

ALL HANDS FINAL REPORT

Kodiak Ocean Growers

Hands On Farm Training Internship Program

Final Report

Program Period: April 15–July 15, 2026

Project Overview

Kodiak Ocean Growers (KOG) implemented the Hands On Farm Training Internship Program as part of the Alaska Mariculture Cluster workforce development effort. The goal was to give participants real experience working on commercial kelp farms while helping Kodiak farmers build and better understand their future workforce needs.

Six interns were placed with five participating farms during the April 15–July 15 program period. SeaKind Ocean Farm used two interns during a shorter five-week placement in May and June. One of those interns became ill and had to leave near the end of the assignment.

The program began with a two day training May 6–7 that brought together all six interns and the participating farms. The training covered farm construction, knots and splicing, gear and materials, hatchery operations, deployment and husbandry, site selection, environmental conditions, and visits to working kelp and oyster farms ([see report one for more details](#)).

In addition to hosting interns, all five farms contributed to administering the grant. Farmers participated in planning and monthly All Hands meetings, helped develop and refine surveys and reporting tools, completed ongoing reporting and end-of-season evaluations, communicated with KOG throughout the program, and helped plan and deliver the May training. The May report noted that coordinating vessel access and the water based portion of the training required significant farmer

collaboration and that farmer administrative time spent setting up the training was initially underreported ([see report 2 on survey development and deployment](#)).

Program at a Glance

- 6 interns placed with 5 Kodiak area farms
- 3 of 6 did not live on Kodiak year round
- 5 of 6 had a family connection to someone on Kodiak
- 2 day shared training completed May 6–7
- 36 weekly farmer reports collected
 - Boat operations appeared in 18 reports
 - Gear maintenance appeared in 16 reports
 - Harvesting appeared in 15 reports
 - Farm construction/rigging appeared in 9 reports
 - Processing/postharvest work appeared in 9 reports
 - Farm monitoring/site assessment appeared in 8 reports
- 5 of 6 interns (83%) completed the final intern survey
- 100% of responding interns reported increased interest in Alaska mariculture
- 100% felt prepared to work on another commercial kelp farm
- Four of five farmers rated the program 5 out of 5, with the fifth rating it 4 out of 5



Recruitment, Selection and Onboarding

Recruitment began through several channels. KOG promoted the opportunity through social media, added internship information to the KOG website, and provided recruitment materials for farmers to share through their own networks. KOG also accepted resumes from applicants to the related Sea Grant internship program.

The broader recruitment efforts were less successful than anticipated. Only two applications came through the Sea Grant applicant pool, and ultimately all six interns were recruited through participating farmers' networks.

Farmers felt Kodiak's remote location and high cost of living were significant barriers to recruiting people from outside the community, particularly for a seasonal position. Housing and travel make bringing someone to Kodiak considerably more complicated than recruiting someone who already has a connection to the island.

This was reflected in the final intern group. Five of the six interns had a family connection to someone on Kodiak, and half lived on Kodiak year round. Every farm ultimately selected someone already known to the farmer or connected through their network.

That does not mean the farms simply recruited people who already knew how to farm. Intern experience varied considerably, and not all entered the program with aquaculture or maritime experience. This became an important lesson from the program existing community networks may be one of the most practical ways to build Kodiak's mariculture workforce, but the people within those networks still need training and opportunities to gain commercial experience.

Farmers handled travel coordination and made individual arrangements directly with their interns. KOG handled credit and registration and communicated program requirements through a series of onboarding emails. All interns were successfully registered and covered through the intended program mechanisms.

Onboarding also included information about program expectations, required reporting and the intern closeout survey. The May 6–7 training then served as the shared in person introduction before interns moved into their individual farm experiences.

Workforce and Industry Impact

The program demonstrated that hands on farm placements can prepare people to work in commercial mariculture. All five interns who completed the closeout survey felt prepared to work on another commercial kelp farm, and all five reported greater interest in Alaska mariculture after completing the program.

Farmer feedback also helped clarify what they are actually looking for in employees. Across the closeout surveys, farmers repeatedly emphasized reliability, work ethic, positive attitude, willingness to learn, teamwork, problem solving and comfort working on boats. Previous kelp farming experience was generally viewed as helpful rather than essential.

