



Hooked up with Whole Foods

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Over the years, the price Cape Cod fishermen could get for their catch has been unpredictable.

"Traditionally, fisherman sell their fish by going fishing in the morning, then begging people to come take it off their hands and taking whatever they get for it," said Eric Hesse, a 25-year veteran of the fishing industry. "There were no guarantees — you couldn't count on that."

Now, however, a small group of Cape hook fishermen have found a way to ensure they get consistent prices for at least part of their catch: selling directly to Whole Foods Market.

"I know what I am going to get paid when I leave the dock," said Greg Walinski, who fishes out of Dennis and Harwich.

Whole Foods has been promoting sustainable seafood in its stores since 1999. In September, the company began using Monterey Bay Aquarium's color-coded seafood rating system in its stores to educate consumers about the sustainability of the fish on offer.

A green label indicates that a fish is a "best choice." Those labelled with yellow are "good alternatives" and those marked with red should be avoided.

"Our over-arching goal is to move our stores — and the seafood industry as a whole — toward healthier oceans," Whole Foods seafood director Dave Pilat said in an email. "It's a continuous effort."

Atlantic cod caught by hook-and-line fishing is rated yellow, while the same fish caught by trawlers should be avoided, according to the aquarium's rankings.

So Whole Foods started looking for a source of hook-caught cod and found Hesse, Walinski and three other Cape-based fishermen.

"We started talking with them last fall," Hesse said. "It was in January that we actually embarked on the supply chain."

Whole Foods has actively promoted the fish as a Cape Cod, hook-and-line product, even using a poster that depicts Hesse wearing fishing gear and hefting a cod.

"Customers have been looking for it and actively seeking it out in our seafood cases," Pilat said.

When the supply has been good, as many as 60 of the chain's locations have carried the Cape-landed fish.

The program has also been a success for the fishermen. Overall, the stable prices the fishermen get from Whole Foods have ended up slightly better than what they would have gotten at auction, Hesse said.

"It's led to something you can count on in terms of return," Hesse said. "The peace of mind is so much nicer, too."

The fishermen's ability to offer Whole Foods a regular supply of fish can be traced to the implementation of a new quota system known as catch-share, Hesse and Walinski said.

The system essentially caps the number of fish each fisherman can catch, rather than limiting the number of days he could be on the water. While many fishermen have complained that the quotas are damaging the industry, it has let some of the Cape's fishermen consider alternatives for distributing their product.

"We said, 'We've got this limited amount of quota, so let's try to get the most money we can for it,'" Walinski

said.

Though the initial trial period is over, Hesse said the arrangement with Whole Foods is likely to continue.

"We're past the initial phase and we're looking at down the road," he said.

While selling directly to retailers has shown promise from the fishermen involved with Whole Foods, such arrangements make up only a small part of the market, said John Pappalardo, executive director of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association.

"The majority of the fish will continue to go through the normal distribution," he said.

And that is alright, he said, because the auctions provide the services and infrastructure necessary to keep the industry afloat.

"It's really important for those auctions to continue," he said. "It's all tied together."

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