SMOLTS

NEWSLETTER | SUMMER 2026

Cook Inlet AQUACULTURE ASSOCIATION



FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
TRENTEN DODSON

It is with genuine excitement — and a real sense of coming home — that I introduce myself as the new Executive Director of the Cook Inlet Aquaculture Association (CIAA). For those I haven't yet had the chance to meet, my name is Trenten Dodson, and while this role is new, this organization is not new to me. I started my Alaska career right here at CIAA back in 2001. Twenty-five years later, it is a true honor to return to where it all began.

In the years since, my path has never strayed far from salmon. I spent a decade with the Kodiak Regional Aquaculture Association, working within Alaska's hatchery system and seeing firsthand what well-run enhancement programs can do for fisheries and the communities that depend on them. Most recently, I served as Executive Director of the Kenai Watershed Forum, leading research, education, and restoration efforts to keep the Kenai Peninsula's watersheds healthy and productive. Salmon fisheries in Alaska and their continued success are not just my profession; they are something I care about deeply and have built my career around.

That career has taught me something CIAA has understood since its founding in 1976: salmon are the thread that ties this region together. They feed our families, anchor our economy, fill our smokehouses and freezers, and define who we are as a community.

Commercial, sport, subsistence, and personal use — every one of these fisheries matters, and each one depends on healthy, abundant runs. From the Trail Lakes and Tutka Bay Lagoon hatcheries to the remote release sites, fish passage projects, and invasive species monitoring and control work spread across the Cook Inlet drainage, CIAA pairs sound science with hard, hands-on work in some of the most demanding conditions Alaska can offer. I have long admired the dedication of this staff and board, and after just a short time back on the job, that admiration has only grown.

I also want to thank my predecessor, Dean Day, for his leadership. Dean worked closely with the board through some hard decisions in recent years, and thanks to that steady hand, CIAA is in a strong position to move forward

SEE PAGE 2, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

IN THIS EDITION:

BOARD UPDATES
Officer election results, upcoming meeting & upcoming Area H election
Page 2

RESURRECTION BAY
Highlighting the history of the various hatchery programs
Page 3

COMMUNITY
Reflecting on a recent visit by Bald Mountain Meadow students
Page 4

2026 RELEASES & EGG COLLECTION GOALS
Page 5

PIKE SEASON
Seeing an uptick in harvesting this season
Page 6

INVASIVE SPECIES LEGISLATION
Why we need better coordination to protect our salmon runs
Page 7

NEW STAFF & PROMOTIONS
Page 8

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

and thrive. I'm grateful for the foundation he leaves behind.

In the months ahead, my priority is simple: listen and learn. I plan to spend time at our facilities, on the water, and in conversation with Area H fishermen, our board, partner agencies, and the communities we serve. I want to understand what is working well, where the challenges lie, and how CIAA can continue to strengthen our salmon returns. The challenges facing Cook Inlet salmon are significant — but so is the expertise, passion, and grit of the people working on their behalf.

My door is always open. If you have thoughts, questions, or just want to talk fish, I would love to hear from you. Stop by the Kenai office, catch me at a board meeting, or drop me a line anytime.

Thank you for the warm welcome — it is good to be back.

With gratitude,
Trenten Dodson



Cook Inlet drift gillnet fishing. Lisa Ka'aihue

BOARD UPDATES

49TH ANNUAL MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

At the 49th Annual Meeting, the board elected its officers:

- **Dale Bagley, President**
- **Malcolm Milne, 1st Vice President**
- **Roland Maw, 2nd Vice President**
- **Jessie Nelson, Secretary**
- **Dave Martin, Treasurer**
- **Brent Johnson, Elected Member**
- **Bob Nathanson, Elected Member**

The board also welcomed two new at-large Area H fishermen representatives:

- **Robert Roth, alternate Austin Winslow**
- **Rod Van Saun, alternate Daniel Airaudi**

NEXT BOARD MEETING

The next Board of Directors meeting will be held Saturday, September 19, 2026, 10:00 a.m. at the Kenai Headquarters Building.

