



**IDEAS:** Managing director Thór Sigfússon with some of the Ocean Cluster's staff, admin manager Eva Rún Michelsen, economist Haukur Már Gestsson and project manager Arnar Jónsson

## 'Ideas are infectious' says new Ocean Cluster's MD

Quentin Bates

**Y**ou almost wonder why there hasn't been a dedicated maritime industry cluster in a country where fishing underpins the national economy. Iceland's new Ocean Cluster is taking shape in what used to be the Hampidjan netloft on the Grandagardur quayside in Reykjavík. Where there was once an open space long enough to work with the meshes of the

largest pelagic trawls there are now smart offices, although the old concrete floor, sealed but otherwise untouched, is there as a reminder of the building's heritage.

A dozen companies of different kinds make up the Ocean Cluster, which is the brainchild of Thór Sigfússon, six feet plus of fizzing enthusiasm for the project that grew out of his doctorate examining relationships between companies. The Cluster is still growing, as Thór

Sigfússon demonstrated, throwing open the door at the end leading from the new offices at the building's eastern end and suddenly we're back in the old net loft with its high windows, now in the process of being fitted out for the next group of companies ready to move in.

Between the offices are a communal canteen, which inevitably serves as the meeting point where ideas are shared and discussed, while the Ocean Cluster's own staff are a youthful group of graduates.

"They are all young, in their twenties," Thór Sigfússon pointed out. "I like working with these energetic people, even when they make fun of me because I get stuck on Facebook, and it was a deliberate step to move away from the traditional setup with men in their fifties in grey suits talking about golf."

### Missing links

He explained that his work identified missing links between companies in the same sectors, commenting that examining the real value of fisheries as a whole to the country's economy is not an easy task as figures from the Statistics Office tend to divide them into various brackets.

"The official 10% figure (2011) doesn't show the full picture. We calculate that 26% of GDP comes from the ocean sector," he said, pointing out that a great deal of activity is contracted out

and is therefore not apparent, told *Fishing News International* that alongside production of seafood, Iceland has a booming technology sector supporting its fishing industry, which grew out of the tight quotas and hard times of the 1990s when every extra piece of value that could be extracted was vital.

"Fishing is a base industry and as such its total contribution to GDP is greater than its direct contribution," he said, describing as examples that Icelandair Cargo has seen its activity increase significantly with exports of seafood by air, while Iceland's textile industry is dominated by the fishing industry's demand for material, notably nets and ropes.

"There are two things that Iceland does really well; geothermal power and fisheries. This is where we are genuinely world class. But we have plenty of opportunities in front of us as well."

These lie in functional foods, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, as well as in further developing the way the fishing industry handles its raw material, as has been shown by the associated Codland venture, based at the south coast port of Grindavík.

"A 5kg European cod is worth \$12, which is two fillets and the liver," he said.

"An Icelandic cod is around \$15 and the 20% difference between the two lies in the dried products that are exported,

## FACT FILE

■ So far the Ocean Cluster is home to a maritime lawyer and a marine publisher, as well as Thor Ice, DIS, 3X Technology, fish producer Dyrfiskur, an office maintained by Marel and Polar Fishing Gear, while the area available is being extended and there is already a waiting list of interested companies looking to move in

which are mainly heads. But we feel that this 5kg Icelandic cod should be fetching \$25 and this can be done using known technologies," he said, commenting that the arrival of the Ocean Cluster can play a significant role in making this a reality – such as in bringing together the catching and the biotech sectors that had no contact before.

"What was clear was that there are a great many people in this sector, even people who are working in closely-linked business, who weren't in contact. They are based maybe only a few kilometres apart, yet they would only meet once a year at Brussels, if that often," he said.

"Now we are bringing together people who are working under the same roof and they meet all the time and share ideas," Thór Sigfússon said, adding that the Ocean Cluster is supported by the industry itself with no public funding. "There's a lot that comes out of meeting and talking. Ideas are infectious."

"But this isn't a coffee club," Thór Sigfússon warns. "This is about new development and it's about developing and promoting Iceland's fishing and fish technology, with the focus on green technology."

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