

Midcoast well represented at first Fishermen's Forum seminars

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ROCKPORT (Feb 28): The first day of the Maine Fishermen's Forum Thursday at the Samoset Resort offered three seminars to attendees. The audiences at each seminar were large, but there were almost as many people gathered in the hallways of the Samoset talking as there were in the seminars.

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Many use the forum as an opportunity to have face-to-face conversations about the topics of their concern, said forum coordinator Chilloa Young on Wednesday.



The registration table at the Maine Fishermen's Forum during a rare quiet moment. (Photo by Emily Sapienza)

The seminar "Updated and New Innovative Gear Technology" met in the morning, while "Shellfish Management and More" and "Owning Your Product from Dock to Plate" met in the afternoon.

Updated and New Innovative Gear Technology

The seminar on gear technology looked at four recent innovations in fishing gear.

Dana Morse of the Maine Sea Grant Program and Kelo Pinkham of the F/V *Jeanne C* presented their adjustments to recently developed trawl nets, said Sally Sherman of the Maine Department of Marine Resources.

The nets were originally designed to avoid fish such as yellowtail and monkfish while catching haddock, and also to float under water rather than dragging across the ocean floor and damaging it, Sherman said. The only problem is that the nets do not work well in Maine where the bottom can be rocky, she said.

Pinkham added a series of weights to the nets to keep them lower to the ocean floor so they are effective in catching fish. The nets also have floats to keep them from doing damage, said Sherman.

John Knight of Superior Trawl presented a trawl net that targets haddock and avoids cod, said Sherman.

The net, called "The Eliminator," is "designed to reduce the incidental catch of cod in the haddock bottom trawl fishery by taking advantage of the different fish behaviors as they enter a net," according to the World Wildlife Fund website.

The net won the WWF "Smart Gear" competition in 2007, said Sherman.

Bill Lee of Ocean Reporter designed an inexpensive way to make underwater cameras so fishermen can monitor their nets and gear to see how they are working, said Sherman.

Ben and Alex Brickett of Blue Water concepts presented "innovations in fixed gear technology."

They showed a lobster trap that can release unwanted catch at the bottom of the ocean, where it will be less vulnerable, said Sherman. Unwanted catch, such as undersized lobster and other fish, are put in a small cage on the trap that opens under a set amount of pressure.

They also presented a device that is attached to the lines on a lobster trap to cut the lines if a certain amount of tension is exerted on it. Whales that get caught in lines will exert enough tension while swimming that the device will cut the lines and free the whales.

At the end of the session Jason Blackburn of the National Marine Fisheries Service gave an update on exempted fishery permit rules.

Shellfish Management and More

During the shellfish management seminar, panelists discussed the passage of a law that would give municipalities control of mussels located in intertidal zones.

Those municipalities would be able to specify areas of the intertidal zone where dragging for mussels would be limited in order to support shellfish conservation, said seminar panelist Denis-Marc Nault of the Maine Department of Marine Resources.

The law would mostly affect municipalities Downeast where mussel draggers have adversely affected seed plots of clams on intertidal flats.

It's been more than 10 years since mussel dragging has taken place in the intertidal area of the St. George River, said Abden Simmons; it's been that long since there were mussels there to drag for. Simmons is the chairman of the Waldoboro Shellfish Committee.

Instead clam diggers in that area have been devastated by closures of the areas where they dig, Simmons said. Two recent closings are due to bad water scores, he said. Water quality is regulated by the federal government.

The committee was formed, he said, to address these issues.

Owning Your Products from Dock to Plate

The second afternoon seminar featured a number of guests from the Midcoast, who spoke about ways to innovate the sales of fish, through both value-added products and creative sales techniques.

Kim Libby and Lucie Bauer spoke about the community supported fishery they started at the First Universalist Church in Rockland. Libby is the business manager of the Midcoast Fishermen's Association.

Working with Bauer and Jennifer Plummer of the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, Libby sold shares of the weekly shrimp catch to members of the church. She delivers 110 pounds of shrimp to the church each Sunday, weather permitting.

"People are very willing to pay premium prices," said Bauer, "especially if they know fishermen are involved in conserving, not mining [the ocean's resources]."

Russell Libby of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association agreed.

"[Consumers] want you to persuade them that what you're doing fits their values," he said.

Linda Bean, owner of Port Clyde Lobster, spoke about a different approach she has toward the successful marketing of her product.

When Bean recently bought Port Clyde Lobster she was new to the business, she said, so she had no preconceived limitations on what could be done with the product.

Bean named the business Port Clyde Lobster, she said, to recognize the community the lobster comes from.

"In Port Clyde we have wonderful quality lobster," she said. "Port Clyde Lobster is not just a company, but a standard of excellence for Maine lobster. We need to celebrate Maine lobster and brand it."

One of the ways she has done that is by making a value-added lobster bisque that sells on QVC, a home shopping network.

Port Clyde Lobster, she said, is selling quality, value and convenience.

The Maine Fishermen's Forum continues through Sunday morning, March 2, with panels, a trade show, an auction and activities for families.

For more information on the Maine Fishermen's Forum, visit mainefishermensforum.org.