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Title: Homegrown ideas sought to spur rural economies -

CONTEST: Entrepreneurs' plans will be rewarded with cash and professional support.

Date: April 7, 2006

Entrepreneurs from around the state gathered in downtown Anchorage on Thursday to sell their business ideas for building a better life in rural Alaska, from beauty products made out of tundra plants to diesel fuel made out of canola.

The presentations capped a business idea competition through the Alaska Federation of Natives that aims to kick-start sputtering rural economies with confidence and cash.

"Everybody here has the potential to change their community," said Julie Kitka, AFN president, "no matter how small or large your phone book."

Kitka reminded contestants and judges that Alaska Native and Indian innovation goes back millennia, back when nobody was getting government grants to make their ideas work.

Contestant Sherri Adams reminded herself to breathe.

Adams is one of 42 finalists vying to be among 20 winners who will receive from judges a share of \$200,000, as well as a year of mentoring. Three additional \$1,000 prizes will be decided by the public through the People's Choice awards. Funding is from oil companies, government agencies and other AFN partners. Winners will be named today.

Unemployment rates in most of rural Alaska are over the state average of 8.2 percent, with some swathes nearly three times higher. Those areas have some of the highest poverty rates in the nation. Few transplanted economic development efforts take, so AFN asked community members for their homegrown ideas last December and got 170 entries.

"We (want) people to feel like they can make a decent living where they live," said AFN consultant Veronica Slajer.

The contest, which Slajer said would likely run one more year, was inspired by a World Bank competition that awards grants to innovative, small-scale projects that can be replicated or expanded, such as an effort in Azerbaijan to transport fruit in locally made plastic boxes instead of one-use boxes made from illegally harvested trees.

The **Alaska Marketplace** theme, "Culture and Development," was broad enough to pull in entrepreneurs seeking money for wide-ranging business ideas: high-tech alternative power, glacial silt skin-care products, medicinal stinkweed, diving in Sitka, custom tours in Metlakatla and pick-your-own organic farming in Noatak.

Adams wants to sell cell phone holders, in the shape of cloth parkas known as kuspuks with a loss/theft alert. She rocked forward on her toes as she made her first pitch of the day to one of more than 20 judges in front of a scattering of tiny, colorful kuspuks pinned to her booth. If absent-minded owners get more than 15 feet away from their phone, a beeper worn as a necklace goes off, she explained. Women can make the holders at home whenever they have time -- she laughed as she took a deep breath between note cards -- "fusing traditional arts and crafts with modern technology."

Photos of blueberries, smiling children, ivory carvings and diagrams of biomass gasification units decorate other exhibits, on display in the Conoco atrium at 700 G St. in downtown Anchorage until 5 p.m. today.

Hogarth and Fred Kingeekuk want to run a parts and repair shop in Savoonga staffed by youths who will be learning how to operate a small business.

"They can see if they like it or not," Hogarth Kingeekuk Jr. said.

Terri Mitchell of Anchorage wants to start Confluence, a Web-based women's art cooperative, stressing fair trade as a marketing point. She said feedback on her pitch has already helped her refine her plan. One judge asked, "When you Google fair trade you get a gajillion hits. What sets this apart?"

Judges include well-known Native leaders, economists and business owners from Alaska and beyond.

Triplets Michelle and Cika Sparck and Amy Dobmeier pitched Arxotica, skin-care products based on tundra flora they gathered for subsistence growing up in Chevak.

"We do have private investors lining up," Michelle Sparck told a judge.

Wearing a neat pale blue kuspuk, Ulric Ulroan of Chevak Bird and Cultural Tours stood next to photos of tundra swans, a yellow wagtail and an emperor goose, a bird unique to Alaska and eastern Russia.

"Even if I don't win, it's good experience," Ulroan said. Networking at the competition, he got advice on insurance and airlines. "It sure would be nice to win it, though," he said, grinning.

Daily News reporter Sarana Schell can be reached at sschell@adn.com or 257-4466.

FOR MORE about the competition:

www.adn.com

Caption:

JIM LAVRAKAS/Anchorage Daily News

Regg Kirkovich from Yakutat shows off his chummer and chum bags for halibut fishing at the **Alaska Marketplace** business idea competition at the Conoco Phillips atrium Thursday.

Caption:

Photo 1: Weblink CMYK_040706.jpg

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Author: SARANA SCHELL Anchorage Daily News Staff

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