

Building Resilient Seafood Systems: Strategies for a Stronger Massachusetts Food Future

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Jynesa Dutka Gianelli – Moderator, UMass Amherst Extension Faculty

Work focused on assisting fishermen and women.

Panelists

- Angela Sanfilipo, Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association
- J.J. Bartlett, Fishing Partnership Support Services
- Sharren Davis, Chatham Harvesters Cooperative
- Shelley Edmudson, Martha's Vineyard Fishermen's Preservation Trust
- Wendy Mainardi, MA Division of Marine Fisheries Seafood Marketing Program

Angela Sanfilipo, Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association:

The organization started in 1969, with the purpose of advocating for effective regulations and preserving many seafoods that are not well marketed. In the last 10-20 years, it has been a real struggle to own a fishing boat. We are accused of exploiting the ocean, of breaking the law. Back in the 70s, we put a cookbook together called "The Taste of Gloucester," which is still read today. Advocacy has been extremely effective, gaining us the support of state representatives and private-public partnerships. However, there is still a huge disconnect between local fishermen and women and major grocers, which have disappointing displays of seafood that is not fresh, that is not representative of the great diversity of our catch.

J.J. Bartlett, Fishing Partnership Support Services (FPSS):

Massachusetts is a world class state, and we have some of the best fishermen, and fishermen who are female actually prefer to be called fishermen, FYI. Our nonprofit is the only organization that support the economic and physical wellbeing of our fishermen. The largest port in the country is New Bedford, and we have a multi-billion dollar industry. There are 130,000 jobs that depend on the thousands of fishermen who

feed our country. This is not a dying field either, and fish can be the solution to our protein deficit crisis. We catch 200M pounds of fish every day, and not only lobster and scallops: a huge diversity of cheap proteins that can feed people. I am here because fishermen, despite all of these attributes, have been left behind. They have low access to paid leave, they have low job security, and they have a lot of physical injuries. It is a hard job that deal with a lot of uncertainty, including federal regulation, fuel prices, and high, mortal risk. Half of fishermen have seen or suffered major injuries, death, and crippling debt. These groups are at the top of all bad CDC lists: uninsured, suicide risk, drug addiction risk. And they are also the ones that get the least support from their employers. Their security costs, including financial, health insurance costs, are not covered by the cost of the product. All of this is why we built the FPSS – to stand in the gap and provide fishermen with the services they deserve.

Sharren Davis, Chatham Harvesters Cooperative

Right now, most seafood landed in MA leaves the state – challenges include high costs, strict regulations, aging workforce, etc. Despite this, we rank #3 in seafood sales, at 8.4B, and residents spend \$314 M in seafood – though unfortunately most of this seafood is brought from abroad. At the Chatham Harvesters Cooperative, we are a co-op business that pays fair price to fishermen to bright sustainable, locally-landed seafood directly to consumers (pick-up location) and as liaisons to wholesale grocers and restaurants. We also have a program to supply seafood to pantries and other food assistance programs. We are conveners, and incorporate research programs, workforce training, and educational programs to build a more sustainable seafood system across levels. In order to grow, we need more diverse markets. There is opportunity to expand the seafood market, primarily by expanding retail opportunities, creating value-added chains, marketing underutilized species, and convening innovation summits and hubs. An example is our fish burger made out of monkfish, which has a similar taste to lobster and has a tremendous success in school meal programs. Our biggest needs are processing capacity, filleting, packing, cold storage capacity, value-added facilities, and traceability technology that will allow us to market local products. We are undergoing a transformation, but we need the support of agricultural and food advocates to include us in their organizing, mobilizing, and their policymaking. When we are not included, it is impossible to tackle the unique challenges of the seafood industry.

