



Local lobstermen see sharp drop in income

By Stephen Betts
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(April 16): Knox County lobstermen saw their combined incomes drop by \$17 million last year as the economic recession dampened the public's appetite for Maine's most prized seafood.

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The Maine Department of Marine Resources reported that 20.3 million pounds of lobsters were landed across docks in Knox County during 2008. This is about 3 percent more than the 19.7 million pounds caught in 2007.

But the per-pound price paid to lobstermen plummeted during the latter part of 2008 just as the harvesters were bringing in their peak catches.

Knox County lobstermen were paid \$69.9 million in 2008. This is down nearly 20 percent from the \$86.7 million paid to Knox County lobstermen in 2007.

The per pound price paid to lobstermen reached a peak last year in March at \$7.22. That had fallen to \$5 per pound in June, \$3.97 in July, \$3.64 in August, \$3.50 in September, \$2.68 in October and a low of \$2.49 in November. The bulk of lobsters are caught in August, September and October.

In addition to dramatically lower prices, expenses rose sharply in 2008. The costs of diesel fuel and bait rose, with the fuel prices dropping near the end of the year as the lobster season was winding down.

Daniel Staples of Cushing, the vice chairman of the Zone D Lobster Management Council, said diesel was now about half the price it was last year. Bait remains high, however, he said. A barrel of bait costs \$110 compared with \$120 per barrel last year.

There is a lot of uncertainty about what will occur this year.

"No one really knows," Staples said. "It's hurting all of us."

The drop in income for lobstermen had a ripple effect in the local economy. The drop in prices coincided with a drop in retail sales, particularly motor vehicle sales.

The local zone management council was scheduled to meet Thursday, April 16 at 5 p.m. at the Maine State Ferry Service building in Rockland.

Patrice McCarron, executive director of the Maine Lobstermen's Association, said with the economy still in a recession, lobstermen were bracing for another year with low prices.

More lobsters are caught in Knox County than in any other county in Maine. Hancock County came in second with landings of 17.8 million pounds, Washington County had 10.9 million pounds, and Cumberland had 9.1 million pounds.

Statewide, 67.3 million pounds were landed in 2008 with harvesters paid a combined \$235 million. While the catch was greater than the 63.1 million pounds landed statewide in 2007, the value was down by \$55 million.

The peak year for income paid to lobstermen came in 2005 when the value reached \$318 million. That was also the year when the price per pound set an annual record high with an average of \$4.63.

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