

Press release: As markets reel from COVID-19, BC fish harvesters work to support local food markets

March 30th, 2020 – While British Columbians shutter up to weather the COVID-19 pandemic, B.C. fish harvesters – designated as essential food providers by the B.C. government [last Thursday](#) – will do what they can to support local food supplies. B.C. fish harvesters and processors are working with the provincial government to support local supply chains and markets to ensure fish harvesters and processors can supply Canadians with healthy, nutritious, and sustainable protein.

“Fisheries are an essential service and people need food in this difficult time,” says Dan Edwards, executive director of the Area A Crab Association, who is working with a [newly formed committee of fish harvesters](#) representing several fisheries to collaborate with distributors and the provincial government to safely get more seafood to British Columbians. Usually, most of the province’s \$445 million wild fisheries – including crab – are exported, with about 85 percent of the catch heading to the U.S., China, and Europe, while 90 percent of the seafood we eat is imported. With global markets closed, and the 80 percent share of our domestic market held by now-shuttered restaurants, industry efforts are focused on supporting local supply chains.

“Right now, we’re trying to set up local markets in Prince Rupert to get the crab that’s coming in this week to residents, as we’ve closed the fishery from April 4th until June. We’re encouraging the province to put together a virtual taskforce comprised of representatives from across the industry to increase the availability of B.C. seafood to British Columbians amidst these fundamentally changed markets. We will also be establishing safety protocols for harvesters and other workers in the industry to reduce their risk of exposure to COVID-19,” says Edwards.

Other fisheries, like the commercial prawn fishery, are also leading the effort. “We are working quickly to determine ways to expand our local markets this season to increase the availability of healthy food sources for our communities,” says Emily Orr, representative for the Prawn Industry Caucus. “This includes delaying the season opening until at least May 21st to help flatten the curve, protecting both fish harvesters and our coastal communities. We are also looking at new strategies to deliver locally harvested seafood to Canadian doorsteps.”

Connecting Canadians to B.C. seafood is familiar terrain to Sonia Strobel, co-founder and CEO of Vancouver-based Skipper Otto Community Supported Fishery. Unlike traditional markets where harvesters sell to distributors, retailers, or restaurants, the company pre-sells the catch of its 18 fishing families directly to nearly 3,000 across Canada before the season starts. They can then use this credit to order seafood online throughout the year and pick it up at one of 45 locations in B.C. and across Canada. Fishing families have a guaranteed market and an up-front payment for their catch, considerably reducing the financial risks they normally face. And the model is resilient to the challenges posed by COVID-19: At-sea and on-shore safety protocols protect fish harvesters and processors, while pick-up points are coordinated remotely with little or no face-to-face contact between consumers.

“Our vulnerability to a food security crisis has never been clearer. We simply don’t have large-scale mechanisms in place to ensure access to safe, reliable, quality Canadian food for Canadians,” says Strobel. “We created Skipper Otto in direct response to the broken food system. With most of Canada’s seafood processing capacity and markets overseas, both fishing families and end consumers are incredibly vulnerable to crises like COVID-19. Now is the time to act. We need to quickly increase capacity for local processing and distribution models that prioritise paying living wages to Canadian fishing families and getting their seafood safely into the hands of Canadians.”

COVID-19 presents unprecedented challenges to the fisheries as they strive to support British Columbians and their communities through the pandemic. Still, there might be a silver lining.

“We may yet build a more robust local food system in response to the crisis,” says Strobel.

For more information:

Marc Fawcett-Atkinson - Communications manager, T. Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation

P: 902.318.1923

E: marc@bucksuzuki.org

Dan Edwards – Executive director, Area A Crab Association

P: 250.266.0082

Emily Orr - Prawn Industry Caucus

P: 778.652.1025

Sonia Strobel – Co-founder and CEO, Skipper Otto Community Supported Fishery

P: 778.689.1319

E: sonia@skipperotto.ca