



## **Strategic Plan for the Marketing of Rhode Island Seafood**

Rhode Island Seafood Marketing Collaborative  
2023-2028

### **Overview**

Rhode Island's marine fisheries provide jobs, food, and recreation. Thousands of jobs stem from Rhode Island's commercial fishing, aquaculture, and seafood industries, which provide seafood to consumers; and many additional jobs stem from Rhode Island's for-hire and recreational fishing industries, which afford consumers the opportunity to harvest their own seafood. Fresh, local seafood has high nutritional benefits, contributes to improved public health and local food system resilience; it is readily available and sustainable, and it is delicious. Promoting the Rhode Island seafood industry supports economic stability, public health, and food resilience. Growing the industry offers promising opportunities to stimulate the economy and bolster the health, welfare and security of Rhode Islanders.

This Strategic Plan for the Marketing of Rhode Island Seafood (Strategic Plan, or Plan) adopts a strategy grounded in achieving long-term stability for the existing Rhode Island seafood industry and fostering opportunities for growth. This Strategic Plan embraces all Rhode Island seafood, including exports, while lending particular focus to the profound win-win opportunities associated with the sale and consumption of Rhode Island seafood in Rhode Island. A central platform of this Strategic Plan is Rhode Island's diverse, and fluctuating, seafood portfolio, which offers an appealing complement to consistent supply chains.

Rhode Island is a small state with a large fishing and seafood industry. Point Judith is the third most valuable commercial fishing port on the East Coast. Newport's Pier 9 supports a stable and productive commercial fleet; Narragansett Bay supports a thriving shellfish industry; and shellfish farms are well-established and expanding in the state's southern coastal ponds and elsewhere in Rhode Island waters.

While certain species such as squid, scallops, and lobsters constitute the highest-value landings in Rhode Island, the long list of additional species landed and grown in the state distinguishes Rhode Island's marine fisheries. Few other states have marine fisheries that are as diversified as Rhode Island. Like other states, the Rhode Island industry faces the need to adjust to declines in historically important fisheries, such as lobsters and cod, upticks in non-traditional fisheries, such as Jonah crab, and fluctuations in the availability of stocks such as summer flounder, black sea bass, and striped bass. While landings of squid, scup, scallops, and hard clams have been generally stable and provide a

reliable source of fresh local seafood year-round, landings of other species tend to fluctuate. The Rhode Island fishing community understands that shifts in species availability and catch caps are the result of a dynamic ecosystem, a changing climate, and a sustainable fishery management system, and thanks to the state's diverse seafood portfolio, the industry is well positioned to accommodate such fluctuations.

Rhode Island seafood consumers are generally unaware of the variability associated with local seafood production, and how and where their seafood is sourced. This largely explains why seafood imports, which tend to rely upon consistent supply chains of specific species from foreign markets, typically eclipse local seafood products in markets.

Accordingly, a key tenant of this Strategic Plan is to promote increased consumer awareness regarding the nature and availability of Rhode Island's diverse seafood portfolio, leading to increased consumer demand that better aligns with fluctuations in local seafood production. In other words: aligning flexible supply with flexible demand. Increased consumer awareness and demand give rise to industry stability and growth; and the grounding of such stability and growth in a fluctuating and flexible local seafood system offers huge promise for long-term economic and public health benefits.

In 2020, the Rhode Island commercial fishing and seafood industries were severely impacted by the pandemic. One immediate effect was the sudden breakdown in traditional seafood supply chains and markets. That breakdown exposed vulnerabilities and insecurities associated with local seafood production grown dependent on complex out-of-state seafood purchasing and distribution systems, as well as local consumer access to seafood, grown dependent on those same systems. When those systems collapsed, as they did at the outset of the crisis, local harvesters and wholesalers lost their ability to sell, and local consumers lost their ability to purchase – even though local product remained readily available. The pandemic called attention to the importance of establishing shorter, local, more sustainable seafood supply chains and markets to buffer the impacts associated with reliance on traditional systems.

