.ak.us; contact Maureen Butler at the Kodiak Job Center at (907) 486-3105 or by email at Maureen_Butler@labor.state.ak.us. Or contact Laurie Fuglvog at (907) 465-5926 or by email at Laurie_Fuglvog@labor.state.ak.us.

For more information about Alaska's return transportation law or other wage and hour laws, call the nearest Wage and Hour Office: Anchorage (907) 269-4900; Juneau (907) 465-4842; and Fairbanks (907) 451-2886.