This is an important finding for future recruitment. There may be more value in finding people who are dependable, comfortable working in a physically demanding marine environment and willing to learn, and then providing them with the technical experience they need.

The recruitment experience also suggests that developing a workforce from within Kodiak and existing Kodiak networks is a realistic path forward. Broader recruitment generated relatively little response, while farmer and community networks ultimately produced all six placements. Farmer feedback made it clear that workforce development cannot be separated from the economics of the industry. Farmers identified market instability, seasonal employment, housing, transportation and labor costs as barriers to hiring. Developing skilled workers is important, but farms also need reliable markets and sufficient revenue to employ those workers.

Program Administration

KOG coordinated the overall program, including recruitment, registration, communications, development of reporting systems, intern and farmer surveys, training logistics, farmer coordination, and the ongoing reporting and closeout.

The [May progress report](#) documents the early administrative work required to establish the program, including coordinating training logistics and schedules, coordinating participating farmers and instructional support, developing participant communications, finalizing reporting systems and developing weekly farmer reporting forms.

Participating farmers also contributed directly to grant administration. This included planning meetings, monthly All Hands meetings, program communications, survey and reporting development, required reporting and documentation, closeout evaluation, and planning and teaching the May training.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Several clear lessons came out of the first year of the program.

1. **Recruitment was more difficult than expected.** Social media, the KOG website and the Sea Grant applicant pool generated little interest. Farmer networks ultimately proved to be the most successful recruitment tool. Kodiak's remote location and high cost of living make recruiting seasonal workers from outside the community difficult without additional housing and travel support. It may make sense to consider local partnerships for recruitment in the fishing industry (possibly with Wild Source for instance)
2. **Finding the right person matters as much as previous aquaculture experience.** Farmers consistently emphasized work ethic, reliability, attitude and willingness to learn.
3. **The two day training is useful, but it is a starting point.** The training gave interns common terminology and basic exposure to farm systems before

placement, but it did not replace the experiential learning that time spent working under real commercial conditions provided. Future training could include more maritime safety and use gear that more closely matches what interns will encounter on farms.

4. **Interns would benefit from seeing more of the production cycle.** Because of the timing of the program, not every intern saw activities such as seeding and outplanting. Several farmers recommended creating opportunities to understand the full cycle from set through harvest.
5. **The business side of farming was largely missing.** Harvest season naturally focused interns on physical farm work. Farmers and interns had less opportunity to cover sales, marketing, permitting, budgeting, record keeping and product development. Future programming should intentionally include some exposure to these areas. Partnerships with processors or buyers may be worth exploring.
6. **Reporting needs to be simple.** Farmers were being asked to report during one of the busiest times of their year. Shorter, phone friendly reporting tools and clearly defined reporting expectations would make data collection easier and more consistent.
7. **Workforce development alone does not create jobs.** Farmers need markets that allow them to hire and retain workers. Market stability, housing, transportation, labor costs and seasonality remain significant barriers even when trained workers are available.

Recommendations

Based on farmer and intern feedback, a future version of the program should keep the basic model of a shared introductory training followed by hands on placements with commercial farms.

Recruitment should begin earlier and continue to use farmer and Kodiak community networks, which were much more successful than broader recruitment efforts during this program. Candidate selection should prioritize reliability, work ethic, willingness to learn and comfort in a marine environment. The initial training should continue but

could be strengthened with additional maritime safety, gear and line that more closely match what interns will use on farms, and more discussion of the full production cycle.

Future interns would benefit from structured exposure to the business side of mariculture, including permitting, budgeting, sales, marketing and product development. This could instead be incorporated into a shared workshop or end-of-program session.

Conclusion

The Hands On Farm Training Internship Program demonstrated that placing interns directly on working farms can provide meaningful workforce training while also creating real value for participating farmers.

Interns did not simply observe commercial farming, they worked aboard vessels, maintained equipment, monitored farms, prepared gear, harvested and moved kelp, responded to changing weather and farm conditions, and participated in the day to day problem solving that comes with operating a farm.

