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Massachusetts brand proposed for fishery

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Eric Hesse takes pride in the fish he catches.

A day boat hook fisherman based in Harwich, Hesse believes his approach lets him catch and sell some of the highest quality fish (he catches mostly haddock) available.

And that is why he is expressing caution about a legislative proposal to investigate the feasibility of branding local seafood with the Massachusetts name.

"When you tar everyone with the same brush, with that idea of a Massachusetts seafood brand, it could reduce our product to the lowest common denominator," he said.

The proposal, put forth by Rep. James Cantwell, D-Marshfield, would create a 13-member panel that would be tasked with investigating the feasibility of a statewide, coordinated seafood marketing program.

At a meeting of the Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture yesterday, Cantwell told legislators that the promotion of Massachusetts-branded seafood could attract consumers interested in buying local foods and provide a boost to the state's struggling fishing industry.

"It would create a commission that would come up with ideas about how to brand or label Massachusetts seafood," Cantwell said in a telephone interview yesterday afternoon. "Ideally, it would be a brand that would target consumers in restaurants and in stores, just to appeal to the idea of buying local."

The commission, he said, would be made up entirely of volunteers and would require no state funding.

It is an idea with wide appeal.

"Anything you can do to self-promote is a good thing, I would believe," said committee member Rep. Timothy Madden, D-Nantucket. "If you were in a restaurant and you saw it was Massachusetts cod or haddock, you'd know you're getting something that's fresh."

But there are those with concerns about the exact shape such a marketing effort might take.

Hesse supports the concept of a seafood marketing program, but worries that too broad a brand could end up hurting some fishermen if lower and higher quality fish are all sold together under one label. He would prefer to see narrower geographical brands, such as New Bedford and Cape Cod.

"I think it would be better for everyone that way," he said.

This sort of proposal would be considered, Cantwell said, but his instinct is that it would be more effective to focus on the Massachusetts label.

"I would hope to try to benefit the industry as a whole," he said. "Usually, when you're marketing, its better to have one brand than a dozen."

Andy Baler, owner of the Chatham Pier Fish Market and the Nantucket Fish Co., believes that Massachusetts has a lot of catching up to do when it comes to promoting the fishing industry.

"It's never too late to try to catch up, but we sure are far behind the eight ball," he said.

Though he calls a concerted marketing effort "an important step," he worries that the commission won't go far enough.

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seafood marketing commission

Rep. James Cantwell's proposal calls for the creation of a 13-member panel consisting of:

- One member of the state House of Representatives
- One member of the state Senate
- One representative of the Department of Agricultural Resources
- One representative of the Division of Marine Fisheries
- One representative of the Massachusetts Marine Fisheries Institute
- One representative of the Massachusetts Fishermen's Partnership
- Two members from fishing industry advocacy organizations
- One wholesale seafood dealer
- One member from a seafood specialty retail business
- Three representatives of the commercial fishing industry

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He would like to see Massachusetts fisheries pursue Marine Stewardship Council certification for sustainable fishing, which could open up wider markets for Cape Cod fishermen, he said.

"Maybe you can get in the door, open up some more markets," he said.

Local fishermen also face international competition that drives down the price of the seafood they catch, Baler said.

To be useful, he said, a marketing commission would have to address some of these issues.

"There are several programs you could establish right away, if you are putting money into the right things," he said.

For committee member Sen. Robert O'Leary, D-Barnstable, the idea of a Massachusetts brand is a strong one. But he would prefer to see direct action.

"I suppose the only question I would have is, 'Why do we need the commission?'" O'Leary said. "I would be more inclined to go at it, figure out what we'd need in a bill and make it happen."


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