

EDITORIAL

Lobster for Dinner

Maine's lobsters are clearly sustainable, through license limits, trap limits, V-notching of females and throwing back undersize and oversize lobsters. But what about the lobstermen and the lobster industry? Both are in bad shape these days.

The catch is not bad this year. But the economic squeeze is dreadful, with the boat price at \$2.50 a pound, diesel fuel still near \$4 a gallon and bait at \$30 to \$40 a bushel. It costs a harvester \$400 to motor 25 miles out to, say, Mount Desert Rock where lobsters now are plentiful. A day's catch often is not enough to pay for fuel and bait and the sternman's share.

Many lobstermen are cutting back on their fishing days, and some are quitting the industry.

State officials have been meeting with industry representatives to discuss possible longterm remedies such as stimulating more lobster processors in Maine, which now send most of their catch to Canada for processing. (Those sales have been interrupted by the collapse of the Iceland bank that finances the Canadian processors.) Another possibility would be seasonal restrictions on harvesting.

But it's the short-term squeeze that hurts right now, and a short-term solution has suddenly taken shape. **The Maine Lobster Council** is leading the way to increase lobster consumption with newspaper and radio appeals. It has been working with suppliers and supermarkets to crank up lobster promotions. Hannaford and Shaw's have begun aggressive promotions in their stores in Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts, and WalMart is said to be considering a similar move. Restaurants such as the Weathervane seafood chain are planning advertising campaigns and lobster promotion. The idea is to sell the present glut of lobsters and persuade consumers, through lower prices, that lobsters are not a luxury item but can be a reasonable, everyday eating pleasure.

Pushing Maine lobsters is spreading of its own accord as business executives see an emergency need to bolster a billion-dollar industry that supports and promotes the entire Maine economy.

Downeast Toyota has begun to promote Maine lobsters in its automotive advertising. Sales Manager Brian Geaghan saw the need and called a lobsterman acquaintance in Cutler for advice. John Drouin, who is chairman of Zone A of the Lobster Management Council, told him that promoting lobsters would help not only the lobstermen but also the entire Maine economy.

In Rockland, Heidi Stevens, co-owner of By George Jewelers had a brainstorm one sleepless night and organized 36 local businesses for a community lobster bake and all-day individual promotions giving away lobsters to customers. She says her friend David Winslow in Boothbay Harbor gave 60 lobsters to Janson's Clothing Store for a promotional raffle.

Eating and plugging Maine lobsters, known as the ultimate white meat, is a healthful and helpful way to support the lobster industry in a time of need and to bolster the Maine economy.