



CO-OP
MONTH

Multi-stakeholder co-op to bolster New Hampshire fishing industry

By Noémi Giszpenc and Lynda Brushett



Fishermen Neal Pike, president of the Yankee Fishermen Cooperative, and his son (also named Neal) begin the first trawl of the day on board the Sandi Lynn. Photo by Sarah VanHorn

NEW HAMPSHIRE fishermen experienced a 78-percent cut in the groundfish quota allowed in 2013 and were further challenged by low lobster prices and increasing costs of fuel and bait. About 98 percent of the groundfish landed in New Hampshire are normally shipped out of state, with most being sold for low prices at commercial fish auctions.

These factors put the New Hampshire fishing industry in a precarious position; its very survival is threatened. Josh Wiersma, Northeast Fishery Sector XI and XII manager and Fishues (rhymes with “issues”) blogger Sarah Van Horn decided that the time was right to form a community

supported fishery (CSF) to help preserve the industry. The objectives of a CSF would be to help local fishermen diversify markets, meet the need of consumers for fresh, locally harvested seafood and capitalize on an established infrastructure of fishermen, producers and processors.

“The maritime fishing industry — a vital element of the economy, culture and history of the New Hampshire seacoast — is in crisis,” Van Horn says. “We are addressing this crisis by increasing the recognition and appreciation of the interdependent roles that the fishing industry and the consumer play in our local ecological economy.”

CSFs patterned on CSAs

Taking a cue from local, community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, in which farmers offer consumers shares of the harvest for a pre-season, pre-paid price, Wiersma and Van Horn worked with local fishermen to develop a business plan for a community supported fishery.

Fourteen fishermen and crew from Seabrook, Hampton, Rye and Portsmouth — representing just about all the active fishing boats in New Hampshire — decided to organize the initiative as a cooperative that would reconnect local consumers with commercial fishermen. That meant

bringing consumers into the fishing business.

Unlike traditional CSFs, New Hampshire Community Seafood is a “multi-stakeholder” cooperative. Instead of the fishermen being the sole member-owners, consumers are also offered an opportunity to become co-op members. “This way,” Wiersma says, “interested and engaged consumers can be more directly integrated” into the CSF and its mission.

Consumers are offered the opportunity to buy a share in the cooperative in addition to their seafood share. Consumers who buy a share of NH Community Seafood are represented by having a seat on the board of directors. They are also entitled to receive a portion of any profits made at the end of the year. Buying a share of the co-op gives the consumer a voice in the organization; both the fishermen and the consumers thus have a vested interest in seeing the organization succeed.

Fifth fishing season may be added

NH Community Seafood consumers pre-pay for an eight-week “season” of fresh seafood consisting of half, or full, allotments of a weekly delivery of a filleted groundfish share, a weekly whole groundfish share, or a bi-weekly

“underdog” fish share (an underutilized fish species). Four “seasons” are planned, with a possible fifth season in February and March that would feature shrimp and scallop.

Deliveries of freshly caught fish are made weekly or every other week to farmers' markets and other community locations. Cod, redfish, cusk, king whiting, monkfish, pollack, squid and lobster have been among the offerings. Tweets keep consumers up to speed on upcoming deliveries.

Taking cooperation a step further, NH Community Seafood developed partnerships to support aggregation, processing and distribution with two businesses that are key to the state's commercial fishery infrastructure. Yankee Fishermen's Cooperative in Seabrook picks up the fish at the dock, sorts and grades it, and then sends the highest quality fish to Seaport Fish, a family-owned wholesale and retail market in Rye, N.H., which processes and packages fish for delivery the following day. This means consumers receive fish within 30 hours of its being landed.

NH Community Seafood's mission is to: “provide local fishermen a fair market for all the species they catch and to provide the consumer with access to a wide variety of fresh, locally caught seafood throughout the year; [this

provides consumers with] better insight into the supply chain that brings seacoast seafood to their table, and [gives them] direct input about the choice and diversity of fish they consume.”

The co-op mission statement continues: “The cultivation and nurturing of this direct relationship between local fishermen with local consumers is intended to increase demand for local seafood, to promote community awareness and engagement in marine resource issues and to support our local and regional economies through the preservation of the livelihoods of local fishermen and the supporting of shore-side support infrastructure.”

Editor's note: Giszpenc is the executive director of CDI (Cooperative Development Institute), headquartered in Shelburne Falls, Mass. Brushett is the senior cooperative developer at CDI specializing in agriculture and food systems: co-ops of producers (farmers, fishermen, foresters) and consumers (retail stores, buying clubs, institutions, etc.). CDI, a 501(c)3 organization, was founded in 1994 with the mission of developing a cooperative economy in New England and New York. It provides direct business assistance, training and networking for established co-ops, start-ups and businesses considering conversion to cooperative ownership. ■



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Initiative helping convert grocery stores into co-ops

By Stuart Reid, Food Co-op Initiative

WE HEAR a lot about the demutualization of cooperatives, but what about the flip side? How viable is it to convert a privately owned business into a cooperative? The Food Co-op Initiative has been receiving inquiries from

independently owned grocery stores of varying size and product mixes during the past few years asking for advice on becoming a cooperative.

Transitioning to a cooperative may be a potential exit strategy for owners wanting to retire or move on. In some

cases, the store may be in decline and the community support of a cooperative is seen as a way to gain investment and build loyalty and sales.

As independent grocers struggle to survive in an increasingly competitive environment where large chains benefit