The feedback also showed that the right workforce candidate does not necessarily need previous kelp farming experience. Reliability, work ethic, willingness to learn, maritime comfort and the ability to work safely as part of a crew were often more important. The fact that all five interns who completed the final survey reported greater interest in Alaska mariculture and felt prepared to work on another commercial kelp farm is an encouraging outcome.

The program also identified areas that can be improved. Recruitment outside existing Kodiak networks was difficult, interns did not always see the full production cycle or business side of farming, and reporting requirements were challenging during harvest. Future programs can be more targeted based on these lessons.

Perhaps the most important finding is that workforce development and market development need to happen together. Farmers can help train capable workers, but

reliable markets, housing, transportation and the economics of seasonal employment will ultimately determine whether farms can hire and retain them.

Overall, this first program created a practical pathway for people to gain commercial mariculture experience, gave participating farms an opportunity to identify and develop potential workers, and provided KOG with a much clearer understanding of what future workforce development in Kodiak should look like. It also allowed this new cooperative an opportunity to execute on a project together and gain the experience of managing a grant program.

[ALL HANDS PHOTOS](#)

Farm Reports / Outcomes

Alaska Sea Greens

Intern: Autumn Fox

Alaska Sea Greens had a very positive experience with Autumn and rated the program 5 out of 5. The farm reported increased productivity, significant labor savings, less stress during harvest, improved harvest efficiency and more time for equipment maintenance. By the end of the season, they felt Autumn could immediately work on another commercial mariculture farm and said they would hire her again.



One of the strongest themes in Alaska Sea Greens' feedback was that attitude and work ethic mattered more than previous kelp experience:

"It's important to have a person who already has a great work ethic and level of physicality/athleticism. With those base skills, along with a good attitude, anything can be taught."

That showed up in the weekly reporting. Autumn helped prepare the harvest barge and hydraulic systems, made 45 bag ties, 45 lift straps and 30 jumper lines, picked up tools and parts, harvested and delivered kelp, cleaned gear, stripped seed twine and helped break down the harvest system. During multiple weeks the farm estimated that she saved 10+ hours of farmer time, and during harvest they reported that their system required three people and that Autumn filled a position they otherwise would have had to hire for.

For the grant itself, Alaska Sea Greens also participated in planning and All Hands meetings, helped develop and respond to reporting and survey tools, completed grant reporting and closeout feedback, and contributed to planning and delivering the May intern training. Their closeout feedback also identified a useful improvement for future programs: *more emphasis on boating safety and safely working around slippery kelp, knives and harvest equipment.*



Alaska Ocean Farm

Intern: Preston Maroldo

Alaska Ocean Farm also rated the program 5 out of 5, but their experience was different. Preston came into the internship with less farm experience, so the farmer was clear that the program did not immediately save time:

“My intern need to be taught the basics. So it actually took extra time to teach him how to farm.”

That is an important outcome of the program because it reflects what workforce development actually looks like. Early reporting shows significant time spent on boat orientation and safety, explaining farm systems and teaching basic skills such as knots. Over the season, Preston progressed into harvest preparation, installing flotation, flipping oyster baskets, setting up the harvest vessel and gantry, harvesting kelp, monitoring the farm and working with oyster gear. During one harvest day, the farm reported harvesting 16,000 pounds of kelp after getting its Harvest Buddy system running.

The farmer felt prior mariculture experience was helpful but not necessary and identified positive attitude, reliability, work ethic, willingness to learn and independence as the most important traits. One gap they identified was that Preston never saw the seeding stage of the kelp farm, which the farmer considered an important part of understanding the full production cycle.

Alaska Ocean Farm also contributed to grant planning, All Hands meetings, reporting and surveys, closeout evaluation, and the planning and delivery of the May training. Two days of one reporting week were specifically identified as intern training days. Their broader feedback was also direct: *the biggest workforce problem is not necessarily a lack of trained people, but a lack of profitable markets that allow farms to hire them.*

Kelp Island

Intern: Stajia Painter

Kelp Island rated the program 4 out of 5 and reported that Stajia helped reduce harvest stress, improve efficiency and, especially, keep up with farm monitoring.

