

## CTSA Welcomes ADP Manager Todd Low to Board of Directors

Todd E. Low, the new manager of the Aquaculture Development Program (ADP), joined CTSA's Board of Directors in January this year, filling the vacancy left by John Corbin after he retired from the ADP last year. Low attended the annual meeting of the Board of Directors on January 30, 2009 to meet the other members of the Board and to review and approve the CTSA FY08 Annual Plan of Work. Low brings his expertise in marketing and product development of Hawaii's agricultural products to contribute to the wide range of knowledge and experience represented by CTSA's Board of Directors.

Photo courtesy of Aquaculture Development Program



*Todd Low joined CTSA's Board of Directors in January 2009.*

Before the meeting, Low found time in his busy schedule in January to respond to some questions from *Regional Notes* editor Pat O'Brien about his plans for promoting aquaculture in Hawaii.

**Regional Notes: How will ADP promote diversification of aquaculture in Hawaii? Are certain species or sectors of aquaculture (e.g., food fish, ornamentals) being targeted? Which ones?**

Todd Low: One important way we promote diversification is by helping farmers with permits. The permitting process can be extremely challenging for a farm that wants to expand, build new facilities, import new species, or otherwise diversify its operations. We can act as a liaison between the industry and county/state/federal governmental agencies to assist with this process. We also support state-wide extension activities. There have been significant budgetary cuts in this area recently, so we are looking for alternate sources of funds to support extension services. It is critical that the smaller operations have extension services so they can develop into commercially viable and stable enterprises that will be able to diversify and expand into new aquaculture sectors.

By nurturing a favorable business environment with the above actions, ADP hopes new aquaculture ventures will be encouraged to establish operations in Hawaii. New businesses are an excellent source of industry diversification because they bring new technology, ideas and products to the market.

It's also important to recognize that the primary driver of diversification is demand, so one of our priorities is to increase demand for local products in lieu of cheaper imports. While Hawaii's small producers will not be able to completely supplant low cost seafood products coming in from foreign countries, I believe we can help them carve a niche by emphasizing the freshness and quality of local aquaculture seafood products. In terms of the ornamental sector, we try to

remind purchasers that locally produced ornamental plants and animals are less stressed than those that have been transported over great distances.

**What food fish or seaweeds would you like to see developed for increasing Hawaii's food self-sufficiency?**

*Pangasius bocourti*, or basa, and saltwater tilapia may have the greatest potential. Catfish and tilapia are both in the top 10 seafoods per capita in the U.S., and tilapia in particular is the ideal "green" product because it is a mainly herbivorous fish that can grow well on plant-based proteins. I believe that for now we need to put most of our effort into increasing production of what we already have rather than try to develop new species to culture in Hawaii. The "Buy Fresh Buy Local" movement is striking a chord with the public and aquaculture farmers need to be ready to meet increased demand. The great challenge, however, when we talk about food self-sufficiency for Hawaii, is affordability. Aquaculture farmers in Hawaii struggle with issues such as scarcity of land, the high costs of labor and feed, and the above mentioned permitting environment. That's why CTSA's support for development of new technologies is so important. These studies result in greater knowledge and efficiency that will, hopefully, give our farmers a competitive edge.

**What export opportunities would you like to explore for Hawaii's aquaculture industries? What export markets do you think have the best potential for expansion or development?**

The current export market is limited to a select few aquaculture operations. Hawaii's SPF shrimp are exported all over the world, and we would like to create similar programs for other species as well. I think there could be a huge potential market for clean, certified broodstock of amberjack (kampachi) and Pacific threadfin (moi). I will be traveling to the Big Island in February to gather information about the algae market and its expansion and export possibilities.

**Please tell us more about your campaign to educate consumers about aquaculture products available in Hawaii.**

ADP is planning a campaign that will inform consumers about the fresh, local products that are available in Hawaii, and also dispel some of the negative myths about aquaculture that are found on the Internet and in print. Our goal is to give the consumer enough information to make an educated decision about purchasing and consuming local aquaculture products.

We will be applying for Federal grants to supplement the project, because State budgets are shrinking dramatically. In the meantime, ADP is laying the groundwork for content that will first appear on our website and then be expanded to print when funds become available.

**Labor and land costs in Hawaii are high compared to those in other places with aquaculture industries. How do you think our products can be competitive in the marketplace?**

Frozen imports from developing countries will always be cheaper because of the factors you mentioned, but we can be competitive by positioning our products as premium in terms of quality and freshness. The fact that Hawaii-grown products can get from local aquafarms to seafood outlets in just a few hours is a huge advantage, because everyone knows that when it comes to seafood, fresher is better. We will also be getting the word out that aquaculture best practices are very eco-friendly. More people are aware of and care about the environment than ever before, so we will be letting consumers know that eating locally grown seafood reduces the

carbon footprint associated with importing food from far away. Our main tool in the competition wars goes back to our campaign to educate consumers. We will be using as many different venues and media as possible to get our message out.

**What do you see as Hawaii's biggest challenge to developing its aquaculture industry?**

To me, the biggest challenge is the current dismal economic environment. This is having two effects. Consumers are looking for ways to conserve resources by reducing their spending. This makes our local aquaculture products a harder sell because they are often more expensive than imports. Secondly, the capital markets are in turmoil, which dramatically limits business opportunities for existing operations and makes it less feasible for new businesses to enter the market.

The difficulties of growing the aquaculture industry in this economic and political environment are significant, but I love the challenge and we are making progress. I have a great team: my staff is energetic, dedicated, and passionate about aquaculture. I really enjoy working with the farmers, the Hawaii Aquaculture Association, and other industry leaders. Aquaculture in Hawaii has tremendous unrealized potential and that is what makes it such an exciting time to be at ADP. Between ADP and the time away from the office that I spend with my family, every day is a great adventure!