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Rep. Kumiega: Maine must boost in state lobster processing and marketing worldwide

Good morning, I'm State Rep. Walter Kumiega from Deer Isle -- a hub of Maine's fishing and lobster industry.

Thank you for tuning in.

If you're like most people, you probably only think about lobster when you are dropping it into a boiling pot or ordering it off a menu.

But for weeks record low lobster prices have been making headlines -- and just this week it all came to head when Canadian lobstermen blocked trucks carrying Maine lobster heading north for processing. The protests in Canada had been going on for days. And now some dealers simply won't buy Maine lobsters because they have no place to sell them.

The issue is lobstermen in Maine and Canada are competing neck and neck. Lobster supply is outpacing demand in Maine -- driving prices lower and lower and hurting fishing families and their communities across the state. Conservation measures taken by lobstermen over the years have worked to the point that we have more lobster than we can process, sell, or ship.

The fact is Maine needs Canada to help us process all the lobster we catch -- because we only have three processing plants compared to Canada's 24.

The international skirmish with Canadian fishermen alarmed Maine officials, as lobstermen from communities like mine worried about the impact on an already tough season. For months now, the low price of lobster has left the industry on the verge of crisis.

Dealers are paying less and lobster processing plants in Canada don't have room for

the influx. With the rate hitting a low this summer of less than \$2.00 a pound dockside, you could get a boiled lobster for less than baloney.

With higher supply than demand and no ability to process the catch here, Maine's fishing families are the ones caught in the trap. If we want to make a difference, the state and the industry need to act fast.

The bottom line is we are leaving money on the table and sending jobs to Canada. We must be marketing lobster worldwide and processing it here in Maine.

Maine's lobster industry is critical to our brand nationally and internationally. We should be amplifying it. Maine is known as much for its lobsters and blueberries as it is for its rocky coasts and untouched forests.

Twenty years ago, Maine's lobster catch was about 20 million pounds and it was mostly consumed by tourists. Last year, the catch was over 100 million pounds -- a record high.

Now, experts say only about 15 percent of it is eaten by individual consumers --leaving a lot of lobster to be sold, processed and shipped elsewhere.

The opportunity for economic development is staring us in the face. Maine officials should be working to facilitate more processing plants here in Maine and be working together with the industry to launch a large scale marketing campaign to increase demand for our Maine brand lobster.

We need more in-state capacity to process lobster, smarter ways to ship lobster, and better marketing of our brand worldwide.

The protests in Canada highlight a serious flaw in our state's economy.

We should be directing dollars to our working waterfronts, investing in research and development bonds to better process and ship lobster, while working to lure in processing plants with tax incentives.

These are economic development tools that will directly boost jobs in our state and help buttress an industry that is critical to our state's history and brand.

During the past two years, Maine's economy has shrunk while our neighboring New England states have begun to emerge from the recession. We've lost jobs while other states across the country are adding them. The governor and his Republican allies have turned their backs on critical policies that could have supported jobs here.

We must turn that around. We can't afford to let our fishing industry go the way of our other natural resources based industries.

We have the opportunity to make the right decisions to help a critical industry in our state. There is no reason to wait. The time is now.

Thank you for listening, I'm Rep. Walter Kumiega of Deer Isle.