Jack Payne: Finding Dory: A Tampa economic development story

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Hockey legend Wayne Gretzky is often quoted in business circles as saying, “I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been.”

Craig Watson in Ruskin and Cortney Ohs in Fort Pierce see where the puck is going, though their milieu is water, not ice. They see opportunity headed toward a fish called the Pacific blue tang.

Watson and Ohs are University of Florida/IFAS scientists who specialize in aquaculture. That means they’re research and development leaders for the state’s fish farmers. Simply put, they figure out how to grow cash in tanks.

So what’s the big deal with the Pacific blue tang? No one knows how to farm it. Its only source is the ocean.

But Watson and Ohs figure a whole lot of people are going to want it in their tanks next year. The scheduled movie release of “Finding Dory” will suddenly introduce millions of Americans to the iridescent blue fish with the yellow tail, and a portion of those moviegoers undoubtedly will want to take one home with them.

But no one has yet figured out how to raise them in a tank. That’s a lost opportunity for ornamental fish producers in Tampa and statewide who are depending on Watson and Ohs to figure it out so they can meet the anticipated spike in demand.

Watson and Ohs have done it before. Take the porkfish, for example. They wrote the book on how to raise it. And Jonathan Foster used that recipe book and other UF/IFAS aquaculture know-how to help him grow Fisheye Aquaculture in Dade City.

Foster started with some tanks in a one-car garage seven years ago. In 2012, he built a 2,100-square foot warehouse. And he's hired four people.

Now he's thinking of building even bigger. He can entertain aspirations for expansion, he says, because the aquaculture research makes it more likely that he'll have a consistent supply of products.

The Dory story is an example of science driving economic development in Florida. Science is about reliable prediction. So is beating the market.

So Ohs walks among rows of huge tanks in a warehouse in Fort Pierce, trying to figure out how to feed blue tangs in their first weeks of life and communicating his findings back to Watson in Ruskin. The challenge is keeping the blue tangs alive through those weeks. Because their mouths are so tiny, the live food they eat must also be tiny and nutritious. If they don't eat, they can't survive. There's a whole lot of trial and error involved.

It's a big bet, and Ohs is dedicated full-time to finding the solution. Fish producers, citrus growers, cattle ranchers and tomato farmers and other beneficiaries of UF science are drivers of the state's second-largest industry after tourism. The agriculture and natural resources industries employ 2 million Floridians, sometimes just four people at a time.

The ornamental fish producers are clients, and they support Ohs and Watson's research, just like the state's orange growers have supported UF/IFAS research on citrus greening, a grove-killing disease that threatens to bring an iconic industry to its knees.

Ohs is essentially working on writing the recipe book for raising the Pacific blue tang. He'll hand it to fish producers, who'll use it to grow their businesses. If the recipe is off, they'll let Ohs know, and he'll tweak the directions or ingredients.

It takes a public-private partnership to produce those kinds of results from which Floridians will receive maximum benefit.

UF pays the scientists' salaries and provides labs. Most of our research is publicly funded as well, but the private sector sometimes funds a specific project. In the case of the Pacific blue tang, Rising Tide Conservation is funding the research.

Rising Tide brings together university researchers, ornamental fish producers, wholesalers and others, directed by the nonprofit Sea World-Busch Gardens Conservation Fund.

Farming blue tangs could be a sustainable method of production that means economic development and environmental stewardship are not at odds.

In fact, says Judy St. Leger of the Fund, the two must go hand in hand; that if something's not profitable, it's not sustainable. Success with the blue tang would be a great model for debunking the false dichotomy of economy versus environment.

That kind of support from industry helps pay the bills, but more importantly it helps assure that the scientists' work is relevant, that it creates wealth for Floridians. It creates solutions for Floridians' lives. For some, that means the chance to earn a living selling fish. For others, that means being able to buy the pet your 8-year-old is clamoring for after seeing the movie.

Jack Payne is the University of Florida's senior vice president for agriculture and natural resources and leader of the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.