This meeting provides an opportunity for the Board to review the year's hatchery operations and field season, discuss key accomplishments and challenges, and look ahead to upcoming priorities.

More information will be posted closer to the meeting date on the CIAA calendar: https://ciaanet.org/calendar/.

UPCOMING BOARD ELECTION

Are you an Area H salmon permit holder? Are you looking for a leadership opportunity that will put your strategic thinking skills to work? Are you committed to sustaining salmon fisheries for all users in the Cook Inlet region? If so, then please put your name in for the CIAA Board of Directors!

This fall CIAA will begin an election process to fill three of the five at-large Board of Director seats. These seats are reserved for Cook Inlet Area H salmon permit holders (the Inlet Wide Commercial Fishermen Representatives).

More information will be sent out to permit holders this fall.

RESURRECTION BAY
SPAWNING GROUNDS OF A HATCHERY PROGRAM

Lauren Deal, Hatchery Operations Manager

Resurrection Bay has a long and diverse history when it comes to salmon aquaculture. Let's take a look at some of the history that has led to today's hatchery programs.

GROUSE LAKE: A SEWARD TERRITORIAL HATCHERY

The Territorial Fish Commission used funds appropriated in 1923 to build the first hatchery in the Seward area. Designers planned the facility to incubate up to 5 million Chinook (king) salmon eggs. Unfortunately, crews could not find enough Chinook salmon for brood stock, so they imported eyed eggs from Washington State in 1924. That same year, they collected sockeye salmon eggs from Grouse Lake and nearby Bear Lake. The hatchery operated for two more years until a fire destroyed the building in March 1927.

In 1994, the CIAA revisited Grouse Lake as a potential cost-recovery project, using brood stock from Packers and Tustumena lakes. We suspended the project in 2000 because it proved difficult to conduct cost-recovery harvests on Grouse Lake fish.



Trail Lakes Hatchery during construction.

A GROWING DEMAND FOR COHO

The Seward Silver Salmon Derby, hosted by the Seward Chamber of Commerce, began in 1956. It remains one of Alaska's oldest and largest salmon derbies and is a reflection of the desire for coho (silver) salmon. As demand for coho salmon increased, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) searched Resurrection Bay for a suitable location to expand coho production. In 1962, ADF&G selected Bear Lake for an experimental coho fisheries enhancement program. The program quickly proved successful, prompting ADF&G to expand stocking efforts to Seward Lagoon and Box Canyon Creek. Today, ADF&G continues to stock coho in Seward Lagoon. During years with lower production, CIAA supplements those releases with additional fish.

The Seward Silver Salmon Derby also supports coho enhancement through its fish buyback program. Proceeds from the program fund CIAA-produced coho smolt released into Bear Creek. Since 2012, CIAA has produced more than 704,000 coho smolt for release into Resurrection Bay.



Jessica Grevan with her Silver Salmon Derby entry. Lisa Ka'aihue

SOCKEYE ENTER THE PICTURE

Bear Lake has long supported a natural population of sockeye (red) salmon, although the run remained relatively small. In 1988, CIAA assumed operation of Trail Lakes Hatchery, and that same year, managers revised the Bear Lake Management Plan to expand sockeye fisheries enhancement while maintaining coho production. In 1989, CIAA officially assumed operation of the Bear Creek Weir and management of the Bear Lake program, and the organization began releasing sockeye fry and smolt into the lake, launching the modern enhancement program. Since those initial releases, the recreational sockeye fishery in Resurrection Bay has grown steadily in popularity. Successful cost-recovery harvests have also expanded, providing the funding needed to sustain the Bear Lake sockeye program.

TRAIL LAKES HATCHERY: THE HEART OF ENHANCEMENT

The Trail Lakes Hatchery, located near Moose Pass, opened in 1982 as part of a statewide effort by ADF&G to rebuild and enhance Alaska's salmon populations. Engineers designed the hatchery as a central incubation facility to support enhancement programs throughout the Cook Inlet region.

