

Martha's Vineyard Seafood Collaborative to support the future of fishing on the island

The fog had settled over the small fishing village of Menemsha on Martha's Vineyard — an island off the coast of Cape Cod in Massachusetts. The harbor was quiet, the only noise coming from a group of people waiting outside Larsen's Fish Market to pick up their orders of lobsters with seagulls squawking overhead.

Suddenly, the fog broke around a large ship as it rounded the corner from the jetty, gliding toward the dock.

Peter Lambros, the director of operations for the Martha's Vineyard Seafood Collaborative, waited for the boat to pull up alongside his shack on the water, tucked between the fish market and a Texaco gas station. The boat was the Menemsha Rose, a scallop boat returning with a haul of 600-pounds of scallops to be sold. A payday which could net nearly \$13,000.

Lambros isn't new to Menemsha. He managed The Fish House, the seafood wholesaler which previously stood where the Martha's Vineyard Seafood Collaborative currently resides. But when the pandemic hit and Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker announced restaurants wouldn't be open, The Fish House decided to close.

Normally the hardest part of fishing is getting the fish in the boat. But suddenly the fishermen on Martha's Vineyard found it to be much harder to offload their product.

"Right when Governor Baker announced that all of the restaurants were going to close, that really killed the wholesale market," Lambros said. "Without restaurants, clams and oysters and that part of the industry died that day."

Without the Menemsha wholesaler buying from local fishermen, the island's economy tanked as fishermen frantically searched for ways to survive.

"Just like that I lost my job, what had been my livelihood," said William Diamond, first mate on the fishing boat Little Feet, a Martha's Vineyard quahog fishing boat. "We didn't even launch our boat. I had to go get a job hammering nails to make ends meet."

For the fishermen who wanted to stay on the water, they had to adopt a completely new business model.

Some scaled back their time fishing, only going out a few times per week to reduce how much they spent on gas. Some stopped selling to the island fish markets altogether, trying their hand at selling in Boston and New Bedford, Massachusetts. Others got licenses to sell directly off their boats or at local farmer's markets.

"None of those guys, you know, want to be salespeople," Lambros said. "They don't want to be business owners. They just want to pull up, drop off their stuff, grab some bait, go get gas and get back to fishing. That's what they do, and last year the other stuff kind of started to get to them."

At the beginning of 2021, the town of Chilmark — where Menemsha is located — began to explore what to do with the old Fish House location and realized it needed a change to support the local fishermen.

When the Martha's Vineyard Fishermen's Preservation Trust — a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting local fishermen on the island — expressed interest in taking over the wholesale operation in Menemsha, it was a perfect match.

Unlike The Fish House, which was owned by Red's Best — one of the largest fish markets in Massachusetts — the preservation trust's goal isn't to hit resale benchmarks and earn maximum profits. Its purpose is to support the fishermen and try to preserve the original trade of Martha's Vineyard, which was first inhabited by fishermen and whalers.

“Being an island, there is a critical need for the island's community fishermen to have an outlet to sell their catch,” said Dr. Shelley Edmundson, executive director of the Martha's Vineyard Fisherman's Preservation Trust. “That slow trickle of losing people who have the skills and desire to work on the water, we're stepping in to keep this market open.”

The preservation trust and the collaborative are doing more than just reopening the market. The organization is looking to give back to local fishermen.

Lambos said the preservation trust aims to break even and has a long-term goal to make approximately \$10,000 per year. If the collaborative's profits are higher than expected, he said they will look to make the excess money available to fishermen through grants they can apply for to buy new equipment or help buy commercial fishing licenses.

On top of helping current fishermen, the trust and the collaborative are focused on educating island kids about careers in fishing. Lambros said he wants to create a yearly field trip for local schools to the collaborative to be able to educate kids about what life as a fisherman is like.

And for those who live each day on the water, the collaborative's opening is a beacon of hope that the oldest way of life on the island can survive for decades to come.

“The collaborative opening is a life-saver,” Diamond said. “I truly mean that. Without it, people's livelihoods, like mine, are lost.”