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Catch of the day: Local customers

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For those who favor local food, community supported agriculture has become a culinary mainstay.

At the beginning of the growing season, subscribers buy a share in a CSA, as the programs are generally called. Then, throughout the coming months, they receive weekly installments of whatever fruits and vegetables are ready for harvest.

Consumers get the freshest foods and the experience of knowing exactly where their food came from; growers get higher prices than if they went through middlemen.

Now, some Cape Codders are starting to apply the same basic principles that have made CSAs such a success to a whole new foodstuff: fish.

"The fishermen get the most money for their product, the consumer gets a great product," said Linda Kelley, co-owner of George's Fish Market in Harwich Port and one of the founders of the Cape's first community supported fishery program. "It connects everyone together."

Launched as a pilot program in May, the Cape Cod Weir Harvest CSF's inaugural season ran for four weeks and included six regular subscribers and one fishing operation.

"For a pilot, that's fantastic," Kelley said.

For \$40 per week, subscribers received 8 to 10 pounds of whole fish each week; for \$20, a half-share included 4 to 6 pounds each week. Weekly shares generally included squid, butterfish and scup, Kelley said.

The Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association is also looking into the CSF concept. The group received a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to conduct a survey online that will help them determine how interested Cape Cod consumers would be in a CSF and what such a program should look like.

"What we're trying to figure out is who would be the most likely and appropriate people to partner with, what kind of infrastructure we need," said John Pappalardo, chief executive of the hook association. "We're trying to scope out what kinds of products the consumer would be interested in."

Though the specifics vary, Cape Cod fishermen typically send the bulk of their catch to auctions in places like Boston, Gloucester and New Bedford, Pappalardo said. Other fishing operations sell their fish to wholesale buyers, explained Sharen Davis, who, along with her husband, fisherman Ernie Eldredge, provided the fish for the Weir Harvest CSF.

Only a small portion of the fish are sold directly to local markets, restaurants and consumers. And some fishing operations would like to see these local sales increase.

"We'd like to see the fish stay here," said Davis, harvest organizer. "We'd like to provide fresh, local fish."

Selling fish directly to local consumers has advantages for fishermen and buyers alike, CSF supporters said.

Consumers get the freshest possible fish and can learn more about an important part of the region's history and economy.

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Community Supported Fisheries

For more on the Cape Cod Weir Harvest CSF: <http://tiny.cc/weirCSF>

To take the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association survey: <http://tiny.cc/CSFSurvey>

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"We had a lot of enthusiasm," Davis said.

The program allowed customers to learn about weir fishing, explore new species available locally, and practice cleaning and filleting whole fish.

"It was a more holistic experience," Davis said.

Stabilizing 'bottom line'

In the short-term, a CSF could also give fishermen the opportunity to sell some of their catch at higher prices than those available at auction. In the longer term, these programs could also help insulate fishermen from the uncertainty caused by changing regulations or fluctuations in the market.

"There might be an ability to stabilize the bottom line of fisherman by establishing a small business enterprise where they could sell a portion of their catch," Pappalardo said.

The CSF model, in fact, has already proved successful in several places, including Gloucester, where Cape Ann Fresh Catch launched in 2009.

"We've had an incredibly positive response — the quality is probably the thing we get complimented on the most," said Emily Currier, outreach coordinator for the CSF, which is a project of the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association. "People have also given us a really positive response about being able to support the local fisheries."

'A work in progress'

Local fishermen have also been pleased with the results, she said. "We do provide our fishermen with a higher-than-average market price," she said. "We've been able to help them stay in business."

As the Cape Cod Weir Harvest CSF moves ahead, it intends to look to the Cape Ann program as a model, Kelley said.

Plans are in the works to get a more diverse range of fishermen involved in the program, she said, and offer another set of shares in the next few months.

"We want to offer a groundfish — pollock or hake or maybe cod," she said. "We want to have a lobster boat and a scallop boat."

"It's a work in progress," Davis said.

The hook fishermen's association plans to run its survey for another few weeks and hopes to have a pilot program going some time in the fall.

Though CSFs are still in their early stages on Cape Cod, those involved are optimistic about the role these programs will play in the future of fishing in the region. "The way the fishing industry is going, it is important for us to diversify," Kelley said. "I really think it's a very positive direction."

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