Schools Hope to Hook Students on Fish

by Shannon Haugland, Sentinel Staff Writer

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Pacific High School students, staff and volunteers on Friday got a taste of an upcoming pilot program to introduce local wild fish into the Sitka School District lunch program.

"The ones that ate it loved it," PHS secretary Lori Lee said of the elaborate spread. "It was a little fancier than we're used to, but it was fabulous. It was one of the best meals I've had in town. We hope it happens and it continues to happen – it was healthy, local, fresh and organic. It was everything we wanted."

Organized by the Sitka Local Foods Network, the special lunch included tacos made with locally caught rockfish and kale salad from a Sitka garden, plus beans and rice.

Guests included Sitka School Superintendent Steve Bradshaw and representatives of the Sitka School Board, fish processors, parents, the Sitka Conservation Society and NANA Management Services, the company that runs the lunch program for the school district. Local fisherman Wendy Alderson donated the yelloweye rockfish.

"It went really well," said Bradshaw, who complimented the adult and teen chefs. "I'm excited about the program. I think it's a win-win for us. The cost breakdown is something we're concerned about. But if we can get the kids eating the good fish we have here, and get them to make healthy choices, it's a win-win."

The idea came out of the Sitka Health Summit of 2010, where a task force was formed to get wild fish into Sitka schools and institutions. The group calls itself FISH for "Fish In the Schools -- Hooray."

"We're just really excited to finally have this happening – it makes such good sense," said Kerry MacLane, FISH task force coordinator.

Lexi Fish, community sustainability organizer for the Sitka Conservation Society and one of the cooks at Friday's event, said serving fresh fish in the schools covers a few task force goals for eating locally and encouraging kids to start making good choices.

"It's healthy, it's local, it's better all around for kids and the community," Fish said. "We want to get students involved and have the students excited about it."

Sponsors hope to roll out the program in January at Blatchley Middle School, by offering wild fish as a school lunch option once a month for the first five months of 2011. If it goes well, Fish said, the program will expand to other schools.

"The original idea was to start with Blatchley, because this is a crucial age where kids are starting to make their own decisions about food, and learning to cook," she said. "It's an important time to get healthy food."

Having tempting and unhealthy off-campus options available so close to the campus is
another reason to stress the importance of eating healthfully, she said.

Blatchley is also seen as the potential center for expanding the local foods movement, since the property already houses a community garden and composting area. It has also been identified as the future site of a therapeutic and educational community greenhouse, Fish said.

MacLane said he and other task force members hope that they can attract at least 25 percent of the Blatchley kids to choose the fish option, since there are four menu items available every day at the school.

“That will be a measure of our success,” he said. Education should help build some enthusiasm for choosing fish on the appointed day, MacLane said.

“We’re going do some education about the health benefits of fish, and about the low carbon footprint, and economic benefits of supporting the local fish (industry),” he said. The project has drawn eager volunteers from Pacific High who are willing to help with that portion of the project. Several students helped cook the Friday test lunch at the school.

MacLane said he expects that the project will also make the most of any offers for donated fish to get the program off the ground.

Bradshaw said he is excited about the prospects for the program.

“We hope we could make it feasible to do this,” he said.