Today, Trail Lakes Hatchery serves as the heart of CIAA's sockeye and coho programs. Every sockeye and coho salmon released by CIAA throughout the Cook Inlet Region passes through the hatchery. Unlike many hatcheries, Trail Lakes receives no returning adult salmon. Instead, hatchery staff conduct all egg collections at remote sites and transport the eggs back to the facility. Staff collect sockeye eggs along the shoreline of Bear Lake and at the Tutka Bay Lagoon Hatchery net pens. They collect coho eggs at the raceway located at Bear Lake Weir. Once the eggs arrive at Trail Lakes Hatchery, staff incubate them and rear the fish to the fry or smolt stage before transporting them to their release locations throughout the region.

WHAT ABOUT KINGS?

Trail Lakes Hatchery may incubate up to 4 million Chinook (king) salmon eggs, but it has never operated a king salmon program. Like the earlier Grouse Lake Hatchery, Trail Lakes has never identified a reliable local brood source. Without a dependable source of brood stock, hatchery managers cannot develop a sustainable king salmon enhancement program. So where do the king salmon caught in Resurrection Bay come from? ADF&G stocks Chinook salmon in Seward Lagoon each year. Many of the adults caught in Resurrection Bay originate from those releases, and those same fish support the popular youth-only fishery in the lagoon.

See page 5 for this year's egg collection goals and release numbers.

HEADWATERS TO HOME

This issue's community article is from Jason BreMiller, co-founder of Bald Mountain Meadow. In it he reflects on the visit he and his students made to Trail Lakes Hatchery and Bear Creek Weir earlier this summer.

It's raining buckets at Porcupine camp here in Hope where I'm hunkered down in my tent listening to the pattering of rain on the fly and thinking about our first two days in Alaska. I've brought a group of ten high school students–spanning Beijing to Maine–for a deep dive into fishing and fisheries in Alaska, an exploration from as many stakeholder perspectives–human and more than human–as possible. As a longtime classroom teacher observing the widening gulf between an antiquated system and what students seem to need right now, I've opened a small company, Bald Mountain Meadow, that builds place-based learning expeditions for students and teachers. We're trying to nurture joyful, connected, environmentally literate humans who understand complex systems and can pull the right levers of change.

We've spent the past two days on the Kenai Peninsula, volunteering with Trout Unlimited on the Resurrection Creek restoration project and learning about the current rewilding efforts there to combat historical mining impacts–and climbing into the alpine with local authors Christine Cunningham and Steve Meyer to contemplate the headwaters where this whole journey begins. Already, the kids' minds are alive with ideas–with stakeholder maps of increasing complexity and possibilities for what it means to love a place. "You need to know a place before you can be kind to it," Steve says to us, and it's a phrase I find myself turning in my mind as I assemble this place's puzzle in my own mind. My tentbound ruminations, though, are jostled by laughter outside.

Turns out the kids are sitting in the full brunt of the downpour–at the picnic table playing cards in their rain gear with a waterproof deck. They're present, alive, leaning into discomfort, and it's a reminder of what experiences like this uncover in them, these small, spontaneous moments of connection and joy too often precluded by the ubiquity of devices.

The next morning we grab biscuit sandwiches at Turnagain Kayak and Coffeehouse where owner Jess feeds us homemade nutella poptarts and muffins while the kids mess around in the parking lot on pogo sticks. Then we're off to Moose Pass and the Trail Lakes Hatchery where we're greeted by fish culturist Zach Kalk who shows us in and helps the kids wrap their minds around the complex process of raising eight million salmon and releasing them into the watershed to bolster salmon numbers and provide resource opportunities for all users. We discuss the complex role hatcheries play in the broader fisheries landscape. The kids ask good questions, sometimes the hard questions, too–like what do the critics of salmon aquaculture say about all of this? As we talk, we peer into tanks packed tight with 300,000 fry. It helps to see it all in action, in real time.

