

Fishermen selling shares in catch

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PORT CLYDE, Maine - Getting fresh fish to market has been a challenge ever since people began selling fish, and local groundfishermen believe they have come up with a balanced marketing plan.

They have begun selling directly to area restaurants and consumers through community-supported fisheries, which is a concept modeled after successful community-supported agriculture — or CSA — operations.

At the same time, fishermen will continue to sell through the auctions at the Portland Fish Exchange, which for them is becoming more difficult to do because of decreasing profits and rising fuel costs.

In the CSA model, shareholders in a farm or garden pledge in advance to cover the anticipated costs of the farm operation and the farmer's salary.

In return, they receive shares in the farm's bounty throughout the growing season as well as satisfaction gained from reconnecting to the land and participating directly in food production, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The CSF model being used in Port Clyde is brand new, said Laura Kramar, Port Clyde Marketing Cooperative coordinator for the Rockland-based Island Institute, which serves as a project collaborator with the fishermen.

"The marketing is around the Port Clyde Fresh Catch brand name for shrimp in the winter and groundfish in the summer," Kramar said in a recent interview. "We're selling to restaurants and through community-supported fisheries, which is the CSF model, and we're also exploring other options to see what is going to work for them."

Part of the value system for the Port Clyde fishermen means harvesting in an environmentally conscious manner and handling their product with great care, she said.

"All fishermen fish by a certain set of standards," Kramar said. "These guys are going to follow a more stringent set of standards and offer quality assurance."

The plan is to start local with the idea of expanding outside of Maine and improving the fishermen's profit margin.

"It's an attempt to try to get them a better economic standing than they have right now," she said.

Kramar and Kim Libby, business manager for the Midcoast Fishermen's Cooperative, have divided their marketing responsibilities. Kramar works with the restaurants, and Libby focuses on building up the weekly CSF shares of fresh catches of haddock, cod, flounder, hake, dabs, grey sole, monkfish, pollock and redfish.

So far, six restaurants have signed up with the program: The Dip Net in Port Clyde, Craignair Inn in St. George, and Cafi Miranda, Big Fish Cafi, Primo Restaurant and Lily Bistro in Rockland.

Libby, meanwhile, has started one consumer group that meets at the First Universalist Church on 345 Broadway in Rockland. Consumers who bought 12-week shares for the period from June 8 through Aug. 24 may pick up their fish between 10:30 and 11 a.m. each Sunday.

A second CSF is starting for the period from June 18 to Sept. 10 for pickup between 4 and 6 p.m. every Wednesday at the Good Tern Natural Foods Cooperative and Cafi in Rockland.

Shares are available in half shares and full shares. A half share of 4-6 pounds per week, which would yield 1½-2 pounds of filleted fish, costs \$180. A full share of 8-12 pounds per week, which would yield 3-4 pounds of filleted fish, costs \$360.

So far, 37 consumers have bought shares for the Sunday pickup. Customers come from places outside the area, including Palermo, Waldoboro, North Haven and Belfast.

"The old days of the cowboys are gone," Libby said, referring to fishermen going out for full boatloads and trying to sell them at the auctions.

"We've got to change our mindset," she said. "Our philosophy is that more is less, less impact on the fishery.

"Our ultimate goal is bringing the fish back," she said.

Libby said she has four boats to work with owned by Randy Cushman, Glen Libby, Gary Libby (Kim's husband), and Justin Libby, and they are fully committed to the CSF mode.

"The others are taking a wait-and-see attitude," she said.

Anyone interested

in learning more about the CSF may call Libby at 372-8065 or e-mail kim@midcoastfishermen.org.

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