

Maine's loss is Gloucester's gain: Industry analysts predict Portland's doors soon will shut

By Clarke Canfield, Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine - There aren't as many boats unloading their fish here as a few years ago. There are not many fish, either. In fact, times are so tough the port's commercial fish auction is letting its longtime auctioneer go to save money.

And now Maine lawmakers have scrapped a proposal to let trawler fishermen sell lobsters they inadvertently catch in their nets. The Portland Fish Exchange's future is about as certain as New England's fickle weather.

As the New England fishing fleet struggles, Maine fishermen are at a decided disadvantage to their counterparts in Gloucester and other ports in Massachusetts, said Bill Gerencer, a seafood buyer for M.F. Foley Co., based in Boston and New Bedford, during an auction at the Fish Exchange.

Maine doesn't let fishermen sell lobsters; instead, they have to toss the lobsters back or go to Massachusetts and Gloucester where they can be sold. Unlike Massachusetts, Maine doesn't give fishermen a break on diesel fuel taxes, either.

Some Maine fishermen are even looking for berths for their boats in Gloucester.

Maine fishermen also have to use more of their precious allotment of fishing days to steam to bountiful fishing grounds to the south.

It doesn't help, Gerencer added, when Maine legislators and Maine's lobster industry refuse to offer a helping hand.

"I give the commercial fishing industry in Maine about two years," he said. "Not just the Fish Exchange, but the entire industry."

When the Portland Fish Exchange opened in 1986, it was said to be the first wholesale fresh fish display auction in the United States. Here, buyers for seafood processors and wholesalers bid on cod, haddock, pollock, flounder and other fish hauled from the North Atlantic.

Fish are kept in hard-plastic crates stacked in a sprawling 40-degree warehouse cooler where buyers can inspect the catch before bidding. Forklifts zig and zag through the warehouse carrying crates to and fro. The smell of fish hangs heavy in the air.

In an auction room next to the cooler, more than a dozen seafood buyers last Sunday sat at tables, information sheets in front of them and telephones to their ears. At the front of the room, auctioneer Paul Dewey begins the bidding, just as he has for the past 20 years.

"I have 88 cents, looking for nine. I'm looking for nine," Dewey says in rapid-fire fashion as he auctions off a batch of pollock. "Anyone have nine?"

The buyers make their bids with a nod of the head or by holding up pingpong paddles with buyer numbers. For the next hour, Dewey leads the bidding on 56,000 pounds of fish that will make their way to restaurants and retailers.

Hank Soule, general manager of the Fish Exchange, points to a chalkboard on a wall that lists the fishing vessels scheduled to bring their catches to the auction in the next week. The board is blank.

In its heyday in the early 1990s, the auction handled more than 30 million pounds of product a year. In 2006, just 9.5 million pounds crossed the auction floor, down from 17.1 million pounds in 2005. This year, Soule projects about 5 million pounds.

"How do you keep the doors open with 5 million pounds?" he asks. "I don't know how we can do that, but we'll try to figure something out."

Things have become so desperate that Fish Exchange officials tried to get a long-shot bill passed to change a Maine law that prohibits dragger fishermen from bringing lobsters to shore.

As regulations get stricter and fish populations fluctuate, Maine fishermen are taking more of their catches to Gloucester, where they are allowed to sell up to 100 lobsters per day at sea, or up to 500 per trip.

Fishermen say that selling the lobster bycatch can bring in thousands of dollars, enough to make the difference between a profit and a loss.

The bid to change the law pitted fishermen against Maine's powerful lobster lobby. The groundfish industry is worth peanuts compared to lobstering, by far the state's top fishery worth close to \$300 million a year.

The bill didn't make it far.

Lawmakers never got a chance to debate it on the floor because the Marine Resources Committee killed it in a unanimous vote.

Fishing boat owners like Allyson Jordan say the inaction leaves fishermen little choice but to sell their catch in Massachusetts.

Jordan's 65- and 71-foot boats, which she owns with her mother, were among the top-selling boats at the Portland Fish Exchange a couple of years ago. Now they rarely come to Portland, opting instead to unload in Gloucester for the revenues from lobster.

Jordan said she is now looking to berth her boats in Gloucester.

"The state needs to support us to keep the industry going," she said.

The Legislature is considering ways to do that, other than changing the lobster law. Legislators will consider things like making fishing boats exempt from the state's fuel tax, creating health insurance plans for fishermen and buying days-at-sea allotments and leasing them to fishermen who bring their catches to Maine.

Rep. Herb Adams, D-Portland, said the industry can hold on "with grit and by their fingernails and with a hand up, not a handout."

But you'll get a different answer if you ask Gerencer, the seafood buyer from M.F. Foley Co. What, he is asked, will it take to save the Maine fishing industry?

"A miracle."

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