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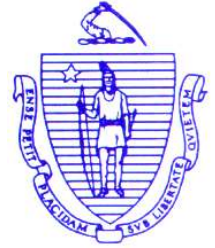
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SEAFOOD MARKETING PROGRAM STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING SUMMRY

3:00 PM – 4:00 PM

April 27, 2020

Held Virtually Via Zoom

In attendance:

Steering Committee members: Senator Bruce Tarr, Senator Anne Gobi, Representative Susan Gifford, Commissioner Ron Amidon, Acting Director Dan McKiernan, Bonita Oehlke (Proxy for Commissioner Lebeaux), Laura Ramsden, Angela Sanfilippo, Beth Casoni, Alex Hay, Frank Mirarchi, Ed Barrett, Tory Bramante

DMF members: Story Reed, Wendy Mainardi

Members of the public: Joan Connor, Dan Orchard

Dan McKiernan: Welcome everyone. Thank you for coming. This is the bi-annual meeting of the seafood marketing steering committee. We have new initiatives now that circumstances have changed. We will start with the Program update.

Wendy Mainardi: Thank you all for being here today. Last week Dan and I shot a video, starring Dan that addressed the current situation of the seafood industry and urged people to continue to shop locally and buy MA seafood, especially because so much consumption is tied to the restaurant industry. We are receiving the rough draft of the video (under three minutes) today, and will be releasing it this week.

Part of what this video does is break the seal and we are getting our feet wet with a company that we have done good work within the past though never video. Because big events are most likely cancelled this summer, this is an opportunity for us to really dive into this medium. We are going to shoot some squid footage in the coming weeks, and this will be the beginning of our species-specific video series.

Another project we are launching right now is also inspired by the closure of restaurants. We are engaging with chefs who might be home instead of working, or have limited hours, or might still be full time. We are paying them \$100 for home seafood recipes and a photo of the final product. We have set aside funding for probably around 35 Chefs over the course of the spring and summer. The most popular recipes we could potentially expand to do a how-to cooking video series.

One thing that we did very early on was email all permitted retailers and wholesalers of seafood in the State and create a list of who is open in any capacity and selling local seafood. This list continues to be updated as businesses open up for the season, or because they decided to open for take-out. We have mainly been promoting this over Facebook and also cross posting with the Department of Ag, wherever possible. This list is linked to in the video that we shot so will have new life this week.

Our plan this summer is/was to get an intern to do Fisherman interviews and “tell the story” with original content, I don’t know if we are going to be able to do that still, but we can try with social distancing. We also were going to sponsor Eating with the Ecosystem’s food boat to go to various farmers markets again this summer, and that is also a question mark. I don’t think that the big events we do such as Boston Seafood Festival are going to happen, but if farmers markets happen that’s something.

And we will also do an advertising push – as discussed last meeting. Part of this messaging and the use of our own social media this summer will be highlighting what is available as close to real time as possible.

Speaking of last meeting. Those that were there might remember that we came to the conclusion to do some kind of b2b event. I had worked hard this winter to create a buyers event tied to the March Seafood Expo called “Navigating Massachusetts Seafood” that was going to be a breakfast at legal seafoods in a private room, presentations, a tour at the fish pier, and a ribbon cutting event at Mass Ave with networking. As you saw, the Seafood Expo has been rescheduled for the Fall. If the Expo does happen in September, we will have the option to reschedule our event though the Expo itself could be a fraction of what it normally is. I think we will wait to see what happens.

Story Reed: Shortly after the shutdown requests came in for retail boat permits, primarily from lobstermen. We were able to waive the fee in the interest of being able to issue them quicker as we were transitioning to working remotely. There is the lobster fleet, and we’ve had some scallopers as there is an LOA to sell shucked scallop meat directly from the boat. There is also a group getting the permit as a just in case measure because they don’t know what the market will look like this summer.

There is a reason that there are dealers and there are fishermen: dealers have an additional level of reporting and some at the federal level. We’ve been getting a lot of questions so have come

up with an FAQ document and we can circulate this to you all. This document may grow as we get more questions, but new permits have leveled out a little bit.

