

LOCAL & REGIONAL

UM to construct new fish facility

Taunton Bay expansion will triple space at aquaculture center

By Bill Trotter
Of the NEWS Staff

FRANKLIN — The University of Maine has plans to roughly triple its lab and research space at its aquaculture center on Taunton Bay by constructing a \$1.2 million, 25,000-square-foot building at the former commercial fish farm it bought last year.

The building, funded by a grant the university received in September from the federal Economic Development Administration, will provide more tank space for cold-water fish scientists hope to cultivate. It will add laboratory space for businesses that hope to perfect aquaculture tools and techniques before implementing them on a larger scale, according to university spokesman Nick Houtman.

Houtman said Wednesday the number of tanks already at the Franklin site, called the Center for Cooperative Aquaculture Research, is insufficient for the university's goals.

"It's not nearly enough for what a growing business would need," Houtman said. He added that having businesses use the facility is

key to developing Maine's aquaculture industry. "We can do all the research we want, but it's the connection to the business side that's been missing in the past," he said.

The goal at the center is to establish a brood stock of fish that can reproduce several hundred thousand juveniles each year, according to Dr. Nick Brown, the operations manager of the facility.

He said there are 10,000 to 12,000 square feet of building space at the site. The initial focus of the center will be to establish a brood stock of halibut and to research ways to cultivate the fish, he said. Other species, such as cod and salmon, may be added at a later date, he said.

Brown said the construction of the building will add several jobs to the existing five-person staff at the center. He said this does not include jobs that may stem from a U.S. Department of Agriculture investment in the facility and from the establishment and eventual growth of aquaculture businesses.

"Undoubtedly there will be further jobs," Brown said. "It will be built primarily to service the aquaculture industry in Maine."

A \$25 million investment by the

USDA in the university's aquaculture program was announced earlier this year. Brown said the USDA expects to create 14 new federal scientist positions in connection with the program. Of the \$25 million, about half is expected to be spent in Franklin and the other half in Orono, he added.

The additional space will better equip the center to cultivate more kinds of fish in a wider variety of growth stages, according to Houtman. He said that one of the strengths of the Franklin facility is that it is entirely land-based.

"It avoids environmental problems and competing concerns people have with ocean-based sites," the spokesman said.

Stephen Kahl, director of the university's George Mitchell Center, said the development of the Franklin facility is not pre-empting any interest the university may have in being a partner with the National Park Service in a planned educational and research facility at Schoodic Point.

Kahl also is the consultant hired by the park service to study reuse options for the Navy base at Schoodic after the military vacates

the 100-acre facility in June 2002. The military base will become part of Acadia National Park, which surrounds the property, when the Navy leaves.

"I don't think there's a strong relationship there one way or another," Kahl said of the two sites. He added that the university has considered having housing at Schoodic Point for graduate students and perhaps field staging facilities for students and faculty members who conduct oceanographic studies at Schoodic Point. These possibilities are not needs that will be addressed in Franklin, he said.

"There have been a lot of people on campus who have expressed an interest in having a presence down there," Kahl said of Schoodic.

Other research and educational organizations, such as College of the Atlantic and the Jackson Laboratory, have been approached about the planned learning center at Schoodic, according to Acadia National Park Resource Planner John Kelly.

Kelly said that it is too early in the planning stages to determine whether these other institutions may want to participate in the learning center.