An hour later we're at the Bear Creek Weir just outside of Seward. As the kids cross the road to a small downstream perch, one of them shouts "I see them!" And there they are, lined up like torpedoes, sockeye, silver sided, greenbacked, treading the riffle. Eagles cackle in the tree tops. It's the first time the kids have seen a live adult salmon, and this whole operation moves them one step closer from abstraction to understanding. As we step around the corner, we're greeted by fish culturist Ryan Nascimento, above whose voice we can hear the repeated thumping of salmon against the fish elevator that, when full, will lift them above the weir where they will continue their journey upstream. The fish explode out of the water in a constant barrage, leaping high, sometimes more than three feet, only to smack their noses on the iron bars impeding their path. They plunge back into the pool only to launch again. Again and again, undeterred they rise, raw instinct in motion, lithe, powerful, ceaseless. This is magic to see, for the kids to see so close, to glimpse the sheer vitality propelling this ecosystem forward.

From here, the kids split into two groups–one that nets smolt to record weight and length; the other taking

SEE PAGE 5, COMMUNITY

Bald Mountain Meadow visitors learn about sockeye salmon at Bear Creek Weir. Steve Small and Charlotte Workman of Deepwild Creative



COMMUNITY, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

turns placing adult males in the freeze box to be shipped to the processor to offset operational expenses and sending the females down the sluice that drops them upstream of the weir and farther along their upcreek spawning journey. It's a profound moment for the kids, holding a salmon aloft and helping it along, emblematic of their larger role as stewards in keeping this ecosystem's wild wheels turning.

The visit culminates with a salmon dissection led by fisheries technician Else Kalar, whose impeccable command of physiology and joyful passion for all things fish holds these kids rapt for the better part of two hours. They slice open their specimen and identify salient organs, they pop out eyeballs and remove the glasslike lens, they cut out the still-beating heart, hold it in their palm and watch it pulse, they kiss fish and the whole story comes to life for them in ways that begin to work deep. Smell, taste, touch, a shared communal story written in guts and blood and fluorescent orange flesh that will live in their hearts forever.

When I'm coaching teachers on their practice, I tell them to just get the heck out of the way and let the experience unfold, let the place work its magic. And this maxim holds here: good things are happening in the minds and hearts of these kids as they watch and listen and lift and fillet. It's soul work. And I'm grateful to partners like Lauren Deal and the Cook Inlet Aquaculture Association for opening their world to us and without whom these experiences would be so much harder for young people to access.

From here we're on to Exit Glacier and Alutiiq Pride Marine Institute, and from there on to King Salmon to floss Naknek sockeye and see the Brooks bears *and, and, and*...a wild, widening world unfolding itself for Alaska's newest advocates.



Else Kalar leads a salmon dissection at Bear Creek Weir. Lauren Deal

2026 RELEASES AND EGG COLLECTION GOALS

The tables below summarizes 2026 releases from Trail Lakes Hatchery and Tutka Bay Lagoon Hatchery, along with this year's egg collection goals.

2026 Hatchery Egg Collection Goals

Hatchery	Species	Stock	Target number of eggs
Tutka Bay Lagoon	Pink	Tutka Bay Lagoon	50,000,000
Trail Lakes	Sockeye	Bear Lake	3,500,000
		Tutka Bay Lagoon	4,846,000
	Coho	Bear Lake	565,000

2026 Hatchery Releases

Hatchery	Species	Brood year and stage	Release number	Location
Tutka Bay Lagoon	Pink	BY25 Fry	6,813,400	Tutka Bay Lagoon
Trail Lakes	Sockeye	BY24 Smolt	426,700	Tutka Bay Lagoon
		BY24 Smolt	549,200	Bear Creek
		BY25 Fry	1,081,200	Bear Lake
		BY25 Fry	1,109,200	Hazel Lake
		BY25 Fry	238,400	Kirschner Lake
	Coho	BY24 Smolt	85,200	Bear Creek
		BY24 Smolt	10,800	Seward Lagoon
		BY25 Fry	462,300	Bear Lake



One small pike with a belly full of juvenile salmon. CIAA

PIKE SEASON UNDERWAY

Danny Tanis, Biologist

The 2026 field season is in full swing. After an unexpected, delayed start to the season, the crew made it out to Shell Lake for a short stint of pike suppression before moving over to nearby Whiskey and Hewitt lakes. The crew will return to Shell Lake in mid-August to close out the season and enumerate the salmon population there.

