**UAF’s Baker uses fishing background to feed role as educator**

By Lauren Frisch

With the dual perspective of a commercial fisherman and educator, Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory agent Torie Baker strives to help Cordova fishermen connect with each other and run successful businesses.

“Sometimes I feel like the den mother,” Baker said. “I like that people are able to come to my office and ask basic questions or run through ideas they’ve been thinking about to improve their bottom line.”

Baker grew up on a small, multicrop farm in central California. Her family benefited from an extension agent at a local university campus who provided technical assistance on subjects like almond tree pollination and crop rotations for alfalfa. It was Baker’s first exposure to community-based extension work.

Baker moved to Cordova in 1988 to be a commercial fisherman. Cordova instantly appealed to her because of the thriving fishing port and the small-town, family-oriented culture. Baker has been the owner and operator of her fishing boat, the F/V *Delta Tango*, for more than 20 years.

Baker first became involved with Alaska Sea Grant in the early 2000s when she was recruited to coordinate a statewide technical support program for salmon fishermen who were suffering an ongoing price collapse. She was hired into a permanent faculty position at the University of Alaska Fairbanks as the Prince William Sound Marine Advisory Program agent in 2004.

Sunny Rice, a Marine Advisory agent in Petersburg, was hired at the same time as Baker. Since Rice and Baker both work in small, fishing-oriented towns, they frequently collaborate on projects.

“A lot of the work we do is geared toward commercial fishermen,” Rice said. “She brings that fisherman’s experience, which is completely invaluable. It’s really hard to do something effectively without that perspective. She knows what our program is capable of providing, understands how to teach fishermen and brings this realistic, on-the-water experience.”

Baker said the biggest thrill of her job comes from helping someone bring a project or way of thinking to the next level, either by providing information or fostering a new connection.

“The success of fishing family businesses is critical in coastal Alaska. I especially enjoy working with the newer generation, those 30 and under who are putting a lot of things together on their plate now between the business side, the safety side and the fishing side,” Baker said.

Marc Carrel, a 31-year-old fisherman in Cordova, recently purchased a new boat and asked for Baker’s input as he explored what to buy, how to get a loan and other steps in the process. He ended up purchasing a boat similar to Baker’s and has continued to rely on her as a resource to customize the vessel for use in the local fishery.

Carrel also reviewed content for a website Baker and Rice recently upgraded, called the [FishBiz Project](http://fishbiz.seagrant.uaf.edu/), which provides information and tools for starting, managing, diversifying and exiting a commercial fishing business.

“Every time I have needed help from Torie or worked with Torie, it has been fantastic,” Carrel said. “It’s super valuable to have somebody in town who understands the fishing world and the fishing industry, but also has that bigger-picture understanding through the Sea Grant world and has resources available for people in the fishery.”

Baker and Rice coordinate the [Alaska Young Fishermen’s Summit](https://seagrant.uaf.edu/map/workshops/ayfs/index.php) series, a three-day event for new industry entrants that includes networking and skill-building to manage modern commercial fishing businesses. A goal of the summit is to give fishermen a venue to work together and discuss relevant issues with industry mentors. The seventh summit will be held in December 2017.

During the first summit in 2007, Rice said, the schedule was packed with lectures and activities. But sitting at dinner after the first day, it became clear to Baker and Rice that participants needed more time to talk to each other about issues that were important to them. The two dropped everything and stayed up late to change the schedule, making sure the attendees would have time for the conversations they needed.

“This was one of my favorite moments working with Torie,” said Rice, “because it required real teamwork and a great partner to think about how to facilitate this discussion.”

The summit continues to attract both new fishermen eager to learn and industry leaders eager to share their knowledge and experience. “Making sure we give participants the workshop they need is a challenge that we are happy to keep working on,” Rice says. “Torie’s experience and dedication are crucial to making sure we do it in a practical way that makes sense for the fishermen we serve."

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Cutlines:

Torie-young.jpg

Torie Baker leads new commercial fishermen in a discussion at the 2013 Alaska Young Fishermen's Summit in Juneau. Photo by Beverly Bradley.

Torie-sunny.jpg

As colleagues, Torie Baker (left) and Sunny Rice often collaborate on statewide initiatives in fishing business and direct marketing assistance. Photo by Beverly Bradley.

Torie-salmon.jpg

Torie Baker works aboard the F/V *Chagvan*. Photo by Troy Tirrell.