COVID precautions combine with strong harvest, marketing to power Bristol Bay through 2020 season

By Brian Hagenbuch
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Pre-season conversation in Bristol Bay, Alaska – home to the world’s most-lucrative sockeye salmon run – revolved around whether the season should happen at all. Despite the region’s economic reliance on the summer fishery, some communities and tribal organizations in the Western Alaskan outpost called for the 2020 season to be closed down. But processors, fishermen, and fishery organizations scrambled to put protocols and testing procedures in place, and the coronavirus was kept largely at bay while fishermen hauled in almost 40 million sockeye salmon, nearly double the long-term average catch of 21.5 million fish.

“The fleet in Bristol Bay showed true strength and resiliency this season, pulling in strong harvest numbers in the face of the huge logistical challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Andy Wink, the executive director of the Bristol Bay Regional Seafood Development Association (BBRSDA).

The catch marked a sixth-straight year of harvests well above historical averages as Bristol Bay continues to buck statewide trends of dwindling salmon runs.

The strong supply of sockeye salmon coupled with foodservice shutdowns meant retail marketing efforts played a key part in moving fillets through the market.

According to the BBRSDA, several new partners ran retail promotions this summer, with eight retail chains that have more than 1,200 stores doing in-store or online promotions of Bristol Bay sockeye salmon.

BBRSDA Marketing Director Lilani Dunn told SeafoodSource that stores typically see an average increase in sales of 34 percent from the promotions, and sometimes much more. A Rosauers retail outlet in Washington State, for example, saw a sales bump of 120 percent in volume and revenue this summer over last summer, when the store did not run a
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H-E-B, Heinen’s, Hy-Vee, QFC, Raley’s, and Whole Foods are among other major retailers that promoted fresh Bristol Bay sockeye, and retailers like Rosauers are looking to promote frozen salmon throughout the year.

“Bristol Bay sockeye salmon promotions have become a highlight of our annual sales programming, and we are eager to do more throughout the rest of the year,” Rosauers Meat Merchandiser Mike Alfson said.

But even with the strong push on promotions, Dunn told SeafoodSource the marketing of Bristol Bay salmon has room to grow.

“There is a whole lot of room for marketing growth and we’re always looking for new partners,” Dunn told SeafoodSource.

Dunn said the current difficulties facing the foodservice sector has complicated BBRSDA’s marketing efforts.

“Foodservice is something where we need to be flexible. There’s trust that’s being built through the supply chain all the way down to the diner,” Dunn said. “We have to be ready with supply if foodservice comes back online, and we have to be ready for it to come back in the same way or in a different way. We’re trying to get ahead of it as much as we can.”

Despite good retail demand and marketing efforts, major processors in Bristol Bay posted an ex-vessel base-price of USD 0.70 (EUR 0.59), down nearly half from 2019. Industry observers believe the low price is in part due to processors spending large amounts of money on COVID-19 precautions, along with turbid market conditions created by the pandemic.

Photo courtesy of Bristol Bay Regional Seafood Development Association

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