



OUR WAY OF LIFE

Advancing Understanding of Climate Adaptation and Resilience in Gulf of Alaska Fishing Communities

March 18-19, 2025
Harrigan Centennial Hall, Sitka

WORKSHOP REPORT, SUMMARY, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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**RINGER
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Executive Summary

The *Our Way of Life* workshop series convened community leaders, Tribal representatives, commercial fishermen, researchers, and partner organizations in Sitka, Alaska on March 18-19, 2025. The workshop was hosted as part of the project *Advancing Understanding of Climate Adaptation and Resilience in Gulf of Alaska Fishing Communities*, led by the NOAA Alaska Fisheries Science Center with support from Alaska Sea Grant, the Alaska Ocean Observing System, the Kachemak Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, and additional partners. The project focuses on supporting fisheries-dependent communities in Cordova, Kodiak, and Sitka to develop locally relevant strategies that sustain fishing-based ways of life.

This report synthesizes key themes, shared insights, and potential next steps that emerged from the workshop. Several consistent themes emerged across Kodiak, Cordova, and Sitka discussions. Participants emphasized that commercial and subsistence fishing are deeply intertwined with community identity and cultural continuity. Fishing was consistently described not simply as a job or an industry, but as a way of life that shapes daily routines and intergenerational relationships. Economic pressures, including rising operational costs, workforce challenges, and shifting resource availability, were described as central influences on shorter-term decisions and longer-term planning. Practical strategies, such as energy efficiency measures, workforce development pathways, expanded seafood marketing opportunities, and community-led monitoring, were identified as actionable approaches to strengthen resilience. Workshop dialogues highlighted the importance of locally driven solutions to common challenges and expressed a clear preference for tools and resources that support informed decision-making rather than top-down prescriptive direction.

Collaboration across sectors, geographies, and knowledge systems was viewed as essential to sustaining fishing communities throughout the Gulf of Alaska. Hearing how different places are addressing similar challenges helps reduce feelings of isolation, generate new ideas for adaptation and innovation, and reinforces a sense of regional solidarity to persevere through challenges and celebrate small and large wins. While solutions must remain place-specific, participants expressed strong interest in continued peer-to-peer exchange and coordination across the Gulf of Alaska. The workshop report aims to strengthen those connections and serve as a model for broader scalability.

Acknowledgments

The Our Way of Life workshop was made possible through the generosity, knowledge, and engagement of community members who shared their time and expertise.

This report reflects the voices of participants from Kodiak, Cordova, and Sitka, alongside contributions from project partners.

Special recognition is extended to the Indigenous communities of Southeast and Southcentral Alaska, whose stewardship and knowledge form the foundation for sustainable practices.

We honor the contributions of Elders, youth, fishermen, practitioners, and community leaders who ensured these conversations remained grounded in lived experience and local priorities.

Introduction

The *Our Way of Life* (OWL) workshop was convened in Sitka, Alaska on March 18–19, 2025 at the Harrigan Centennial Hall, as part of the broader project and ongoing project: *Advancing Understanding of Climate Adaptation and Resilience in Gulf of Alaska Fishing Communities*. This initiative is led by the NOAA Alaska Fisheries Science Center in collaboration with fishing organizations in Cordova, Kodiak, and Sitka, and supported by Alaska Sea Grant, Alaska Ocean Observing System, Kachemak Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, and other partners. The project focuses on three of the Gulf of Alaska’s most fishing-dependent and diverse communities, which also serve as infrastructure, service, and cultural hubs for surrounding outlying communities.

The workshop was developed by project leadership to create space for Gulf of Alaska fishing communities to share experiences, identify shared challenges, and explore locally grounded approaches to resilience in the face of ecological, economic, and social change. These complex changes intersect with longstanding cultural relationships to marine resources, particularly for Alaska Native Tribes and fishing families whose identities, food systems, and livelihoods are deeply connected to the ocean. The workshop brought together project leaders, community members, and Tribal organizations including the Kodiak Area Native Association, Native Village of Eyak, Sitka Tribe of Alaska, and the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska. By centering local voices, the workshop provided opportunities to share observations, values, concerns, and innovative strategies for moving forward together.