This is truly meant for dockside sales. We have found some municipalities are less interested because they are having dockside social distancing issues. Some people think this is new, but it is not. This has generated more excitement around local seafood, and with the retailers open, this has provided an opportunity. It will be interesting to see activity moving forward. Some of the enthusiasm is waning among fishermen, but it gives them an option to sell directly.

Dan McKiernan: When we issue a retail boat permit to a fisherman, they take on the burden of becoming a dealer so they have to record the catch and sale.

Story Reed: If they have any federally managed species, they need to get the NMFS permit also, and they have been getting the permits out. We've been working with them. I have been answering a lot of questions about what is possible. This moment has raised many questions and an opportunity, and we are excited about the response to our retail list and social media posts.

Dan McKiernan: When we send you the video, it really emphasizes that the industry is multilayered, and that every layer is important. We don't want people to think that retail boats are the solution, it's not. Days like today (stormy), means the product isn't available. The theme of the video is to shop locally to support the harvesters, cutters, dealers, retailers: everyone involved. This is an amazing opportunity for the public to become aware of the services of fisherman and have long term awareness of the seafood industry.

Senator Bruce Tarr: Thank you for all of your work, it's important to support the industry. Is the video something we can share? What we've seen on Cape Ann is pop-up drive through operations, what permit is this?

Story Reed: Yes, we will circulate. Yes, the drive throughs are permitted wholesale dealers, permitted at that location. The fish is being stored in a refrigerated truck. The truck and facility are permitted. The retail boats sometimes do drive-up, but most drive throughs are permitted facilities. DPH has been monitoring these activities.

Senator Bruce Tarr: Clammers are out, and it seems like the market is soft, can we discuss the market? Can we promote clams so they don't have to resort to selling off back of truck, is there a way we can help market this product? Maybe we can market them downstream ie) fried clams in summer. This is the time of year, so can we know who is retailing them and promote them to support the price?

Story Reed: Shellfish cannot be sold directly from boat to consumer. Unless they are a grower/dealer.

Laura Ramsden: A lot of retail accounts have pulled seafoods from stores or are tray packing shellfish. What you are describing, declining demand for shellfish is a real thing. The demand is

only for frozen from retailers right now. We have pivoted to do direct to consumer but shellfish is much trickier, because you can get very sick. We can all work on promoting it, but handling is still more difficult.

Dan McKiernan: Most softshell clams are sold through restaurants, and the challenge is to get the restaurants to do curbside as successfully as possible by promoting. I don't know if we can do much to knock down barriers, but we can make it a feature species and highlight them in the Spring.

Beth Casoni: Regarding the retail boat permits for the lobster industry: we were supposed to launch a website www.lobsterweb.org, all things lobster in MA, and I would like to add the retail lobstermen to it.

Story Reed: Yes, I can provide you that by town. We will also post this on our website.

Frank Mirarchi: I support all of these off the boat approaches as a way to mitigate this crisis but we need to look beyond to one of the greatest opportunities we have for marketing our fish. People are really tuning into our food supply chains and I think we should jump in and say that we are here and local and try us, we were here through the crisis, and we will be here after. Underscore the fact that US fish is sustainably harvested fish as well.

Commissioner Ron Amidon: The MA local procurement law: we could use the moment now to try and have this reinforced. Maybe the legislators on the phone today could investigate this and we could move the initiative forward. The State is supposed to buy locally first for nine departments, and if we can do this with local seafood, I think this would help.

Angela Sanfilippo: Since our call on Thursday I have been talking to people about this. I was going to start calling different offices and circulate the document to get this off of the ground.

Bonita Oehlke: Commissioner Lebeaux is one of the Chairs of the Food Security Task Force and it relates to food security and as part of the last food action plan. There is good opportunity to build a case for priorities. We've been pulling information about sectors and industry losses and the importance of using these procurement laws. This helps us have a lot of data for programs moving forward. The recommendation now includes the local food procurement rules and seafood.