In response to the crisis, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, in coordination with the Rhode Island Department of Health, enacted a new Direct Sale Dealer License, enabling commercial harvesters to sell certain species directly to consumers and retailers. DEM, the Commercial Fisheries Center of Rhode Island, the Rhode Island Food Policy Council, Eating With the Ecosystem, and other partners also launched several other initiatives, all aimed at helping the Rhode Island seafood industry to regain its footing and adjust to new challenges and realities, and seize upon new opportunities.

## **Summary**

This Strategic Plan is both comprehensive and focused on broad scale initiatives for the next five years. In the broadest sense, this Plan addresses the sustainability, accessibility, value, quality, diversity, quantity, and affordability of Rhode Island seafood. The Plan builds on the previous actions taken to promote seafood in the state and offers the next steps for expanding this initiative for the next five years. It should be noted that the current efforts to market and promote local seafood will continue.

This plan includes educating seafood consumers regarding the availability of local seafood products landed at Rhode Island ports and grown in Rhode Island waters; partnering with seafood harvesters, dealers and retailers to provide increased access to Rhode Island seafood products; offer opportunities for new business growth for harvesters, dealers, and retailers; providing a platform for existing and new businesses to seize upon the opportunities afforded by increased consumer awareness and demand for Rhode Island seafood products; offering affordable protein sources for all communities

in the state; expanding opportunities for younger fishermen to enter the industry and build new seafood businesses that offer locally sourced seafood; and advocating for expanded policies and initiatives that promote local seafood and enable seafood businesses to expand. Some of these initiatives build on the success of other programs that were adopted in neighboring states and by seafood related nonprofits and businesses.

The implementation of this Plan will require ongoing collaboration with the many partners and stakeholder groups who participate in and contribute to Rhode Island's seafood sector. The foundation for this collaboration is already in place and will continue to be cultivated and supported.

### **Plan Development and Consistency**

This Strategic Plan is proposed to go before the Rhode Island Seafood Marketing Collaborative, established pursuant to Chapter 20-38 of the Rhode Island General Laws. Since its original adoption, the Plan has been updated/amended twice by the Collaborative, in February and November 2020. The Collaborative involves all key sectors of the Rhode Island commercial fishing, aquaculture, and seafood industries, along with leaders from state government and academia; key partners include several non-governmental organizations and the Rhode Island Food Policy Council. The Plan stems from the insights and experience gained, and groundwork laid, by the Collaborative over the past several years, via close coordination with partners and stakeholders.

This Strategic Plan complements and builds upon the Rhode Island Food Strategy, *Relish Rhody*, adopted by Governor Raimondo in 2017. That statewide food plan is organized around three core themes – Health & Access; Economic Development; and Environment & Resiliency -- and five integrated focus areas, which include (1) preserving and growing agriculture and fisheries industries and in Rhode Island, and (2) sustaining and creating markets for Rhode Island food and beverage products. Marine fisheries, aquaculture, and seafood serve as core elements of the statewide food plan. Buoyed by largely consistent goals and objectives, the development and implementation of this Plan will continue to be closely coordinated with the statewide food plan, in a mutually reinforcing way. While Rhode Island seafood has certain attributes that render it unique from other types of fresh local food, it also has a lot in common and stands to benefit from a synergistic approach to marketing and promotion.

This Strategic Plan also aims to advance the seafood marketing tactics set forth by the *Rhode Island Commercial Fisheries Blueprint for Resilience*, adopted in 2018 via the grassroots Resilient Fisheries RI Project. Broadly, this Strategic Plan builds on the myriad of ongoing efforts in Rhode Island to sustainably manage Rhode Island's marine fisheries, support Rhode Island's fishing and seafood industries, and protect and promote public health.

This is also an update that expands on prior marketing initiatives and includes new strategies for promoting local seafood. The first step from the RI Seafood was to market seafood within the state and push for a broad consumer awareness program. This reflects a comprehensive approach for the next five years with some of the initiatives starting sooner whereas others are a long term vision for the RI Seafood future.