This report presents a synthesized summary of key themes, insights, and potential next steps that emerged through collective reflection and dialogue during the workshop. Rather than capturing every discussion or perspective shared, the report focuses on cross-cutting observations that surface to highlight shared priorities, challenges, and areas of opportunity. Its purpose is to support continued coordination and action among Gulf of Alaska fishing communities by elevating community-driven perspectives and practical solutions. The report aims to inform future collaboration, guide program and funding alignment, and contribute to ongoing conversations about sustaining fisheries and coastal ways of life in a changing world.

Workshop Context, Planning, and Purpose

The *Our Way of Life* workshop was developed in response to growing recognition that effective adaptation must be grounded in lived experience, cultural knowledge, and place-based practice. Organizers envisioned the workshops as a convening space to explore common challenges, align ongoing efforts, and strengthen collaboration across the Gulf of Alaska. Planning efforts focused on building bridges between existing fisheries adaptation and Tribal planning initiatives. Rather than introducing new frameworks, organizers sought to complement ongoing efforts, reduce meeting fatigue, and maximize the value of in-person engagement. Common areas of focus included energy efficiency and independence, habitat stewardship, research and monitoring, workforce development, fisheries access, and youth engagement, while recognizing that communities are often operating with limited capacity and resources.

led panels presentations from Kodiak, Cordova, and Sitka to share ongoing work and local context followed by small group facilitated discussions to create space for dialogue and relationship building among participants. Shared meals, informal gatherings, and outdoor activities were intentionally incorporated into the agenda to foster connection and encourage open exchange. Together, these elements supported deeper engagement, strengthened interpersonal relationships, and reinforced the importance of learning in place when discussing the future of fisheries and coastal ways of life.

United States Senator Lisa Murkowski, while in Sitka for other official meetings, took the time to stop by the *Our Way of Life* workshop. Her visit provided participants with a valuable opportunity to engage directly with a key federal leader, discuss fisheries issues, and learn about her ongoing work in Washington, D.C. Senator Murkowski's presence highlighted the connection between local community experiences and national policy and reinforced the importance of collaboration in addressing the challenges facing Alaska's coastal fisheries.



Photo credit: Kinsey Brown

Kodiak Panel: Integrating Fisheries, Infrastructure, and Community Identity

Date: Tuesday, March 18, 2025, 10:00 AM

Moderator: Danielle Ringer, Ringer Consulting (RC)

Presenters: Theresa Peterson, Alaska Marine Conservation Council (AMCC); and Andie Wall, Kodiak Area Native Association (KANA)

The Kodiak panel centered on the deep connections between fisheries, infrastructure, and community identity. Commercial fishing is the backbone of the economy anchoring a complex network of processors, marine services, transportation providers, and family-owned fishing businesses. Participants noted that roughly one in three jobs in the Kodiak Island Borough is tied to fishing, with a highly diversified fleet. This diversity has historically provided resilience, allowing the fishermen to adapt to shifting single species stocks and markets, but also exposes a vulnerability to global market pressures and increasing species shifts. Kodiak's identity as a fishing community is both deeply rooted and continuously evolving.

Subsistence fishing and harvesting remain central to cultural continuity for Kodiak's Tribal communities and fishing families. Salmon, groundfish, shellfish, and wild plants are not only nutritional staples, but also foundational to intergenerational knowledge transfer, ceremonial practices, and well-being. Workshop participants emphasized that subsistence resources are

closely tied to village locations and nearshore areas, underscoring the importance of place-based awareness and respectful coordination between commercial activity and traditional use areas. Protecting access to these resources was repeatedly described as inseparable from protecting community identity.



Photo Credit: Danielle Ringer

Presentations from the Alaska Marine Conservation Council and the Kodiak Area Native Association highlighted the importance of integrating traditional and local knowledge with scientific approaches in fisheries management and community planning. Speakers emphasized that cultural and ecological well-being are involved with economic sustainability. Ongoing projects, including local food assessments, traditional plant walks, and fisheries vulnerability assessments, were described as examples of locally grounded efforts to sustain ways of life. Infrastructure and energy also emerged as key themes. Participants discussed Kodiak's leadership in renewable energy, noting that the island is nearly fully powered by renewable sources due to investments aimed at reducing operational costs while strengthening resilience.