Shelley Edmudson, Martha's Vineyard Fishermen's Preservation Trust

People often see us as a little jewel of a wealthy community that doesn't need support, which is true, but only for a third of the year. The rest of the year, our sharp edges emerge – as a rural community that struggles to stay afloat without tourism and without the attention of advocates and government. This is why I took on the role of Executive Director at Martha's Vineyard Fishermen's Preservation Trust, which entrusted me in 2016, after finishing my PhD, with seeing the mission of the organization come to life. Our programs include the Luke's Legacy Fishing Permit and Quota Program – our first program focused on allowing new fishermen to kickstart their business by buying and leasing or selling permits through payment plans and revolving loan funds. As this program evolved, so did our mission. We realized that permits are the first step, but infrastructure remains one of the biggest cost-prohibitive barriers to new fishermen. Infrastructure such as Gin boom, ice machine, cold storage, lumping infrastructure, etc. This is why we launched a fundraising initiative to purchase a local building which had recently vacated – we raise over \$200K. There, we buy, store, and sell fish to a community fishery and local farmers markets, allowing us to interact more deeply with the community. Other programs include the Fisheries Science initiative, which bridges gaps between scientists and fishermen to collect world-ready data that is useful to communities upon publication; as well as the Fishery/Seafood Education and Marketing program, which led to the publication of the Sea Table, which include fishermen stories, recipes, and other local engagement opportunities.

Wendy Mainardi, MDAR Marine Fisheries Seafood Marketing Program

Our division was established in 2015, and comprises mostly marine biologists. We are funded by commercial fishing permits at no additional cost to them. We are within the Department of Fish & Game, and are led by a 17-member steering committee. During COVID, we created a message from our Director with educational purposes. We were able to fend off a PETA attack regarding whale attacks by the lobster industry. We have also acted as advocates for local businesses such as Jonah Crab, which was able to overcome some market challenges through our advocacy. We host and participate market-oriented conferences, education and educator-focused summits. We do public-facing events, such as farmers and town market visits. And we sponsor the Competitive Seafood Marketing Grant Program. Also, we conduct state-wide research across fields, including infrastructure, food security, and consumer habits.

Q&A

Jay Harrison – from the beginning, the MAFSC has thought of fisheries as a critical part of the food system. Instead of antagonizing each other, we need to collaborate and keep learning from each other. We have a great moment, but we also need to realize that compared to the % of the economy that is based on the food system, our state investment is nothing – 1 to 2% of total state budget.

Zoey – Medford, MA Copley Farmer’s Market. Related to the sea to school process, could you speak more about donations vs procurement.

Shelley: the way it has worked right now is that we’ve donated. This is the first year we are engaging schools and it is a learning process for both the school programs but also us. The goal is to expand and work with limited budgets while fundraising and grant-sourcing to make sure that if there is will to buy seafood for school cafeterias, there is a way.

Sharren: We started a meet-the-fishermen event at Cape Cod schools where students got exposed to the trade and then sample it. Two days later they had the chance to order it. It went very well, but there are hesitations due to food safety concerns, which can be quenched by education of the food makers. But these efforts pay off: our monkfish burgers have become now a recurring purchase of a school district.

MDAR – would the Farm Bureau be a good source of health insurance guarantees. Have you thought of engaging them?

J.J.: We started a campaign in the 90s, which was prior to state-wide reform and ACA. I wish we kept a carve out for fishermen, one of the most at risk populations. What we realized though is that even with available health insurance from the state/federal government, education and assisting people enrolling on health care benefits. It is also true that regulations are very different at sea than on land.

Liz Wiley – Marian Institute. Can you elaborate on price stabilizing?

Shelley: the seafood market price is influenced by global catch volatility, which can plummet prices overnight. This is why we started this program, which is grant-funded, but sustaining the program will require regulatory changes.

Unnamed – Is there more of a demand for fish that are local? Will this reflect in how much people will pay?

Sharren: There is a huge traceability problem, which influences confidence that folks are getting actual local fish.

J.J.: Yeah, this has been exposed by the Globe multiple times, but no action has followed.

Shelley: This is a very common issue, but we can push back by creating more fishermen-restaurant-wholesale-market partnerships and we can play a role in educating all the hands that handle the fish all the way to the plate.

Tania Turner – I am really curious about traceability. It seems like a black box – what are some of the resources we need to talk about local? And are there more local processors that could be good places to increase transparency and traceability? Are you working with such processors? And what are some of the solutions that you see shaping?

Sharren: We are a processor, and a lot of processors have to grow to meet demand. We are shipping to the mid-west, Alaska, and when the food goes far, it is tough for the folks down the supply chain to know where everything is from.

Shelley: This also happens at a local level, and educational efforts between everyone involved in the supply chain is critical. This is why we pioneered ID cards that go on the fish and allows for easy education.