It hasn't been an easy season so far. Weather and staffing have been a challenge, and we even had our boat stolen at Hewitt Lake! Despite these setbacks, the crew has done a great job working together to ensure the project continues uninterrupted. And we also appreciated the help we received from Whiskey Lake residents that allowed us to secure a substitute boat to ensure work continued as planned.

THE FIGHT CONTINUES

Since 2012, CIAA has removed a cumulative total of nearly 8,000 invasive northern pike from Shell Lake alone. Last season was one of our most active in recent memory, with 256 pike removed from Shell Lake and over 800 each from Hewitt and Whiskey lakes — the highest harvest numbers those systems had seen in several years.

WHAT WE'RE WATCHING THIS YEAR

One of the biggest questions going into this season is whether the elevated pike numbers observed in 2025 represent a trend or a one-year anomaly. Catch per unit effort increased across all three systems last year, which tells us the population may be rebounding from the low abundances we saw from 2020–2024. That makes consistent harvest pressure this year especially important.

We are also continuing to monitor adult migration through the weir on Shell Creek. A video weir was installed at Shell Lake in early July, and when the crew returns to Shell in August, they'll be able to review the footage and record an escapement count for the season. After several lean years, last season's smolt outmigration numbers remained low but offered a glimmer of optimism. We observed the highest number of naturally-produced sockeye smolt since 2010. We didn't operate the smolt weir this year, but we are hopeful that trend continued this spring.

LOOKING AHEAD

We have applied for a grant to continue our northern pike removal efforts at Shell, Whiskey, and Hewitt lakes, while also expanding our reach through environmental DNA sampling at two additional lakes in the region. Environmental DNA, or eDNA, is trace genetic material that fish shed into their surroundings such as scales, mucus, and waste. By taking water samples and testing them at a lab, we can identify the presence of pike before they've established in large numbers. When it comes to invasive species, early detection is the most effective management tool we have. Catching a new pike population when it's small and localized is far more manageable than responding after a species has established itself throughout a watershed.

We hope to continue the work that CIAA has done at Shell, Whiskey, and Hewitt lakes over the years while staying one step ahead of pike at other lakes in the region. We hope that eDNA can be another tool for the organization to implement in the fight against pike. We should know the status of funding for this project in December 2026.

This pike suppression work is supported by a grant from the Alaska Sustainable Salmon Fund.





This year's pike seasonal crew: Ramsey Anis (left) and Isaac Kaufield (right). Isaac displays a monster of a pike, caught at Hewitt Lake, coming in at nearly 40 inches and 20 pounds.

INVASIVE SPECIES LEGISLATION

SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR

Lisa Ka'aihue, Special Projects Manager

After nearly 20 years of legislative efforts, an invasive species council bill finally reached Governor Mike Dunleavy's desk this year. Unfortunately, he vetoed the bipartisan measure.

THE BILL AND THE VETO

The bill was sponsored by Senator Forrest Dunbar, the most recent champion of such a bill. The bill would have established a council within the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to coordinate invasive species efforts across the state. The fiscal note was for a part-time position to support the council.

The proposed council would have helped agencies coordinate invasive species prevention, response, and long-term planning. Invasive species don't respect agency boundaries. Effective management requires all the governmental agencies (federal, state, and local) and partners to work together.

There are many other states that have similar councils and have had great success in securing the funding and coordination to effectively manage invasive species that threaten native fish, plants, and animals. Successful councils break through bureaucratic silos that inherently exist in government.