Participants spoke candidly about the economic pressures facing Kodiak's fishing sector. Fluctuating fish stocks, price volatility, rising labor and insurance costs, and global market forces have placed strain on vessels of all size. The 2016 marine heatwave and subsequent Pacific cod collapse were frequently referenced as a turning point that revealed how ecological shifts can rapidly disrupt livelihoods and municipal functions. At the same time, many noted that immediate concerns and costs, such as vessel mortgages, fuel bills, and ongoing maintenance, often outweigh longer-term planning. Adaptation efforts are most effective when they address both shorter-term economic realities and longer-term uncertainties together.

Despite these challenges, Kodiak's population was consistently described as persistent with a problem-solving mindset. Participants articulated a shared vision grounded in healthy fish stocks, strong fishing families, cultural continuity, and bottom-up solutions. Interest in continued investments into renewable energy, marketing and value-added opportunities, and a youth pathways into fishing reflect a commitment to retaining value and ensuring fishing remains a viable livelihood. Rather than seeking to replace fishing with other industries, the message was clear: the path forward lies in protecting and strengthening Kodiak's fishing way of life while adapting to changing conditions through innovation and local leadership.

Cordova Panel: Community-Driven Energy and Fisheries Planning

Date: Tuesday, March 18, 2025, 1:00 PM

Moderator: Davin Holen, Alaska Sea Grant (ASG)

Presenters: Beks Rumley, Chugach Regional Resources Commission (CRRC); Erin Shew, Native Village of Eyak (NVE); and Kinsey Brown, Prince William Sound Science Center (PWSSC)

Cordova's relationship with fishing is defined by close connections between people and place. The Copper River salmon fishery provides relatively low barriers to entry and supports a younger-than-average fleet compared to much of the state. This accessibility has helped sustain fishing as a viable livelihood for new generations, reinforcing Cordova's identity as a working fishing town. Subsistence harvesting plays an equally important role in Cordova's cultural fabric. Traditional foods were repeatedly described as essential to physical, spiritual, and community health. Tribal organizations and regional partners emphasized concerns about changing marine conditions, species distribution, and food safety. Monitoring programs for shellfish and ocean conditions were framed as tools to support informed local decision-making and protect food sovereignty.

The Chugach Regional Resources Commission described its work with Tribal communities across the region, emphasizing traditional foods, physical and spiritual health, and the practice of "two-eyed seeing", which brings together western science and Indigenous knowledge perspectives. This approach was evident in initiatives ranging from ocean monitoring and mariculture development to waste reduction projects. Energy planning emerged as a central theme, with presentations outlining Cordova's Priority Climate Action Plan and broader adaptation efforts. Cordova's energy system, which already relies heavily on renewable hydropower, was named as an example of how infrastructure investments can deliver both economic and environmental benefits. Upgrades to hydroelectric storage, street lighting, and solar installations were discussed as practical investments that reduce emissions while strengthening community independence. However, discussions about alternative and renewable energy highlighted implementation challenges, particularly the limitations of large-scale programs that do not always align with the needs of smaller communities.



Photo Credit: Kinsey Brown

Commercial fishermen shared practical insights into how efficiency and innovation can strengthen resilience. Conversations about hybrid engines, fuel monitoring, improved

communication between vessels and tenders, and reduced idling illustrated how small operational changes can yield significant cost savings. Importantly, participants noted that financial incentives, safety, and comfort are often stronger motivators than abstract goals. Younger fishermen were seen as key drivers of change, bringing openness to new technologies while remaining deeply committed to the fishing lifestyle.

Workshop discussions highlighted Cordova's strong culture of collaboration across Tribes, research institutions, fishermen, utilities, and organizations. Participants emphasized that people want information rather than instruction, and that trust is built through longer-term presence, transparency, and respect for knowledge, particularly in relationships with external organizations. Participants stressed the importance of local control and community buy-in for possible programs and research projects. The panel highlighted the importance of leadership in driving successful adaptation efforts, demonstrating that projects are most effective when residents guide both planning and implementation.

