Herring Fishing Underway in Togiak

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Mike Mason/KDLG

The Togiak herring fishery is underway. Fish and Game opened it up at noon Saturday. KDLG's Mike Mason has more.

St. George mayor Pat Pletnikoff sees a whole host of benefits that could come from having a surface connection to St. Paul, starting with access to the larger community’s cargo-capable docks.

“Everything that comes into St. George comes in by air. And everybody is well aware of the costs of air service.”

Pletnikoff says a ferry would also be useful for medical emergencies when planes can’t land. But his hope for the long-term is that it would spark economic development -- particularly tourism.

“Reliable surface transportation so that people can get out and get in on a time-certain basis is going to be critical to that development.”

“Birders would love to come to St. George but it’s very difficult to make that happen when air service is unreliable, as it is. And it’s a lot easier to get into St. Paul.”

That’s Larry Cotter. He’s the CEO of the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Community Development Association, or APICDA, one of six regional groups that were created to infuse Western Alaska villages with money from the Bering Sea fisheries. APICDA owns the fish handling facility in St. George, and like, Pletnikoff, Cotter sees the potential for tourism.

“In the future, I see a lodge in St. George, and I see us routing people to our lodge through St. Paul, in one direction or another.”

That vision is still a few years off. For now, APICDA is focused on a much more fundamental task: finding a ferry. The organization’s Board of Directors has committed $600,000 to getting the project off the ground, but so far, they haven’t found a suitable vessel. Cotter says they’re looking for a delicate balance: large enough to handle the Bering Sea’s rough weather, but not so big as to be overkill.

“We’re certainly not looking at Alaska-class Marine Highway vessels or anything along those lines.”

With summer fast approaching, Cotter is still holding out hope that they can find a vessel for this year. If they can, he’d like to see daily service between the islands.

“This will give us an opportunity to evaluate what kind of costs we’re looking at, what kind of passenger service we might be able to generate, what type of revenue is reasonable to assume, and then in future years, we would either continue the relationship, if that made sense, or acquire our own vessel to provide service.”

If APICDA can’t find a vessel for this year, Cotter says they’ll keep searching over the winter with the goal of definitely having service next summer.