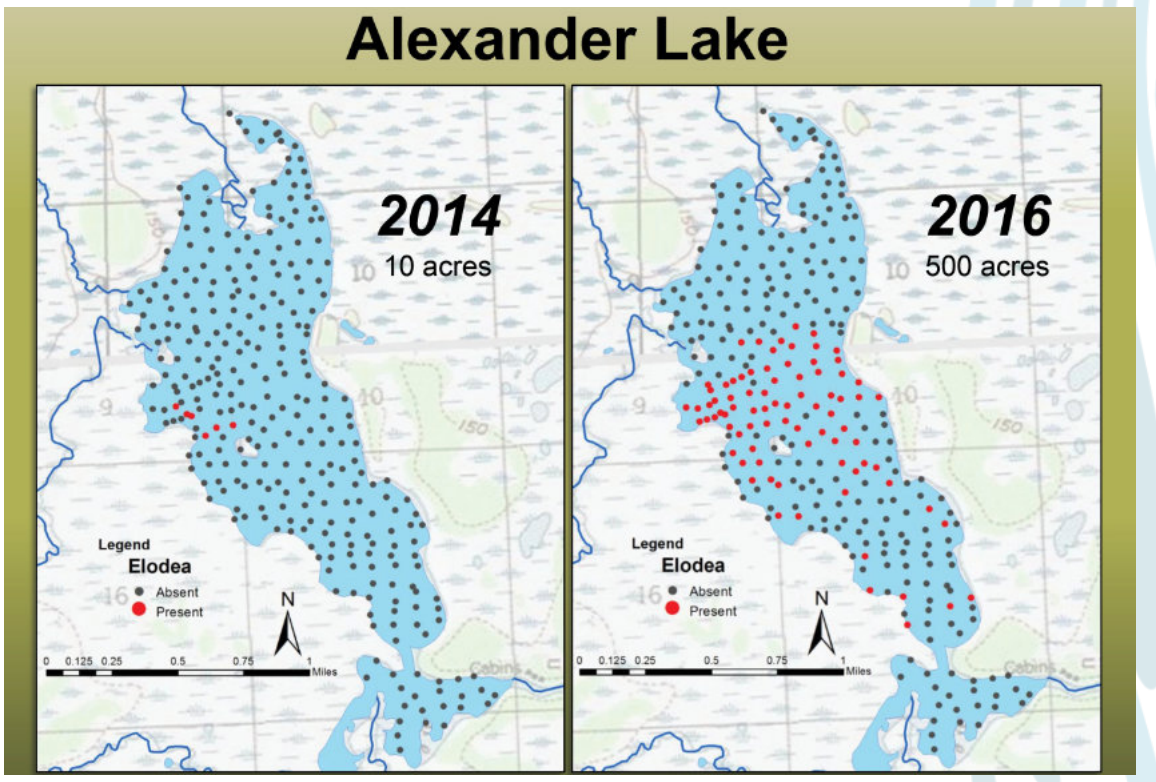
Governor Dunleavy wrote that the bill would create unnecessary government. Supporters argued that the modest investment would improve coordination and help avoid much larger costs from invasive species over time.

THE EXPANSION OF INVASIVE SPECIES

In Alaska, invasive species threaten our economic future, biosecurity, livelihoods, and cultural heritage. We rely on and value on our natural resources such as our world-renowned salmon runs.

Let’s look at one example of an invasive species that is an immediate threat to salmon and other native fish: elodea. This is the first invasive submerged aquatic water weed discovered in Alaska waters. Elodea is a typical harmful invasive species because left unchecked, it will establish itself and dominate habitats, choking out native vegetation and fish, such as salmon.

In recent years, some elodea infestations have been eradicated around the state. But somee once small infestations have faced response delays and cost increases (see Alexander Lake example above). The result is that small infestations have ballooned to much larger, more complex issues requiring even more resources and coordination.



This elodea infestation in Alexander Lake illustrates the high cost of delayed response. After elodea was first detected in 2014, it spread to nearby Sucker Lake by 2016. Funding, permitting, and coordination challenges delayed treatment until 2019—five years after the initial discovery. During that time, the infestation expanded, increasing the scale and cost of eradication while spreading to another lake. Treatments will continue this summer. This example shows that rapid, coordinated action can reduce long-term treatment costs, improve the chances of eradication, and help prevent the spread of invasive species to other waterbodies.

