

Catching fish is easy part; Quota system? Not so much



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PORTSMOUTH By 4 a.m. every morning the Finlander is out in the ocean, sometimes traveling as far as 50 to 70 miles into the Gulf of Maine, to catch fish to be sold directly to restaurants and customers at local farmers markets.

The Finlander is a 36-foot Northern Bay and one of two vessels operated by New England Fishmongers. On a good day, Finlanders crew will haul in 1,000 to 2,000 pounds of fish, according to Capt. Tim Rider.

The reason the Finlander usually travels so far out, even beyond the reception of the vessel's VHF radio, is to increase the odds of catching Atlantic pollock and haddock, instead of a large haul of cod, which has a much higher fishing quota lease price per pound. But out at sea, when the 24-ounce jig is in the water, its anyones guess what may bite.

If theres a problem that far out, were out of VHF radio reception in a 36-foot boat and were likely dead, Rider, also the owner of New England Fishmongers, said. Best case, wed be stuck out there a long time by ourselves before there is any chance we could be rescued.

Despite the risks of fishing on the high seas, Riders crew feels a sense of heightened purpose to reconnect local restaurants directly to the fishermen.

This is the only job I could see myself doing seven days a week, Finlander crew member Chris Roberts said after only his second week as a member of the Finlanders crew on Monday. With us, our fish, youre eating what was caught yesterday. Nothing beats being out on the boat; casting out and catching fish with your hands.

A broken system

No member of the crew needs to be reminded of their purpose: They set out each and every morning to bring sustainable change to the fishing industry with every hand-tossed cast. Its an industry Rider said he believes is bumping up against the threshold of being unsustainable for the men and women actively working in it, if it is not already.

We have to work harder to stay away from certain fish than we do catching fish, Rider said. This has led to inconsistent landings with respect to the amount of people actually fishing, leading the industry to rely on imported fish to fill the void.

Under less burdensome market rules, Monday wouldve made for a great haul for the Fishmongers, according to Rider. By high noon, the Finlander returned to the Portsmouth commercial fishing pier with 800 pounds of cod. Rider said after a morning of fishing the crew earned roughly \$2,000, nothing to spit at considering they were only fishing for half the day.

However, because Riders multi-species commercial fishing permit only allows him the ability to catch 103 pounds of cod a year, a quota the Finlander crew can hit in less than a day of fishing, Rider said he is forced to lease additional quota from other fisheries, many of whom are not actively fishing.

Since cod quota is leased at between \$3.25 and \$3.50 per pound, Mondays big catch is virtually a wash. Rider said he will have to pay about \$1,800 earned from Finlanders catch on Monday to lease quota, leaving roughly \$200 to pay his crew for their morning shift and gas up the Finlander.

Im trying to pay my guys a living wage, and in order to do that Ive had to pay them out of my own take-home income so they can live, Rider said. Im not out here to be a millionaire, everyone who works in this company is a fisherman; we all go on the boat and we all catch fish. Im out here because my family believes in what Im doing. My crew all believes what I believe and they work hard at their jobs catching fish and they shouldnt be denied a living because we have to give half our earnings to someone whos not fishing in order for us to fish.

Due to the quota system, Rider said he pays more than half of New England Fishmongers annual income to lease quota. He said another problem with the quota system occurred when he agreed to outfit the Finlander with monitoring cameras from environmental conservation organizations to ensure he and his crew were not illegally dumping cod they catch, he did so with the understanding the same organizations that own fishing quota would lease it at a discounted rate. He said the quota relief has yet to be offered to his company.

We need to get back to treating fish as a natural resource we all rely on and not a stock market, Rider said. The current system encourages fishermen to break the law because if theyre over their cod quota and they catch a bunch of cod, if the fish is of legal-sized, theyre supposed to bring it in. However, many fishermen are dumping legal fish because they dont want to have to pay to lease the extra quota.

Pat Shepard, sector manager of the Maine Center for Coastal Fisheries, said to better support local fishermen the maximum quota lease price should be capped to reflect the market prices of fish. He said if fishermen participating in the monitoring program belong to different sectors, or harvest cooperatives, it is very difficult to move quota between sectors at a discount. Each sector has a right of first refusal for any quota offered up for lease and if that quota is offered at below market rate, chances are someone in the sector will claim it, preventing movement to another sector and special programs like electronic monitoring have reduced flexibility in these situations, he said.

