

Spruce Head Fisherman's Co-op



About nine miles south of Rockland on Route 73, Sprucehead Island seems a world away from the busy tourist destinations on the mid-coast section of US 1. By the time you've crossed the Weskeag River in South Thomaston center and the causeway to the island, you are more likely to encounter quiet spruce woods and yards full of lobster traps than art galleries and gift shops (although those in the know will find their way to McLoon's Lobster Shack and delicious lobster rolls on the shores of Seal Harbor.)

The non-stop activity on the wharf at the Spruce Head Fisherman's Co-op stands in marked contrast to the quiet of the island's roads. This is the third largest fishing co-op in the state after Stonington and Vinalhaven and the 50 member fisherman that use the co-op's facilities keep a staff of 8 (3 full-time, 5 seasonal) busy throughout the day. During the afternoon, when lobster boats are returning with their catch, there is a constant flow of boats unloading lobsters on the floating wharf,

loading bait from the upper wharf, and captains rowing in their skiffs as their days end.

Like in many of Maine's coastal villages, fishing runs in the family in South Thomaston. Co-op employee Rene Adkins shares bait bagging duties with her daughter Kayla, while her husband Jeff runs the co-op's operations and her son Nicholas works on a lobster boat. Rene says, "It's like a big family down here – whenever anything happens, they all pull together. It's a co-op, so everyone is invested. It's not like one fisherman is better than the other, you know. You all have to pitch in together and you have to give your all. That makes it a little bit better."

David Cousins, former co-op president and current president of the Maine Lobstermen's Association has three sons that fish and sell their lobsters at the co-op, and his wife runs a lobster take-out operation. Cousins explains that the co-op started in 1972 with 9 members and leased the property on Sprucehead Island until 2010, when they were able to purchase the property in part



because the Land for Maine's Future Board allocated \$166,250 towards the purchase of a working waterfront covenant.

The co-op has recently purchased an adjacent property and plans to expand operations. "Before we bought the property next door, we only had 65 feet of frontage to do \$10 million of business per year. So that 65 feet is pretty valuable - to the state, to everyone. If we didn't have it, we couldn't all fit in one dock. This enables us to work."



Co-op president Bob Baines is originally from New Jersey, but he spent his childhood summers in South Thomaston and moved there permanently to start fishing after college. His nephew Cole



now captains his own boat as well. Baines explains that the advantages of working with the co-op include better lobster prices and guaranteed access to the ocean. "The wharf next to us, as well as other wharves, could be sold to a marina at any point in time in the future. Who knows what they're going to be, but by the co-op members owning this property, we have guaranteed access, and in southern Maine, it's really hard for fishermen to get out to their boats."

Baines also says that a thriving fishing industry is a positive impact on other area businesses. "Quite a few businesses in the area rely on the fishing industry. The trap builders, the marine supply stores, the diesel mechanics, engine repair, truck dealers. This parking lot is full of pickup trucks. Fishermen are real good making money, and they're also real good at spending it on their gear, their vehicles, and fuel - we're probably the biggest fuel purchaser in the county."

As he looks at a harbor filled with working boats, Baine's concludes, "This harbor's not going to look the same 50 years from now, but I hope it's going to look pretty similar. Land for Maine's Future is a great program - it's done a lot for us and it's done a lot for co-ops up and down the coast. I hope it continues."

