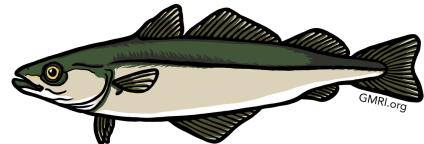


# Improving Value and Quality for New England Finfish



Fishermen and processors agree: seafood is a tough business. Heavy competition with imports, smaller volumes of fish, uncertain pricing, and fluctuating quality all factor into complicated business decisions on both sides. But research from the Gulf of Maine Research Institute, the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, and the Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen's Alliance suggests there is significant opportunity to improve quality, pricing, and market stability by improving collaboration, communication, and trust between processors and fishermen.

## Research Focus

Project partners wanted to better understand current best practices around finfish quality, and the potential that industry saw to improve value by improving quality.

## Who Contributed?

Twenty fishermen and seven processors from across New England were interviewed. Nine fishermen and three processors/offloaders participated in experiments around quality and handling.

## Key points of agreement between fishermen and processors:

- Interest in using best practices and better understanding of what really is best practice across a range of quality handling topics
- Shared goal of building markets for local seafood
- Openness to trying new practices and methods around quality
- Interest in increased communication between all parties to build trust and improve quality

## What we heard from fishermen:

- Fishermen have implemented a range of quality handling practices, but do not always know what makes a difference to a processor or to the end product's yield or shelf life.
- Fishermen are willing to invest more in quality and see potential to do so on their vessels, but need to see a clear return to take that chance – or receive financial support to make upfront investments.
- Fishermen are open to discussions about creative benefits beyond price per pound for high-quality fish.
- Lack of control creates discomfort around pricing and quality: what happens to their catch between landing and purchase? How long is fish waiting before auction or sitting on a truck, and in what conditions?

## What we heard from processors:

- Fluctuations in quality affect the bottom line.
- Poor quality fish leads to poor shelf life and poor yields, affecting both price and customer satisfaction.
- Inconsistent volumes of certain species (e.g. groundfish) make more proactive marketing a challenge.
- Consistency in quality is key for maintaining business and building any new market opportunities: regular volumes of decent quality fish are better than fish that is exceptional one day and poor the next.



For more details about this project, including species-specific quality handling experiments, visit [gmri.org/quality](http://gmri.org/quality).



Gulf of Maine Research Institute

## Current Practice & Interest in Improving Quality

Fishermen have tried implementing changes related to quality, with varying results. These include increasing ice, bleeding fish, using slurry ice, training crew in safe handling and high-quality practices, paying higher rates for crew retention (maximizing the value of that training), and investing in new and improved equipment. Some fishermen report that they continue to implement these practices and others stopped investing the money and/or time due to a lack of financial return. Yet processors and fishermen agree that more can be done to improve quality, and therefore value, for everyone.

**Fishermen also expressed clear interest in more significant changes that would improve seafood quality and value, but need processor buy-in and financial support to achieve:**

- Significant investments, such as refrigerating/insulating holds, conveyors/lifts, greater reconfiguration of on-deck set ups, more consistent crew training
- Agreements to ensure profitability, such as price floors, price consistency, or commitments to buy the entire trip
- Benefits beyond pricing, such as improved reputation (leading to more respect, options to negotiate, better access to higher value markets) and exploring how to partner with processors to collectively develop market opportunities

## What does this mean for your business?

**Based on conversations with processors, fishermen, and experts in quality handling, we see several opportunities for processors to leverage their position and improve the value of New England seafood:**

- Maintain the cold chain and use data (even simple thermometers) to confirm temperature stability, including during trucking
- Continue to ensure careful handling and sanitation
- Use the whole fish to maximize profit and minimize waste
- Freeze fish (well and with best practice) to create more consistent availability and ensure high-quality product over a longer period of time
- Incentivize fishermen in their efforts to improve quality at the vessel level through financial investment or other creative benefits
- Explore market opportunities for premium quality fish
- Consider the potential of a universal standard for fish quality, building a stronger reputation for New England seafood against comparative regions
- Engage in more consistent and back-and-forth communication between processors and fishermen – not just when things go wrong.

## Key takeaway:

To accomplish any of these goals, more communication and feedback between processors and fishermen is essential. Regular conversations to understand what is going well, what can be improved, and where we can work together would be hugely beneficial. Most importantly, these communications could help build relationships and trust, setting the stage for finding creative solutions to the most challenging barriers faced by New England's seafood industry.



For more details about this project, including species-specific quality handling experiments, visit [gmri.org/quality](http://gmri.org/quality).



Gulf of Maine  
Research Institute