Dan McKiernan: Are the food banks properly outfitted with freezers to accept seafood? Is this an area where money should be spent so they could accept seafood?

Bonita Oehlke: Freezer capacity is being looked at, as is resources for personnel. Food banks have very limited capacity.

Senator Bruce Tarr: I am happy to take a deeper look into other procurement laws and see if there are any legislative tools we can use. Please circulate this to the legislators on the call. We

can start a conversation, and we should begin now, because there is going to be a lot of discussion in the next few months.

Tory Bramante: The fleet is limited. The challenge is still unloading the product. The supermarkets have been pretty busy, but slowing down a little bit. Fish is not making it to the retail level like we would like and how consumers would like.

Laura Ramsden: Some retailers have pulled their seafood cases. Other retailers have gone to all frozen tray pack. There were shortages of labor, and seafood workers were re-deployed to other tasks. We lost 85% of our customers, we furloughed workers, we are operating on a rotating schedule. The funding that is supposed to come to the seafood industry is something we are thinking about. We think that people won't actually go out to restaurants right away. We said we would do online delivery and people have signed up quickly, the demand is there.

Angela Sanfilippo: The big grocery store in Gloucester closed their seafood counter, and people found the opportunity to go to drive through. The consumer momentum is happening, and they won't give that up, because they are trying it.

Alex Hay: The process of getting product to food banks: what they will accept has been a challenge. We were trying to donate, and we couldn't unless it was put into a form that was very specific for volunteers to serve it. This has been difficult with closed businesses. This has exposed a need for spanning this gap, and the need is growing. The supermarkets are in a sad state: seafood is a loss leader, and we are the first ones to go which is a big eye opener. This is a huge opportunity to look at distribution channels and food banks.

Ed Barrett: How negatively impacted have the processors been, and is it possible to get people back on the cutting line? A lot of species are coming up and I want to know what we as fishermen might be able to expect.

Laura Ramsden: It is difficult to find a home for the fish. Very few customers are finding curbside take out to be viable. We just don't have anyone to sell it to. The opening of restaurants is our best hope. We are trying to pivot to direct and online sales but it isn't scalable. People are getting a taste of really fresh fish and we want to get that into peoples' hands. The demand is there.

Tory Bramante: If anyone knew what the future brings, they would be lying. Squid is starting soon, and we export to Europe. The demand is slowly starting, but now the flights are not there anymore. Also, trucks are running limited schedules. There are a whole bunch of issues between the producers and the consumers.

Ed Barrett: Do you think it is going to be an issue to bring the people back to do the fish processing?

Laura Ramsden: No. I think that benefits and security of a job will make people want to come back.

Tory Bramante: Maybe, considering unemployment.

Angela Sanfilippo: How do you feel about the safety of getting workers back? Do you want to get them tested? I think we need to get a test site at the fish piers. I have been working with legislators.

Tory Bramante: We've been having separated crews and we've been fortunate health-wise, yes this could be a problem.

Frank Mirarchi: A friend of mine who owns a small retail and wholesale business says retail has exploded. Maybe this is a blessing in disguise, maybe there will be demand for high quality fish. Consumer education, and the ability to re-introduce high quality local fish is an opportunity at hand.

Senator Anne Gobi: Regarding the food banks: have vouchers been used at food banks for seafood?

Bonita Oehlke: The Healthy Incentive Program provides extra funds (\$40-80/month) when recipients use SNAP benefits at farmers, CSAs and mobile markets.

Representative Sue Gifford: Interesting that some large grocery chains have fish counters open now and some do not. About testing: I was on a call today with South Coast Health (3 hospitals), and one of the issues was that the South Coast cases are still increasing rapidly. One of the areas discussed was personnel at fish plants, so much so that there is going to be an effort in New Bedford to test workers. People recognize this is a concern.

Dan McKiernan: I think there is a real future in seafood home delivery, and we want to make sure DPH accommodates this. This model hasn't been recognized in the past, and we know there is demand. This direct marketing is really exciting. Thank you for coming today.