Equally important, strong partnerships between diverse groups can create solutions that offer innovation while respecting culture. Cordova's resilience is rooted in its ability to align research, planning, and lived experience. Participants acknowledged that not all solutions scale easily across Alaska, and that place-specific approaches are essential. At the same time, there was optimism about the power of shared learning across regions. Cordova's story reflects a community actively shaping its future grounded in fishing, guided by collaboration, and committed to ensuring that people can continue to live, work, and return home.

Sitka Panel: Community-Led Research and Energy Innovation

Date: Tuesday, March 18, 2025, 3:00 PM

Moderator: Natalie Sattler, Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association (ALFA)

Presenters: Linda Behnken, Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association (ALFA); Callie Simmons, Sitka Tribe of Alaska (STA); Lauren Bell, Sitka Sound Science Center (SSSC); and Katie Riley, Sitka Conservation Society (SCS)

Sitka's fishing culture is inseparable from its identity as a coastal community shaped by Indigenous stewardship, long-standing commercial fisheries, and strong civic engagement. Many of Sitka's residents are fishermen and many more are connected to the industry through support services and family ties. The region's high engagement with fisheries management, combined with a history of small-boat operations, has reinforced an ethos centered on stewardship, quality, and access to resources. Subsistence fishing and harvesting are also foundational to cultural continuity, food security, and health. The Sitka Tribe of Alaska described its climate vulnerability assessments and adaptation planning efforts as living documents guided by community input, traditional ecological knowledge, and locally led monitoring. Species-focused assessments addressing salmon, herring, shellfish, wild plants, deer, and freshwater systems reflected an integrated understanding of environmental, cultural, and social well-being.



Photo Credit: Danielle Ringer

Rather than relying solely on external solutions, Sitka's approach emphasizes modeling change, integrating new ideas into existing practices, and grounding decisions in shared values. From the oldest seafood processors' cooperative in the country to local research institutions and conservation groups, Sitka has built networks that connect science, policy, education, and on-the-water experience. The Sitka Sound Science Center described hatchery-based research, environmental monitoring, and education programs that link science directly to community needs. They have programs designed to reach every student in Sitka each year and connect young people with scientific curiosity. These initiatives emphasize broad participation and social cohesion. Participants consistently returned to the idea that resilience must come from within and that knowledge sharing must be reciprocal, with data and stories remaining accessible to the people who contribute them.

Energy innovation and workforce development were also central themes. The Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association highlighted similar Gulf of Alaska issues like workforce shortages, declining fish prices, and infrastructure challenges as significant pressures on the fishing community. In response, collaborative initiatives like hybrid and electric fishing vessels, decarbonization efforts, and crew training programs were presented as practical pathways to strengthen both economic and environmental resilience. These efforts reflect a broader strategy of integrating new technologies into existing practices in ways that align with community values and operational realities. Facilitated small-group discussions reinforced the importance of practical tools and local engagement. Participants discussed fuel tracking, vessel efficiency improvements, and funding mechanisms that support technology adoption, emphasizing that solutions must be accessible and responsive to fishermen's needs. Engagement was consistently highlighted as essential, with participants stressing that research and data collection must provide direct benefits and be co-created with local partners.

Despite shared challenges, Sitka was repeatedly described as a community with strong organizational capacity and a deeply collaborative culture. Sitka's story illustrates values-driven approaches to adaptation, emphasizing food security, stewardship, and well-being. Rather than pursuing change for its own sake, participants highlighted the importance of sustaining strong fisheries, healthy ecosystems, and vibrant communities through innovations that build upon and protect existing ways of life. Across workforce development, infrastructure improvements, and decarbonization initiatives, Sitka demonstrates how collaborative efforts strengthen resilience in

the face of complicated challenges. Sitka’s approach underscores the power of knowledge integration, participatory planning, and systems-based thinking in shaping resilient futures that are firmly rooted in place and can illustrate a model for other coastal communities navigating similar issues.