Her value became particularly clear when the people the farmer normally relied on were preparing for salmon season. In one weekly report, the farmer called having Stajia available for farm checks a:

“Game changer!”

Stajia helped with gear preparation, boat operations, trailer maintenance, farm monitoring, harvesting, tendering, removing gear and post harvest cleanup. During a surprise harvest, she helped bring in 1,600 pounds of kelp from lines the farmer had not expected to produce much. Several weeks of reporting estimated that her help saved 10+ hours.

Kelp Island's closeout feedback was also interesting because the farmer talked about what they learned from the program:

“Coordinating with our intern was like being someone's boss, which was a new experience for me. It was fun and challenging to be in a different leadership role.”

The farmer felt Stajia could immediately work on another commercial mariculture farm and described her as reliable, positive, strong and easy to work with.

Kelp Island's grant administration included planning and All Hands meetings, reporting and survey participation, closeout feedback and work on the May training. Their weekly reporting specifically mentions sharing farm stories with the interns during the training classes, which is a good example of farmer expertise being part of the training itself. The farmer also recommended adding a maritime safety



component to future programs and noted that interns had little exposure to marketing, sales, budgeting, permitting and other business side activities.



Kodiak Island Sustainable Seaweed — KISS Kelp

Intern: Josh Desmarais

KISS Kelp rated the program 5 out of 5 and reported one of the strongest overall returns. Josh increased productivity, saved labor time, reduced harvest stress, improved efficiency

and allowed the farmer to spend more time on planning, equipment maintenance and other business activities. The farmer rated the return on the time invested in the internship as greater than expected.

Josh worked across farm construction, rigging, deployment, boat operations, harvesting, IBC preparation, moving processing equipment, adding flotation and jumpers, coiling lines, operating around the gantry and moving processed kelp. The farmer repeatedly estimated that Josh contributed 10+ hours of saved labor in a week and noted that his ability to work independently was particularly useful.

One weekly report said:

“Josh was adamant to do some things on his own to allow me to focus on other needs in work and farm.”

The internship also changed the farmer's willingness to hire outside their normal network. KISS reported being “much more willing” to do so after the program and said:

“I already plan to hire him next year to run my farm while I’m away.”

KISS also has some of the clearest documentation tying farmer time directly to the grant's administrative and training work. During the training week, the farmer reported spending much of the week on intern training or preparation for the training, including time working on slides and the model farm. Their closeout survey reinforced the value of that work:

“The training was very important to the overall understanding of the farm design and why we do things the way we do.”

In addition to that training work, the farm participated in grant planning, All Hands meetings, reporting, surveys and final evaluation.



SeaKind Ocean Farm

Interns: Craig Waters and Ayden Neth |

SeaKind rated the program **5 out of 5** and estimated that Craig and Ayden contributed approximately **700 hours**, the largest reported intern contribution among the participating

farms.

This was SeaKind's **first commercial harvest season**, so the interns were working alongside the farmers as they figured out their harvest system in real time. They worked on the harvest vessel, added flotation, monitored the farm, harvested and delivered kelp, maintained equipment, retrieved buoys, cleaned and stored gear and worked on boat repairs and painting.

SeaKind repeatedly reported that the harvest could not have been completed with the two owners alone:

"We couldn't have harvested without our interns."

The experience was not entirely smooth, which actually makes SeaKind's reporting useful. One intern stopped participating before harvest was finished, leaving Craig with the two owners. The farmer said this made the inefficiency of their harvest method especially clear and motivated them to begin redesigning their system for the following year. Craig stayed through the end, and in the final weekly report the farmer wrote:

"That Craig stuck around to the end helped in ways that we are not even able to articulate."

SeaKind's closeout feedback emphasized that selecting the right person matters. Because both interns already had experience at sea, the farmers did not have to start by teaching them how to function as deckhands. Their biggest lesson was simple:

“I would spend more time picking out the right person for the internship.”

