

Yankee Co-op sells direct at farmers' markets

SEABROOK, NH – Residents of New Hampshire's seacoast region can now purchase locally and sustainably caught shrimp and lobster direct from local fishermen at farmers' markets.

With shrimp and lobster prices at near 20-year lows, this is just the boost local fishermen need.

New Hampshire's rich history in commercial fishing has helped to shape the state's character and sense of community. In fact, commercial fishing has been a vital component of the state's economy for over two centuries and has grown to a multimillion dollar industry in New Hampshire, employing more than 200 commercial fishermen.

Equally important, recent economic studies based on National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) data suggest that New Hampshire's seafood industry has led to the creation of more than 250 jobs in other sectors, including food processing, tourism, restaurants, boatyards, and more.

However, the seafood industry is at a critical juncture that will determine its future viability. Fishing regulations aimed at protecting declining fish stocks have made it difficult for commercial fishermen to turn a profit. Couple this with low prices for shrimp and lobster and commercial fishermen understand that their livelihoods may be in jeopardy.

New economy

The question is: How can New England shrimp and lobster industries both sustain the resource and increase profits from sales? The answer may lie in establishing direct markets for local and sustainably caught seafood.

This is especially true for shrimp, since many fishermen have begun to use conservation measures in addition to the Nordmore grate in the form of modified nets.

The direct result of collaborative research sponsored by the Northeast Consortium and NMFS, these net configurations have virtually eliminated bycatch and allowed for retention of larger shrimp, leading to decreased counts per pound.

Port Clyde lesson

Back in October, Bob Campbell, general manager of the Yankee Fishermen's Cooperative in Seabrook, and Ken La Valley, extension specialist with New Hampshire Sea Grant and University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, made the two-and-a-half-hour drive to Port Clyde, ME to meet with members of the Midcoast Fishermen's Association.



Dorothy La Valley photo

Above, from right, Tom Sutton, Ken La Valley, and Bob Campbell talk to a customer at the farmers market in Exeter, NH on Feb. 7.

"We heard of the success of their community supported fishery, and I felt like we needed to have their perspective before the Yankee Cooperative could make an informed decision on whether or not to pursue local marketing," Campbell explained.

After meeting with Glen Libby and other association members, Campbell left Port Clyde more confident that New Hampshire fishermen may have additional opportunities with local marketing.

More information on the association may be found online at <www.midcoastfishermen.org>.

Farmers' markets

This winter, the Yankee Co-op began selling shrimp and lobster directly to consumers at the Winter Farmers' Markets sponsored by the Seacoast Growers Association and an organization called

Seacoast Eat Local.

"The idea is to build stronger links between the commercial fishermen and consumers, local fresh markets, and area restaurants," Campbell explained.

And what better venue than a farmers' market where a variety of locally produced foods can be purchased?

The 61 members of the Yankee Co-op believe that if fish lovers eat freshly caught Gulf of Maine shrimp, lobster, cod, haddock, pollock, and flounder, they will like what they taste and become regular consumers.

"We're trying to supply locally caught product on a retail basis here, just as local farmers do," Campbell said. "Most shrimp purchased in the grocery stores are not native. They're frozen. And most are farmed, not wild."

The sizeable crowd visible behind Bob Campbell shows why the farmers market was such a successful shrimp and lobster sales event.



Becky Zeiber/NH Sea Grant photo

Help with permits

Beyond the desire to participate in the market, the co-op had to deal with the morass of permits required to actually sell seafood directly to consumers.

As a cooperative, Yankee already had the necessary federal permits. So, UNH Cooperative Extension's role was working with New Hampshire Fish and Game and the state Department of Health and Human Services to determine what additional permits would be required and then assisting the co-op with the application process.

"It was a learning curve for us as well as for New Hampshire regulatory agencies not accustomed to handling these requests," La Valley said.

These conversations are not unique to the Seabrook group, he added.

"The city of Portsmouth has been working with Erik Anderson, president of the New Hampshire Commercial Fishermen's Association, to establish direct marketing of local seafood for the past several months," La Valley said.

Community support

Not knowing what to expect, Yankee Co-op members attended their first Winter Farmers' Market on Feb. 7 at the Exeter Congregational Church about 10 miles away from the co-op.

When the doors opened at 10 am, a sea of consumers poured in looking for fresh native shrimp. Within 25 minutes, the co-op was sold out.

Shrimp was available in large, 10-pound bags for \$16 and five-pound bags for \$9. In addition to selling 500 pounds of shrimp to happy shoppers, the co-op also sold 100 locally caught lobsters by the count with a discount for purchasing four or more lobsters. The price ranged from \$6.40 to \$7.20 per pound.

"I am blown away," Campbell said. "We never expected a response like this. Having the chance to talk to the local community was great. People wanted to know how and where the shrimp were caught and generally what it's like to fish."

Many made special trips to the farmers' market just for the shrimp and were disappointed to find there was no more. But they were told that the boats were out fishing, and they could buy shrimp at the co-op later that day. Another 40 people actually went to the docks that afternoon to purchase the hot commodity.

Two-way street

Joseph Marquette, owner of Yellow House Farm in Barrington and a vendor at the Exeter farmers' market, was enthusiastic about the participation of the fishermen's co-op in the event.

He explained that, as the farmers' market offers more foods and products, consumers will begin to see the market as a destination for filling the bulk of their pantry.

"Compared to the January market, there was about a 30% increase in consumers for the February market, which had just over 1,100 shoppers," he said. "Having the Yankee Cooperative present was definitely a benefit for all of us."

Marquette himself sold more than 50-dozen eggs in 45 minutes.

Next steps

Campbell said he would like to continue the momentum of the farmers' markets by working to get the Yankee Co-op's Gulf of Maine catch into local supermarkets, where it can be processed into fish fillets and steaks and sold to the public. That would be in addition to expanding market opportunities for shrimp and lobsters harvested by co-op members, he said.

There is a special pride associated with offering locally caught product, and co-op fishermen would like to see their Gulf of Maine fish featured on the menus of local restaurants.

The Yankee Fishermen's Co-op will be offering shrimp and lobster again at the March 7 farmers' market, which will be held at Stratham Town Hall.

Ken La Valley

Ken La Valley is an extension specialist with University of New Hampshire (UNH) Cooperative Extension/New Hampshire Sea Grant who is working to connect commercial fishermen interested in cooperative research with scientists who want to work with fishermen. He encourages anyone with ideas to get in touch.

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