Working Waterfronts Field Trip

On the final day of the workshop participants boarded a bus and traveled out the road to visit with several of Sitka’s marine service providers. Sitka is pioneering a new era of sustainable fishing through a partnership developing hybrid diesel-electric propulsion systems for commercial fishing boats. Spearheaded by the Alaska Longline Fishermen’s Association (ALFA) and supported by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL), the project converts vessels to operate primarily on electric power, with diesel generators used only for longer trips. Leveraging Sitka’s renewable hydroelectric power, the hybrid boats can charge their batteries at the dock, enabling near-zero local emissions, reduced fossil fuel dependency, and minimized risk of fuel spills. Workshop participants had the opportunity to ask questions directly to staff working on this state-of-the-art technology.



Photo credit: Natalie Sattler

As participants toured working waterfront facilities, they observed Sitka’s upgraded Gary Paxton Industrial Park, including space for a new haul-out lift to be managed by Kodiak-based Highmark Marine Fabrication and funded in part by a \$1M Denali Commission grant. The effort aims to provide more affordable and accessible repair and maintenance services. These examples contribute to the economy by creating jobs and strengthening the resilience of Sitka’s fishing industry, highlighting the economic and environmental benefits of combining innovation with community-driven infrastructure improvements. The visit offered workshop participants an up-close look at how modernization can be integrated into the local marine operations.



