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ANA Messenger - The Environmental and Government Edition - Spring 2015

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Grantee Highlights

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Sitka Tribe of Alaska

The Development of a Marine Biotoxin Lab in Sitka Alaska is a three year project Environmental Regulatory Enhancement project awarded to the Sitka Tribe of Alaska. The Sitka Tribe of Alaska (STA) serves over 4,095 Citizens of Tlingit, Haida, Aleut, and Tsimshian heritage. STA is a federally recognized tribal government, chartered under the Indian Reorganization Act. The Sitka Tribe has an independent compact with the federal government and does not belong to or receive services from the southeast Alaska regional non-profit, the Central Council of the Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska.



* How did your project come about – how was it determined?

Seven southeast Alaska Tribes started a partnership in 2013 called Southeast Alaska Tribal Toxins (SEATT) to monitor harmful algal blooms (HABs) and the effects on shellfish, specifically paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP). SEATT collaborated EPA Indian General Assistance Program (IGAP) funds to begin collecting weekly baseline phytoplankton data to identify and quantify HAB species. SEATT also has collaborated and partnered with NOAA to help develop this monitoring program. The Tribes wanted to expand this monitoring to include shellfish, but the Alaska Department of Conservation (regulatory authority for shellfish toxins in AK) is not set up to regulate subsistence or recreational shellfish harvests. The Sitka Tribe decided that SEATT needed to have a method to test shellfish, so creating a biotoxin lab in Sitka would allow SEATT to establish subsistence shellfish management plans using a FDA approved regulatory method for the toxin analysis.

* Who were instrumental in the development of the project?

Chris Whitehead, Environmental Program Manager for the Sitka Tribe of Alaska's Resource Protection Department; Dr. Vera Trainer, Oceanographer, NOAA Marine Biotoxin Lab, Seattle WA; Dr. Steve Morton, Oceanographer, NOAA Marine Biotoxin Lab, Charlottesville SC; all of the SE Alaska Tribal environmental staff.

* How did you address bringing together (synthesizing) ideas?

A meeting was called with Vera Trainer in 2013 to discuss designing a Tribal monitoring program here in SE Alaska. A few months later there was a confirmed PSP case in Sitka and Vera, Steve, Ginny Eckert (UAS), Kate Sullivan, and all the STA RPD staff met in Sitka to discuss a planning strategy to address PSP issues in Alaska. The plan was to link all SE Tribes together using EPA IGAP funds to start monitoring for HABs on a weekly basis, creating the SEATT partnership. Once SEATT was created, we needed a reliable, consistent, and FDA certified lab to run shellfish samples when necessary.

* Who are the key project staff members?

Chris Whitehead, Environmental Program Manager; Jeff Feldpausch, Resource Protection Director; Jessica Gill, Fisheries Biologist

* Where is your project located, what Tribes/service are do you serve?

Southeast Alaska. This project will serve all SEATT member Tribes: Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, Craig Tribal Association, Klawock Cooperative Association, Organized Village of Kasaan, Organized Village of Kake, Hydaburg Cooperative Association, Petersburg Indian Association, Yakutat Tlingit Tribe, Douglas Indian Association, and Sitka Tribe of Alaska.

* What are your main project objectives/ goals of your project?

The objective for year one is to establish a working biotoxin lab, with all required equipment and facilities, capable of performing all toxin analysis for each SEATT partner by September 2015. The objective for year two is to staff and train sufficient laboratory personnel capable of performing all shellfish toxin analysis for SEATT within the lab by September 2016. The objective for year three is to receive a regulatory biotoxin laboratory certification

from the U.S Food and Drug Administration by analyzing shellfish samples from each of the SEATT communities for PSP using the RBA analysis by September 2017.

The project goal is to support the ongoing monitoring efforts of the Southeast Alaska Tribal Toxins partnership by establishing U.S Food and Drug Administration (FDA) certified regulatory biotoxin lab capable of analyzing shellfish tissue for toxins in Sitka, Alaska.

*** How has your project benefited the community overall (impact)?**

Since this is the first year of the project, we have not seen any benefits yet as we are still in the development phase, and not testing shellfish until year two.

*** What are your future plans to continue your efforts?**

To keep the lab going and providing this service to the communities, we are looking to partner with the shellfish industry that must also adhere by FDA regulations that require testing product before it can be released onto the market. These groups could use our biotoxin lab to perform all the necessary testing required,

*** What advice would you offer to someone planning or implementing a project similar to yours?**

Develop and identify your partnerships early on. The strength to getting a project of magnitude off the ground and into implementation is through tight, dedicated, and collaborative partnerships.

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