### **Plan Implementation and Support**

The Rhode Island Seafood Marketing Collaborative will implement this Plan by developing targeted work plans that reflect top strategic priorities identified herein, and operationalizing those work plans through partnerships, in accordance with available resources. While this Plan offers enormous promise for economic growth and improved public health, its implementation and impact depend on sufficient funding. Prior to 2021, the Collaborative and the DEM relied upon an annual appropriation

of \$20,000 from the Local Agriculture and Seafood Act Grants Program to promote Rhode Island seafood. In 2021, DEM was awarded the federal Saltonstall-Kennedy grant to conduct a multimedia advertising campaign and offer point of sale support in 2022. In 2022, the campaign showed successful results in the promotion seafood vendors and local seafood.

**Mission:**

- Promote and support Rhode Island seafood and the Rhode Island seafood industry.

**Objectives and Strategies:**

The framework of this Strategic Plan includes the following five components: Economic Stability, Education, Public Health and Food Security, Advocacy and Policy and Communication and Outreach.

I. Economic Stability and Growth

The Plan will sustain and grow Rhode Island’s seafood-based economy and spur the U.S. seafood-based economy via Rhode Island’s contributions. The strategies below will expand on this overarching goal.

- Provide technical, financial, and regulatory assistance to businesses, existing and new, seeking to capitalize on opportunities associated with Rhode Island seafood – e.g., LASA Grant Program, Fish Forward Program, inter-agency coordination, centralized/regional distribution hubs, etc.
- Promote retail establishments that feature Rhode Island seafood products.
- Provide point-of-sale promotional support to participating retail establishments.
- Identify supply-chain barriers inhibiting the growth in the number of retail establishments that feature Rhode Island seafood products and develop solutions to those barriers that encourage sourcing/selling Rhode Island seafood products.
- Optimize direct-sales opportunities by commercial harvesters, while being mindful of the importance of maintaining full accountability for landings, upholding appropriate food-safety standards, and considering impacts to established, licensed wholesalers. Such opportunities include:
  - Dockside (off-the-boat) sales of certain finfish and live lobsters, crabs, whelks, and processed sea scallops to consumers and retailers, via the Direct Sale Dealer License
  - The transportation and sale of live lobsters, crabs, and whelks, to consumers and retailers, via the Direct Sale Dealer License.
  - Sales to consumers at farmer’s markets via a Peddler’s License.
- Provide guidance and assistance to commercial harvesters seeking to become licensed wholesalers and achieve full vertical integration with regard to all components of the seafood supply chain (i.e., harvest, process, transport and sale).
- Support new approaches for marketing underutilized species.
- Develop opportunities and pathways for a new generation of fishermen to join the fleet including training and apprenticeships. This can include safety trainings, business development workshops, and regulatory workshops. This can also include an educational component where high school students are paired with fishermen to try out the life and the work.<sup>1</sup>
- Utilize state property efficiently to maximize opportunities for fishermen to grow or establish their businesses at a subsidized rate.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ktoo.org/2022/04/20/unalaska-youth-fisherman-program/>

- Include features of fishermen, fishing businesses, and seafood recipes at the Newport and Providence restaurant week to include a seafood theme or the inclusion of one seafood dish during the week.

## II. Education

DEM and the Collaborative will educate the public on available local seafood, teaching a new generation of seafood suppliers on sustainable harvesting methods, species management and better business techniques. Below are the strategies that will achieve this goal. This is an opportunity to work closely with the DEM Aquatic Resource Education (A.R.E) Program which offers various training programs to both adults and children including saltwater angling, and marine ecology training for teachers and families. Overall, when educating the public about RI Seafood the campaign should be tailored to fishermen first and then how to fish next.