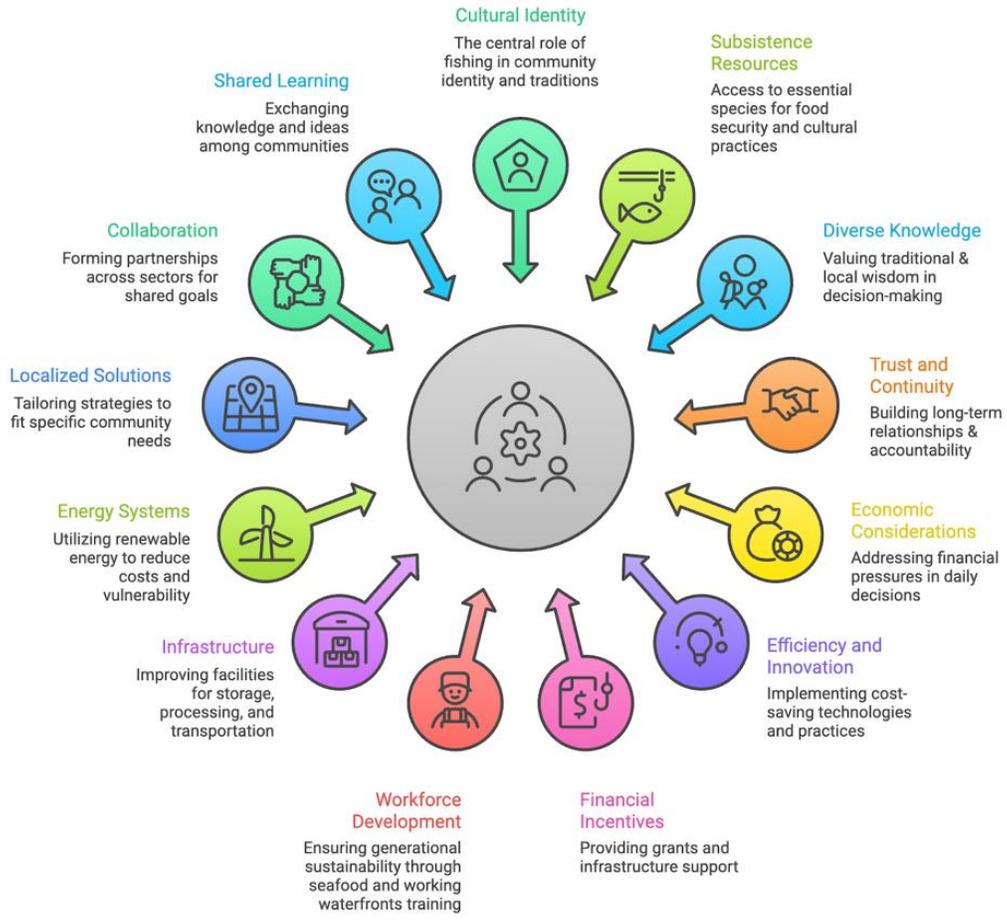
Photo Credit: Danielle Ringer

Cross-Community Synthesis

Across the three community panels, clear and consistent themes emerged around the principles and practices of effective adaptation planning. Participants emphasized that local leadership is critical, with traditional knowledge and lived experience serving as foundational guides for decision-making and project implementation. Successful approaches prioritize listening, respect, and empowerment to ensure that strategies are responsive to specific needs. The workshop highlighted the importance of cross-sector collaboration in longer-term, trust-based partnerships to develop solutions that are both culturally grounded and scientifically informed.

While communities face shared challenges and economic pressures, they also see these common problems as a unifying force. Rising costs, market volatility, workforce challenges, and infrastructure constraints shape daily realities and limit the capacity to engage in future scenarios planning. As a result, participants emphasized that efforts to strengthen resilience are most effective when they respond to immediate operational needs while also supporting longer-term community goals. Practical innovations, such as vessel efficiency measures, improved communication, local processing and storage, youth engagement, and workforce development, were seen as ways to bridge this gap.

Conversations revealed a set of shared values that transcend geography while remaining deeply rooted in place. Commercial fishing and subsistence harvesting were consistently described not as competing activities, but as interconnected expressions of community identity and stewardship. Fishing is more than an economic activity; it is a way of life that shapes social relationships, cultural continuity, and responsibility to future generations across the Gulf of Alaska. Despite differences in size, infrastructure, governance, and regional context, participants in all three communities emphasized the importance of locally driven solutions. There was a clear preference for approaches that provide information, tools, and resources rather than prescriptive directions.



Shared learning reduces isolation.

Hearing what other communities are doing fosters hope, reduces overwhelm, and sparks new ideas.

Fishing is a way of life, not just a job.

Commercial fishing is central to identity, culture, family, and community.

Subsistence resources are foundational.

Access to cultural keystone species is critical for food security, culture, and spiritual health.

People want information, not instruction.

Communities value data and research that support informed local decision-making, while resisting one-size-fits-all approaches.

Traditional knowledge and lived experience must be centered.

Listening, reciprocity, and community ownership of knowledge are essential.

Trust takes time and continuity.

Long-term relationships, consistent presence, and accountability are necessary.

Economic pressure shapes daily decisions.

Rising fishing operation and living costs dominate near-term concerns.

Short-term needs and long-term goals must align.

Efforts to strengthen communities are most effective when immediate operational realities are addressed alongside future planning.

Financial incentives matter.

Cost-sharing, grants, and useful infrastructure are stronger motivators than abstract goals.

Workforce development is critical.

Youth pathways and retirement exit plans are essential to sustaining fishing communities across generations in the seafood industry.

Infrastructure gaps limit opportunity.

Cold storage, processing capacity, energy systems, housing, and transportation constraints affect resilience and local creativity.

Energy systems are tied to resilience.

Renewable energy and efficiency improvements can lower costs and reduce vulnerability.

Solutions must be localized.

Strategies that work in hub communities may not translate directly to smaller villages.

Efficiency is a practical entry point for change.

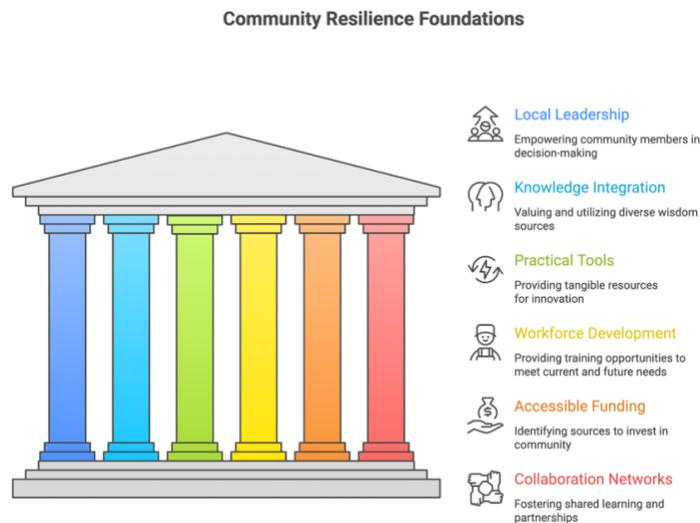
Vessel efficiency and innovative technologies must offer tangible cost savings.