For future programs, SeaKind recommended recruiting people with maritime experience and giving them more exposure to the business side of kelp farming. The farm also contributed to grant planning, All Hands meetings, reporting, survey development and closeout, as well as planning and participation in the May training. The formal May report describes that two day workshop as the program's first major deliverable and notes that coordinating farmers, instructional support and on water activities required significant planning.



Intern Feedback

Intern Feedback and Outcomes

Five of the six interns completed the end-of-season survey, and overall their feedback was very positive. The responses show that the combination of the two day training and time spent working directly on the farms gave interns a much better understanding of what it actually takes to work in commercial mariculture.

All five interns said the program increased their interest in working in Alaska's mariculture industry. Three said they were *much more interested* and two were *somewhat more interested*. All five also felt prepared to work on another commercial kelp farm after completing the program. Four felt they could do so without additional training, while one felt they would need only minimal additional training.

Interns reported increased confidence in boat operations, harvesting, knots and splicing, farm safety, and working as part of a commercial farm crew. Confidence around gear maintenance and processing was more mixed, which is an area we could spend more time on in future programs.

One of the clearest takeaways from the interns was the value of simply being on a working farm and learning how to respond when things don't go according to plan. Autumn Fox described one of the most valuable parts of the experience as:

“Adaptation to the field conditions... Things break, plans go astray.”

Craig Waters similarly talked about learning to deal with weather, logs and sea debris fouling farm lines, along with the realities of loading and unloading totes of kelp. Joshua Desmarais pointed to the value of “hands on learning” and actually being part of a commercial farm operation.

The interns also came away with a better understanding of how much goes into farming beyond harvesting kelp. Anastasia Painter summed this up well:

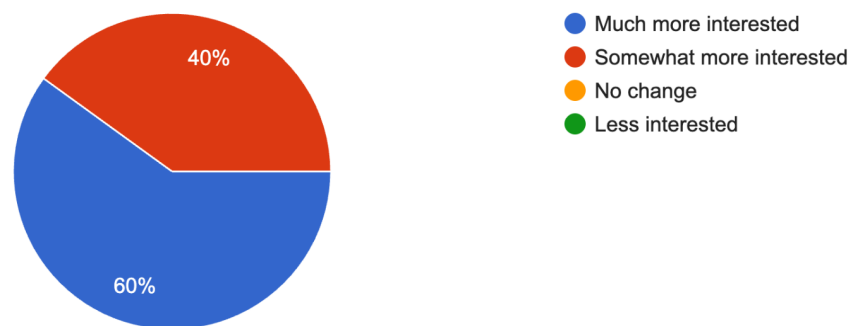
“I learned how much planning, physical work, environmental awareness, and teamwork are required to produce a successful crop.”

Ayden Neth identified “team hardship and team building” as something he learned through the experience that could not have been taught in a classroom.

There were also some encouraging signs that the program could help build a longer term workforce in Kodiak. All five respondents said they were likely to return to work with their host farm within the next two years, and four of the five indicated that they were likely to continue their education in aquaculture or marine science. Several also expressed interest in applying for other mariculture jobs, and one indicated an interest in eventually starting a farm.

As a result of this internship, how has your interest in working in Alaska's mariculture industry changed?

5 responses



Key Takeaways

- 100% became more interested in working in Alaska mariculture.
- 60% said they were *much more interested* after the internship.
- 100% felt prepared to work on another commercial kelp farm.
- 100% said they were likely to work with their host farm again within the next two years.
- 80% indicated they were likely to continue their education in aquaculture or marine science.
- Interns consistently pointed to hands on, real world experience as one of the most valuable parts of the program.

- Learning how to deal with weather, equipment issues, changing plans and other unexpected challenges was something interns felt they could not have learned in a classroom.
- Gear maintenance and processing are two areas where additional training may be useful in the future.

How confident do you feel performing the following tasks independently after completing your internship?



There were also some very practical suggestions for improving the program. For example, Craig recommended using the same size 8 braid line in the initial splicing training that interns would actually encounter on the farms. Feedback like this supports keeping the basic structure of the program—shared training followed by time on individual farms—but continuing to adjust the training based on what interns actually encounter once they get to work.

Which of the following are you likely to do in the next two years? (Select all that apply.)

5 responses