- Support the growth of in-state marketing opportunities by increasing consumer awareness of and access to Rhode Island seafood, giving rise to increased consumer demand and increased willingness to pay or substitute, with associated public health benefits.
- Tailor consumer awareness (education) initiatives to align with the availability and diversity of fresh Rhode Island seafood products.
- Enhance opportunities for consumers to harvest their own Rhode Island seafood through training and informational materials and workshops.<sup>2</sup>
- Offer a dynamic meet and greet for the public to engage with RI Seafood fishermen that showcases the fishermen, the seafood, and various methods of preparing seafood.<sup>3</sup>
- Establish a seasonal fisherman at the Port of Galilee and Newport to educate the public on commercial fishing and marine species.<sup>4</sup>
  - Provide take-aways such as recipe cards, storage information, species fact sheets, and educational easy materials for the kids
  - Do demonstrations such as fileting, cleaning, and even cooking demos
  - This could be done at the fishing piers around the state
  - Create an opportunity for people to see how easy it is to eat and harvest seafood
- Focus consumer awareness initiatives on identifiable/traceable Rhode Island seafood products to boost consumer confidence regarding the nature and source of their seafood, and to enable consumers to make choices that reflect their interests in supporting Rhode Island fishermen and farmers, and in eating well. This includes stickers on the packaging that contains seafood that is distributed and sold.
- Incorporate codes and stickers to connect consumers to the fishermen that catch the fish. This could include a link to show all the fishermen that work with the dealer. This builds on the fishermen profiles established through the seafood marketing campaign.<sup>5</sup>
- Provide consumers with point-of-sale information about Rhode Island seafood products – e.g., how to choose; how to handle and store; how to cook; nutritional information; how/why buying Rhode Island seafood helps to support the Rhode Island fishing community and is consistent with sustainable fisheries management; and how/why buying Rhode Island seafood connects with enhanced food quality, food safety, and food system resilience.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://seagrant.unh.edu/events/seaweed-workshops>

<sup>3</sup> <https://capecodfishermen.org/events/meet-the-fleet/>

<sup>4</sup> 1. Ask Leroy! Coastal Fisheries Maine <https://coastalfisheries.org/collaborative-education/askleroy/>

2. Pier Host Program <https://capecodfishermen.org/pier-program/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.seafoodsource.com/features/barcode-driven-product-tracking-leads-the-way-in-enabling-seafood-traceability>

- Have partners such as CFCRI use their expertise to host a variety of educational events to educate consumers and the public on the seafood industry.

### III. Public health and food security

The Plan will use the below strategies to sustain and improve public health and welfare, in Rhode Island and throughout the U.S., via increased consumption of healthful Rhode Island seafood. These strategies will also ensure seafood is a viable and an affordable protein source for all communities.

- Focus consumer awareness initiatives on Rhode Island seafood products that are recommended as healthy choices.
- Expand access by low/moderate-income consumers to high-quality, healthy, low/moderate-cost Rhode Island seafood products, in the form of economically viable, healthy substitutes for other foods.
- Support initiatives and events that connect local institutional buyers (e.g., schools, hospitals, universities) to Rhode Island seafood products by increasing awareness, availability, and price-competitiveness in existing supply chains. Connect these institutions with fishermen to sell directly.
- Promoting recreational harvest opportunities in Rhode Island and providing the recreational fishing community with promotional information to enhance fisher-as-consumer appreciation of Rhode Island seafood.

### IV. Advocacy and Policy

This Plan provides methods for advocate for seafood businesses and expand opportunities for offering local seafood. This is an opportunity to partner with the Divisions of Marine Fisheries and Coastal Resources utilizing the expertise of each division.

- Consider a legislative proposal to update the enabling statute governing the Rhode Island Seafood Collaborative, particularly expanding membership to include representatives from key non-governmental organizations.
- Evaluate market barriers for fishermen and present a report to state leadership and recommendations for action; chiefly direct sale abilities.

### V. Communication and Outreach

This Plan identifies the communication efforts already taken and includes new methods seafood promotion. This builds on the marketing materials that are currently in use, as of 2022 including the refined RI Seafood logo and swag.

- Expand partnerships with non-profits and fisheries partners
- Website Development
  - Expand species and fishermen profiles
  - Offer more downloadable resources for people that align with education initiatives
- Promote and participate in Rhode Island seafood festivals and related events.
- Expand on video and photo opportunities to showcase the life of a fisherman.
- Conduct special programs that feature select sectors of the Rhode Island seafood industry – e.g., Quahog Week.
- Provide consumers and retailers with online access to aggregated weekly Rhode Island commercial landings data, by species, drawn from the SAFIS dealer reporting program administered by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management’s Division of Marine Fisheries.

