

All in the shellfish family

The Taylor family has farmed shellfish in the Puget Sound region since the late 1890s, with each successive generation dealing with its own set of production, environmental and political issues.

BY BEN DIPIETRO

Challenges haven't stopped Taylor Shellfish from becoming the largest shellfish farming operation in the Pacific Northwest – and they haven't stopped the current group of family members from having to deal with their own particular set of hurdles.

From developing new products and finding new markets for them, to dealing with environmental NIMBYism, state, national and international politics, and sometimes complex and oftentimes litigious regulatory issues, Taylor Shellfish remains at the forefront in efforts to further develop Pacific Northwest shellfish aquaculture.

At no time did the company ever think it wouldn't survive the various changes, be it the loss of Olympia oysters from pollution caused by now-closed pulp mills, to the introduction of the Pacific oysters into the region, to the loss of the canning industry to Japan, to the move to jars, then oyster stew – and later to fresh shellfish and now oysters on the half-shell, the current trend. Not to mention adding mussels and clams to the mix.

"It's kind of hard to say if it [the industry] is better or worse [now], but shellfish – particularly the oyster business – has gone through a whole bunch of completely different steps. It's been a change ... some of them are kind of tough at the time," said Justin Taylor, the 87-year-old patriarch of the Taylor family who still comes to work every morning, just as he has since starting in the business in the late 1940s.

"We change with it. I never really considered" going out of business. "It wasn't abrupt change, we had time to work through them," he said. "But in hindsight, it was pretty dramatic; it changed the bulk of the whole business."

With sons Bill, the CEO and one who oversees regulatory and political matters; Paul, who is in charge of production; and son-in-law Jeff Pearson, who handles the sales and administrative sides of the business, and another generation of Taylors preparing to enter the business, the family tradition is expected to last for at least another generation.

"We've kind of taken the



FAMILY AFFAIR: Taylor Shellfish CEO Bill Taylor (left), his brother Paul, the company's production manager, and their father, Justin, who began working in the family business in the late 1940s, have pushed the company forward from its start in the late 1890s to become the largest shellfish farming operation in the Pacific Northwest. Meanwhile, a new generation is set to enter the business.

PHOTOS: BEN DIPIETRO

same approach with our kids as dad did with us: If they want to come back, that's great – if they don't, that's fine too," said Bill Taylor, whose daughter is in college. Paul Taylor's daughter, Brittany, was working in the office this summer as an intern.

Will the kids enter the shellfish business? "I think so," said Bill Taylor.

Company overview

Taylor Shellfish has about 15 farming sites in the Puget Sound region, including Oakland Bay, Willapa Bay and Totten Inlet, with a main processing facility at company headquarters in Shelton, Wash. There also are farms in two main locations in British Columbia.

Some farms just grow clams, others just oysters or mussels, or some combination of the three, depending on the conditions at that particular location, said Bill Taylor. Every decision is made with one goal in mind: maximize production and profit for every activity taken.

"It's really more of our history, what works in an area," said Bill Taylor. "It's a lot of trial and error. Part of it is market-driven; we want to grow what we can sell so we're looking at every farm to see how we can make the most money, and make it easiest for you – usually when you make it easiest for you that means your costs go down. But it takes time."

Clams and oysters each comprise about 40 percent of the overall business, with groudock production at 15 percent and expected to rise, and mussels at 5 percent. It has a clam and mussel seed hatchery operation in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, and grows mussel and geoduck seed in Quilcene Bay, Wash.

The company sells around 4.75 million pounds to five million pounds of Manila clams, close to 100,000 gallons of oysters last year, 1.25 million pounds of mussels and 500,000 pounds of geoduck, said Bill Taylor. Those numbers grew last year after several acquisitions of clam and oyster operations, and

Taylor said the company is always looking for expansion opportunities. Worldwide, there are about 500 employees, spread from Washington to Canada, Mexico, Hawaii and Asia.

Most of those sales are to the domestic market, between 75 percent and 80 percent, with the remainder overseas, mainly Asia but also some to Europe, said Taylor. The company has a distribution hub in Hong Kong to oversee sales in the region, which mainly are to China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Japan.

Asian wholesalers

In the United States, between 10 percent and 15 percent of sales are in the Pacific Northwest, while New York and California are its biggest markets. Restaurants comprise most of the business, as the company doesn't sell to any of the major retail chains, said Bill Taylor.

Product is mostly sold to Asian seafood wholesalers, who

then sell it to the end users. This started when the company began to get into the Manila clam business in the 1980s, and forged working relationships with these wholesalers and distributors.

"In the early mid-80s, we really took on with the Asian distributors, as we saw growth in Asian communities and tied into them early on," said Bill Taylor. "We sell to a lot of non-Asian folks, too, but that's just where the bulk of our product has gone, so it's been more of a historical thing for us. But as we've gotten into mussels and Kumamotos and specialty-type oysters, we've done work with a number of mainline distributors, including Pacific Seafoods or Santa Monica Seafoods, and Plitt Seafoods out of Chicago. So there are a number of major distributors, but Asian distributors have been one of our stronger areas."

Present good, future better

The economy has lessened demand from what it was a year