There needs to be a ceiling to what quota leases out for, so its not crippling for fishermen to access and use it based on the market rate of the fish, Shepard said. The system currently

allows for quota to be passed down as heirlooms and generations of people are making money simply off leasing their quota and thats wrong. When you make quota an heirloom, fish are no longer a resource.

Chris Pappas, a New Hampshire Executive Council member and Democratic candidate for Congress, joined the New England Fishmongers Monday afternoon to learn more about Riders vision for a more sustainable commercial fishing industry. He said he would need to further study the fishing industry as a whole before deciding whether to support some kind of a price ceiling on quota to stabilize local commercial fishing.

We should look for ways to ease the burden thats placed on them with the quota system and with regulations that make their bottom line very tight, Pappas said. If Im elected to Congress, Im going to be the type of member who is very present in the district and who works to stay in constant contact with the people who make our economy work. The fishing industry has historic roots in our state and weve got to make sure people who fish can make a good living.

David Goethel is a commercial fisherman operating out of Hampton. As a board member of the Center for Sustainable Fisheries, he said he has long advocated for changing the current quota system and this year for all the flounder he caught he was paying 85 cents a pound to lease the quota and was only able to sell it for 40 cents a pound.

The system will never work. I like the idea of feeding people and as fishermen we want to feed the American people in a sustainable way, but theres a lot simpler and less bureaucratic ways of doing it, Goethel said. There are two obvious solutions: Either strip the active permits of those who arent fishing or introduce a price control, so the people who are catching fish can do so and earn a living.

Making a living

Every day when the boat returns, Rider said the job is just getting started for him and his crew.

Some of my guys got off the boat yesterday then drove directly to Lake Champlain to make deliveries. On the way back they stopped in Lincoln and delivered to all our restaurants around Franconia Notch, Rider said. When they return, they go out on the boat again to fish. We all know what we signed up for; were out in bad weather, long hours, but we love to fish. Its what we do.

New England Fishmongers business model is very much the exception as opposed to the rule, Rider said. He said his dealer fees, licensing fees and maintaining refrigerator trucks and his boats cost him thousands and the costs can be a barrier for other commercial fishermen trying to launch a similar effort.

I run around constantly off the boat, Rider said. I understand other fishermen who dont want to go this route, but its what we believe in so were going to keep working at it.

Jeremy Sewall is the chef-owner of Row 34 and Island Creek Oyster Bar, with a Row 34 location in Portsmouth and another in Boston along with two Island Creek Oyster Bar locations in Massachusetts. His restaurant is one of nearly 40 restaurants spread across New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts and Vermont that sell New England Fishmongers catch, according to Rider. Sewall said he has fresh whole fish delivered by New England Fishmongers to his Portsmouth restaurant and transports fresh fish to his other locations. He said he is able to sell his fish entrees at a competitive price compared to other restaurants who are selling re-imported fish.

People care a lot about where their food comes from today: Is it organic? Is it local? Is it sustainable? What Tim and his crew have done is really create a local market for fresh fish and the quality speaks for itself, Sewall said. Being a restaurant that primarily serves fish, we have to do everything we can to support the local fishermen who go out and catch it.

Rider said as much as he and New England Fishmongers are dedicated to remaining fishermen selling fish, he acknowledges the economic realities of the fishing industry and having to forgo so much of his earnings just to pay quota leases.

The truth is were hanging on by a string. My lease bill is my biggest expense this year; more than my mortgage, my car payments or paying for the boats, Rider said. Its really hard to come home to your family, to take care of your employees, and have nothing to show for all your work that consumes you 24/7 and were being driven out of business for nothing we have control over. Were going to continue to try to make this work by taking care of our customers and volunteering at food banks to show were dedicated to impacting change.

Locally, New England Fishmongers fish can be purchased in Dover at Tendercrop Farm on Saturdays from 3 to 6 p.m. and at the Kittery Community Market from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Sundays.