- Administer a comprehensive, integrated communications/marketing campaign that includes a robust *SeafoodRI* website and use of all forms of media outreach – social, earned, and paid; digital, electronic and print – to promote Rhode Island seafood, with a primary focus on “brand” awareness, appeal, and availability.
- Promote Rhode Island’s for-hire industry and local catch attractiveness; providing promotional information for for-hire customers; how to safely handle and store, how to cook, and nutritional information.
- Partner with non-profits, chefs, and higher education institutions to create cooking demonstrations and promote cooking challenges on social media.
- Expand the access to the RI Seafood newsletter distribution and include other articles of interest from the industry and from RI Seafood Collaborators.
- Create and distribute fishermen highlights that can be cross referenced on the seafood traceability initiative.
- Support further development and promote wide use of the Fish Line phone app as a tool for connecting RI seafood consumers with RI sellers of seafood.
- Promote retail establishments that feature Rhode Island seafood products. Provide point-of-sale promotional support to these retail establishments via distribution of information and promotional materials pertaining to Rhode Island seafood – e.g., tent cards and placemats for tables at restaurants, ice picks for display cases at retail markets, etc. Provide other marketing/communications support, as needed, to these retail establishments to enhance consumer awareness.
- Establish feedback loops for program evaluation including surveys with our partners and fishermen.

#### **Metrics:**

In 2022, RI Seafood grew its social media following by 321% with the new addition of Instagram which has gained over 1,337 followers with over 690,302 engagements creating an increase of 229%. There has been a redevelopment and relaunch of the RI seafood website to include over 30 fishermen profiles with weekly additions as well as an updated campaign participant list to include more than 60 markets, restaurants, retail, and direct sales throughout the state of Rhode Island based on geo-location. Since the relaunch of the website, it receives on average 150+ viewers in a month. Here consumers can also reference recipes and other resources like seasonality charts and projections of landings.

Work with the media company Duffy and Shanley has resulted in increased paid media exposure which included a billboard on Interstate 95 which was expected to have over 2 million views, as well as other out of home electronic billboards, messaging at gas pumps and magazine ads. Additionally, the Department contracted and worked with three social media influencers who average 50,000 impressions per post with 20,000 engagements from consumers.

#### **General:**

- Partner with the University of Rhode Island to study the impact of this initiative over time
  - i. Jobs and income associated with Rhode Island’s commercial fishing and seafood industry.
  - ii. Sales, value of sales, and consumption of Rhode Island seafood products – in Rhode Island, and outside the state.

Targeted:

- The direct impact of this Plan’s education/awareness/branding program in Rhode Island will be measured on a yearly basis, if not more, through follow-up consumer awareness surveys.
  - i. Crosswalk these metrics the results found in URI.
- The impacts of efforts to increase opportunities for new and existing businesses to sell Rhode Island seafood will be measured on an ongoing basis by the total number of retail establishments featuring Rhode Island seafood products annually; the total number of establishments utilizing the Rhode Island Seafood Logo and related promotional materials annually; the total number of establishments participating in seafood promotional events, such as Quahog Week, annually; and the total number of institutional buyers who are participating in “buying Rhode Island” seafood efforts annually.
- The economic impact of local marketing and promotion will be assessed by comparing sales of Rhode Island seafood, and the value of those sales, before and after marketing and promotional activities are undertaken. Given the breadth of the Rhode Island seafood supply chain, and the primary focus of marketing and promotional activities on in-state sales, assessing impacts will need to be done via targeted analyses of specific species and changes in sales and value associated with those species.
- The impact of local marketing and promotion on local food security will be assessed by comparing consumption of Rhode Island seafood by Rhode Island seafood consumers before and after marketing and promotional activities are undertaken.

Future goals include continuing the growth of RI Seafood to reach 10,000 consumers through social media. In doing so, RI Seafood will continue to share fisher stories, recipes, and other resources to aid in consumption and accessibility to local seafood. Expand on fisher profiles with creation of recipe cards and video components to showcase the hard-working men and women in the fishing industry that work tirelessly to provide both fresh and local seafood direct to consumers.