



Thursday, March 11, 2010

## Lobstermen from Around the World At Fishermen's Forum

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Feature Writer

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Robert Harris, from Nova Scotia

"We thought it would be good to hear from other lobstermen about what works and what doesn't, what's different and what's the same," said Patrice McCarron, executive director of Maine Lobstermen's Association (MLA).

*The visiting lobstermen, who arrived in Maine Mar. 4 and will stay through the 14th, have been traveling the coast and meeting with other lobstermen. They'll be in Vinalhaven Mar. 11, in Phippsburg Mar. 11 and 12. Call the MLA, 967-4555, for details on times and places of those stops.*

The MLA, with financial support from the Island Institute, Diversified Communications of Portland, Maine Sea Grant program, Gulf of Maine Research Institute and Brooks Trap Mill, invited Chris Beissel of western Australia, Neville Perryman of Tasmania, Lance Wichman of New Zealand, Gerard O'Mahony of Ireland, Scott Bruce of Prince Edward Island and Robert Harris of Nova Scotia to Maine solely for the purpose of talking to Maine lobstermen.



Each morning during the three-day Maine Fishermen's Forum, the six men gathered for an hour and a half to have coffee and chat with whomever showed up. Talk - about gear, trap efficiency, fishing seasons and price - was not hard to come by.

Prince Edward Island (PEI) fisherman Scott Bruce fishes 300 lobster traps for just two months of the year, from April 30 to June 30. There are 1,300 lobster PEI license holders, he said, and that number has been capped since 1996. He uses the same types of traps that are used by Maine fishermen and, also like Maine lobstermen, sells approximately 80 percent of his catch to processors. "The landings have been going up year by year," Bruce said, "but that's a problem because now there's almost no market for the product."

Fellow Canadian Robert Harris, from Pinkney's Point in southwest Nova Scotia, bemoaned the price paid to lobstermen in recent years. As it did for Maine lobstermen, the price for live lobster fell precipitously after the financial downturn in October 2008. "2008 was the worst year with the worst price ever," he said. "The price rose a little in 2009, but demand was way

Lance Wichman, from New Zealand down." Harris sets an average of 375 traps during his season, which extends from the last Monday in November to the end of May. "But we catch about half the season in the first three weeks," he said. He sells 100 percent of his catch live, sending no lobsters to processors.

O'Mahony, from the small port of Fenit in Kerry County, Ireland, fishes for the European lobster *Homarus gammarus*. He sets about 400 wire traps that are open at both ends, but, as he said, "There's no special lobster industry there. It's mostly a by-catch of [spider] crab." Still, Ireland lands a lot of lobster, approximately 1.1 million pounds in 2008, the vast majority of which is shipped live to France and the remainder to Spain. While lobstermen in Ireland adopted the Maine practice of V-notching female lobsters in 1994, they do not use escape vents in their traps. "Because it's primarily a crab fishery, we don't want the mesh too large," O'Mahony said.

Unlike in Maine, licenses for lobstering in Ireland are issued to the boat, not the person. The license fee is based on a complicated equation that factors in the displacement tonnage of the vessel and the kilowatt power of the engine. A big boat with a slow engine may pay less for its license than a big boat with a fast engine, said O'Mahony.

New Zealand uses nine lobster districts along its coast and limited entry into the fishery to keep the resource sound, said Lance Wichman, the executive officer for Region 5, southwest of New Zealand's southern island. New Zealand lobstermen fish under a Quota Management System instituted in 1990 which gives each lobsterman an individual transferable quota (ITQ). By limiting supply, New Zealand lobstermen have found they can command a good price for their product, Wichman said. Lobsters are categorized into five different grades and prices are set according to grade. "We ship live product mostly to Asia," he said.

Australian fisherman Chris Beissel introduced himself as a second-generation lobsterman who last year left the fishery. "[Landings] have dropped by a half in the last three years. So people are getting out. This reduces the effort and allows for something in the future," he said.

He cited the impacts of global warming on southwestern Australia waters as one factor affecting lobster populations. The management plan for his area relies on a four-year projection of lobster abundance; that projection is based on the number of juvenile lobsters settling on the bottom. "No juveniles have been turning up along our coast for the past three years," Beissel said. "So [the regulators] are reducing effort now in order for some to make it through the next few years."

This past year the total allowable catch (TAC) for *Panulirus cygnus*, the Australian rock lobster, was 5,500 metric tons, said Beissel. "So we are not supplying as much as we used to and we are getting a much higher price." Price per kilogram jumped from \$28 Australian to \$46 in recent months (from \$11.50 U.S. to \$22 per pound), much to the remaining lobstermen's delight. "The point is that we are out to make money, not to catch kilos," Beissel said, referring to the drop in landings.

Neville Perryman, from Margate, Tasmania, also said that the key to the successful lobster fishery in his state is not volume but price. "We try to maintain control of our prices," he said, through limits on TAC, licenses and traps. Tasmania introduced a quota system in 1996 which had the effect of reducing the number of traps per lobsterman. Only 10,507 traps are allowed for the whole island.

Perryman sets 50 traps far offshore, which he hauls and resets twice a day during his typical 12-day trip. His harvest is shipped primarily to China, with approximately 20 percent sent to processors. The current price for Tasmanian spiny lobster is \$23.50 a pound U.S., a price, he said, that cultivates a natural conservation ethic among Tasmanian lobstermen. "If you leave something on the bottom, it's money in the bank. You're protecting your investment for the future," he said.

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