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City, County officials examining aquaculture opportunities



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Still energized by what they learned on a recent trip to abalone farms and oyster fisheries in Rikuzentakata, Iwate, Japan, three local officials are looking into the possibility of bringing similar industries and a possible joint economic development project to the Del Norte Coast.

Del Norte County Supervisor Chris Howard, Crescent City Mayor Blake Inscore and Harbormaster Charlie Helms had a phone conference July 20 with Randy Lovell, state aquaculture coordinator for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, about whether Crescent City and the harbor district could develop aquaculture such as seaweed, mussels, oysters and abalone.

Howard said Lovell has since provided a lot of information and contacts to help develop the idea of working with other ports

While in Japan, delegates were given a comprehensive tour of Rikuzentakata's abalone farm, where abalone "seeds" grow into harvestable abalone. At an indoor abalone farm there, the three were notably excited about how easy and profitable abalone farming can be.

Farmers there said that for a \$150,000 a year budget, the farm can generate \$1.2 million.

They had many questions for abalone farmers and officials at the time. In Japan, farm grown abalone are released back into the ocean where local fishers can harvest and sell them to markets. The license to fish for abalone makes each fisherman a member of the same organization that produces them.

On the bus leaving the abalone farm in Rikuzentakata, the conversations turned to how the city and county might get the California Coastal Commission on board in supporting local farming.

“Right now the Department of Fish and Wildlife is greatly encouraging aquaculture-type operations in economically-depressed areas to gain some ground and incentive for folks to go out there and start new businesses.” economic opportunity,” Howard said.

A local partnership

Howard said Thursday conversations with Rikuzentakata officials are investigating the feasibility of using their “seeds” to grow abalone on the Del Norte Coast and ship them to California target markets with the Rikuzentakata brand.

“It would save them a lot of transportation costs,” Howard said, noting that Crescent City could capitalize on that relationship. “That’s the dream, anyway.”

He said all ideas are a lot for both sides to consider. Another possible local industry revolves around the production and harvesting of seaweed.

“Charlie (Helms) is really excited about that possibility,” Howard said.

At the close of Tuesday’s board of supervisors meeting, Howard spoke of another opportunity.

“Many people don’t know this, but it’s a very rare root that is used within a lot of raw seafood type products in Japanese restaurants, but we have a small farm operation just above the border in the Winchuck River system that is growing Wasabi,” he said. “As claimed currently in New York, as is claimed in certain restaurants in California, Las Vegas and in Oregon by the producer of this product, it is currently believed to be the number one wasabi crop in the world for taste, texture and quality.”

Howard said he was excited to hear of such a venture, as it could be pursued in Del Norte County, as well.

Howard said whether it’s abalone, oyster fisheries or sea urchins, there is a lot to consider but Del Norte County could capitalize on a specific market.

“We hope we can find something that will work for us to allow the harbor an income stream,” he

said. “We also talked about partnerships with some of the growers on the Humboldt Coast.”

He said there are lots of opportunities with all kinds of aquaculture to discuss further.