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Home > Communities > Barnstable > Community-Supported Fishery Program Generates Enthusiasm

Community-Supported Fishery Program Generates Enthusiasm

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Friends of Eric M. Hesse, a commercial fisherman who lives in West Barnstable, knew he went out regularly in his fishing vessel and returned to Cape Cod with cod and haddock. So they would often ask him if they could buy a fish.

The answer, to the regret of Mr. Hesse, was no.

Although he was a veteran fisherman, he was not a licensed fish dealer. As such, he could not legally sell them any of his fish.

So his catch, landed on the Cape, would get loaded into a truck and driven off-Cape, to be sold at venues such as the fish auction in Gloucester.

"Now almost all the fish leaves the Cape," Mr. Hesse said.

But for five weeks this fall, it was a different story.

Mr. Hesse and four other captains who are members of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association participated in what the organization is calling a "community-supported fishery."

Based on the model of community-supported agriculture, or CSA, in which customers pay a farmer a subscription up front in return for produce every week during the harvesting season, the association pursued a pilot program in which 100 subscribers paid in advance for seafood every week for five weeks in October and November.

Participants say the program delivered a higher return than market auctions to the fishermen, as well as fresh fish at below-market prices to subscribers.

Now the association's board of directors, of which Mr. Hesse is vice president, is mulling whether to organize another subscription season, perhaps on a larger scale.

Cynthia B. Cole, a CSF subscriber who lives in Barnstable Village, said she hopes the program will return.

"Unless I caught it myself, it is the freshest fish I ever had," Ms. Cole said. "It's really amazing how good it is."

The program made a big difference in the meals she and her family ate. Before CSF came along, they rarely ate fish, finding it expensive and often not very fresh.

For five Fridays this fall, the program turned that scenario on its head, giving her family far fresher fish at a lower cost.

Using the oven or outdoor grill, Ms. Cole and her family cooked and enjoyed fish including haddock, her personal favorite, as well as hake and redfish, two lesser-known species.

Every Friday afternoon during which the CSF operated, she and up to 49 other subscribers would go to the Cape Cod Organic Farm on Route 6A in Barnstable Village to pick up their weekly allotment.

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Subscribers were offered options varying in amount and type of seafood and price.

The options ranged from two adult portions per week of fish, or 1.25 filleted pounds a week, for \$59.25 for the five week session, to a family-sized "mixed seafood" option for \$132.25.

In addition to three weeks of at least 2 1/2 pounds of filleted fish, the mixed seafood also included a week of 2 1/2 pounds of scallops and a week of 6 pounds of lobster.

A subscriber who missed a pick-up missed out on fish for that week.

Among those picking up fish at the organic farm was the farmer, J. Timothy Friary of West Barnstable.

Mr. Friary said he appreciated the fishery program, both as a consumer obtaining fresh fish at a below-market price, and as a businessman who had an opportunity to sell his own products to people stopping by the farm to pick up their seafood. He said he would welcome the opportunity for the organic farm to again serve as a place for CSF subscribers to pick up their fish.

The subscribers who did not pick up their allotment Fridays at the organic farm in Barnstable Village would pick up on Saturday mornings at the hook association's headquarters at the Captain Nathan Harding House on Main Street in Chatham.

The program started Friday, October 15 and Saturday, October 16, and only one weekend was missed.

During the week before November 12 and 13, the weather was bad, and the boats stayed docked so no fish were landed. The delivery to subscribers was postponed to the following weekend, that of November 19 and 20, the final weekend of the five-week program.

Mr. Hesse, who grew up in Centerville and has been a commercial fisherman since 1984, had been an advocate of a community-supported fishery program over the past couple of years.

When he first started fishing, he said, much of the fish caught by Cape-based boats was processed, sold and consumed on the Cape.

But as the price of commercial space skyrocketed, the Cape fish-cutting houses began to go out of business. Meanwhile, off-Cape markets such as Boston and New York were offering substantially higher prices for fish landed by Cape boats.

Thus developed a system where local customers on Cape Cod were often bypassed in favor of off-Cape markets.

To Mr. Hesse and other advocates, a community-supported fishery offered a way to reduce the role of the middleman, offer a better deal to fishermen, and deliver high-quality fish to Cape Codders.

The program also tied in with the "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" movement spreading across America, as well as giving Cape fishermen a way to connect directly with customers.

Getting a pilot fishery program up and running, however, was far more complicated than it might appear.

Susan L. Nickerson, who with Amy Morris co-coordinated the program, said association staff had to invest a lot of time and effort to research pertinent fishery regulations and obtain the necessary health-related permits.

The association obtained two grants to fund the pilot program: a \$10,000 rural business enterprise grant from the United States Department of Agriculture, and a \$25,000 grant from the Cape Cod Economic Development Council.

Ms. Nickerson said the federal grant was targeted toward a project with the potential to expand, while the council grant was intended to help develop new pathways to market.

As part of the program, the association arranged with two Cape businesses, the Dennisport Lobster Company in Dennisport and the Nantucket Fish Company in Chatham, to process the fish landed by the boats.

The association also decided to use the weekly fish distribution as a way to help consumers learn about the fish they were buying and the challenges faced by Cape fishermen.

Educational materials were distributed, participating fishermen made appearances and spoke with subscribers about the fish they were obtaining, and a blog encouraged subscriber feedback.

Ms. Nickerson said the association has been cheered by the "extremely positive" response from the subscribers.

Mr. Hesse said the program "worked out great."

Operators of two retail fish markets in the town of Barnstable see little if any effect from a community-supported fishery program on their business. A key reason: their customers buy spontaneously from them, at a much lower dollar outlay than program subscribers buying in advance of a multi-week season.

"I don't think that's much of a problem," said Jenna Licciardi, who manages Centerville Fish and Lobster.

Paul Dean, who has owned and operated the Osterville Fish Market for a little over 12 years agreed.

"I don't see it affecting us," he said.

Mr. Dean also believes retail fish markets in town can compete on freshness. "The turnaround is pretty quick," he said, from boat to wholesaler to retail market.

Mr. Hesse, one of the participants in the pilot fishery program, skips his fishing boat, the 40-foot Tenacious II, out of Wychmere Harbor in Harwich Port. The other four participating boats use Chatham as their home port.

To catch fish this time of year, Mr. Hesse and his mate travel to grounds 40 to 60 miles east-southeast from the eastern shore of Cape Cod. In the warmer weather, they travel 120 miles east to Georges Bank. They use long hooked lines to catch fish.

For Mr. Hesse, one of the most rewarding aspects of the program was the enthusiasm of the subscribers. "That was infectious," he said.

Further, although the subscribers effectively obtained fish at below-market prices, Mr. Hesse said the program fishermen also saw a higher return, averaging about 50 cents more per pound.

Asked if he would like to participate in a future community-supported fishery program, Mr. Hesse responded, "Absolutely."

The decision whether to pursue one will be up to the association's board of directors, he said. Options include another pilot program, or devising a bigger program with more participating boats and subscribers.

Mr. Hesse hopes the association eventually can establish a community-supported fishery program on a year-round basis. "I'd love to do it," he said.

Those interested in participating a future community fishery program sponsored by the hook association may do so by sending a request to be placed on the program waiting list through an e-mail to csf@ccchfa.org.

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