As reported by Tobias Schwoerer with the International Arctic Research Center, since 2010 the cumulative loss to commercial sockeye salmon fisheries from not eradicating elodea in Alaska is estimated to exceed $1 billion in 2025. And yet during the same time frame only $6.9 million has been spent on elodea response, with most of it coming from federal agencies and the least amount from the State of Alaska. The end is not in sight and seems to be getting away from us with continued expansion of elodea in Alaska water bodies.

Elodea is only one example. Another major threat is invasive northern pike—an apex predator in Southcentral Alaska. It's estimated that pike have already eliminated 27% of lake habitats in the Matanuska-Susitna and reduced populations in another 13%.

Recent studies have only added urgency to the situation. One study confirmed that the pike are traveling through salt water in our region. Another study found that as water temperatures warm due to climate change, the invasive pike in Southcentral are becoming even more of a threat to native fish. The outlook for managing northern pike to save native fish is not good, especially with the limited resources that are available right now.

It seems like for every new invasion there is another grant proposal that needs to be written and submitted, and a hope that funding will come through to continue the invasive species response or prevention work. It's not a sustainable approach that will protect all that we have to lose.

WHY THIS BILL STILL MATTERS

There are so many dedicated entities and individuals that work on invasive species issues in Alaska. Many of these same folks have been supporting the various invasive species bills every time one is introduced and weaves its way through our legislative process. They write support letters, provide testimony, and many continue to do their professional jobs in invasive species without adequate resources.

One group that provides leadership in the state is the Alaska Invasive Species Partnership, of which CIAA is a member. It's an informal volunteer group whose goal is to foster statewide coordination and cooperation. The Partnership supported this most recent bill as well as previous bills. They recognize an elevated approach through a council is needed to provide more tools for prevention and response, and to ensure statewide coordination happens—not only coordination among highly-motivated volunteers.

Protecting Alaska's salmon means acting before invasive species become impossible to control. Although this year's bill fell short, the need for better statewide coordination has never been clearer. We'll continue working with partners across Alaska to advocate for the tools needed to protect the fish, waters, and communities that depend on them.



MEET THE NEW STAFF

We welcomed or promoted the following individuals to regular positions since the last issue of *Smolts*:



Trail Lakes Hatchery
Ryan Nascimento
Temporary Fish Culturist
Ryan was promoted to this position after working as a Fisheries Technician at Bear Creek Weir.



Trail Lakes Hatchery
Brett Bostic
Fish Culturist
Brett came to us from Prince William Sound Aquaculture Corporation where he worked at the Wally Noerenberg Hatchery.



Trail Lakes Hatchery
Gabriel Grantham
Hatchery Manager
Gab accepted a transfer to Trail Lakes Hatchery after working as the Hatchery Manager and Assistant Manger at Tutka Bay Lagoon Hatchery.



Tutka Bay Lagoon Hatchery
Zachary Kalk
Assistant Manager
Zach was promoted to this position after working as a Fish Culturist at both Trail Lakes and Tutka Bay Lagoon hatcheries.

CIAA Board of Directors

Kirsten Dixon	Matanuska-Susitna Borough
Sean Palmer	Municipality of Anchorage
Dale Bagley, President	Kenai Peninsula Borough
Alec Branson	City of Seward
Matt Oxford	Inlet Wide Commercial Fishermen
Brent Keene	Inlet Wide Commercial Fishermen
Rod Van Saun	Inlet Wide Commercial Fishermen
Robert Roth	Inlet Wide Commercial Fishermen
Nancy Hillstrand	Inlet Wide Commercial Fishermen
Emil (Beaver) Nelson	City of Kachemak
Malcolm Milne, 1st Vice President	North Pacific Fisheries Association
Jessie Nelson, Secretary	North Pacific Fisheries Association
Brent Johnson	Kenai Peninsula Fishermen's Association
Vacant	Kenai Peninsula Fishermen's Association
Page Herring	Northern District Set Netters of Cook Inlet
Gary Swan	Northern District Set Netters of Cook Inlet
Dyer VanDevere	United Cook Inlet Drift Association
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Paul Roth	Cook Inlet Seiners Association
Maddy Lee	Port Graham/Nanwalek

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