Collaboration strengthens outcomes.

Cross-sector partnerships among Tribes, fishermen, researchers, educators, companies, and non-profits are essential.

Conclusion: Recommendations for Community-Led Resilience

The *Our Way of Life* workshop highlighted the capacity, innovation, and resilience of Alaska’s coastal communities, demonstrating that adaptation is already. Across Kodiak, Cordova, and Sitka, participants emphasized the importance of prioritizing community leadership in planning, monitoring, and implementation, ensuring that strategies reflect place-based priorities rather than external prescriptions. Integrating traditional and local knowledge alongside scientific research was consistently identified as essential to producing information that is credible, relevant, and actionable, while also respecting cultural values and resident autonomy.



Workshop participants also underscored the need for practical tools that address daily operational realities while supporting longer-term adaptation. Rising fuel, labor, insurance, and housing costs, coupled with workforce constraints, regulatory complexity, and ecological change, continue to shape decision-making in fishing families and communities. In response, participants highlighted actionable strategies, such as energy efficiency technologies, fuel monitoring, renewable and hybrid energy systems, workforce development in seafood and support service industries, and strengthened local food systems. Identifying accessible funding mechanisms, including grants, cost-sharing programs, and shared infrastructure investments, were viewed as particularly effective in supporting fishermen and small businesses operating under narrow margins. Together, these strategies reflect an approach to resilience that balances immediate needs with longer-term visions for sustaining coastal livelihoods.

Cross-community collaboration throughout the Gulf of Alaska emerged as a vital pathway for strengthening collective capacity, reducing duplicative efforts, and maintaining momentum. While participants emphasized that solutions must remain place-specific, there was strong interest in continued dialogue, peer-to-peer learning, and collaboration among communities to share lessons and foster innovation. Partnerships characterized by continuity in staffing, funding, and engagement were identified as critical to building trust and sustaining progress over time. Collectively, the conversations reveal that economic, ecological, and social challenges are deeply interconnected, and that resilience is not a fixed outcome but an ongoing,

community-led practice. Alaska's coastal communities are not simply responding to change; they are actively shaping their futures, drawing on heritage and shared responsibility to strengthen fishing ways of life for generations to come.



Photo Credit: Danielle Ringer

Tuesday, March 18

8:30 Check-In and Coffee: King Room

9:00 Welcome and Acknowledgments

Davin Holen, Alaska Sea Grant, UAF

Marysia Szymkowiak, NOAA Alaska Fisheries Science Center

9:30 Icebreaker Activity

Kodiak

Moderator: Danielle Ringer

10:00 Kodiak Panel

Theresa Peterson, AMCC

Andie Wall, KANA

10:45 Break

11:00 Small Group Discussions

11:45 Report Out

12:00 Catered lunch

Cordova

Moderator: Davin Holen

1:00 Cordova Panel

Beks Rumley, CRRRC

Erin Shew, NVE

Kinsey Brown, PWSSC

1:45 Small Group Discussions

2:30 Report Out

2:45 Break

Sitka

Moderator: Natalie Sattler, ALFA

3:00 Sitka Panel

Linda Behnken, ALFA

Callie Simmons, STA

Lauren Bell, SSSC

Katie Riley, SCS

4:00 Small Group Discussion

4:45 Report Out

5:00 End of Day

6:00 Catered Reception

Location: Sitka Sound Science Center, Mill Building

Wednesday, March 19

9:00 Presentations: Selected Topics

Opportunity to share your work with the group

10:00 Collaboration Building: Topics TBD based on Day 1 Discussion

10:45 Break

12:00 Closing comments from Kodiak, Cordova, and Sitka

12:30 Lunch

2:00 Field Trip to Boatyard

4:00 End of Day