

2009 Seafood Summit Panel on Sustainable Seafood & Public Policy,
presentation notes from Amy Grondin, ajgrondin@gmail.com

My name is Amy Grondin. Since 1993 I have been working on and operating salmon tenders in Alaska. A salmon tender is a mid-sized boat that buys salmon from fishermen on the fishing grounds so they can spend more time catching fish and less time and fuel running back to port to sell their catch.

For the last seven years, when not buying and processing salmon, I have worked as a consultant specializing in sustainable seafood and commercial fisheries outreach. Commercial fishermen who want to promote their sustainable catch to consumers often call on me to help them. Chefs and other culinary professionals who are looking for a source for a specific fish or have questions about sustainable seafood and food policy also seek me out.

I am hired by nonprofits that work with coastal fishing communities to help them engage fishermen in fisheries policy. Outreach to fishermen and for that matter, anyone who buys or sells seafood is critical if you want to have fisheries policies that actually work in practice and not just on paper. My role in this outreach effort is to help fishermen understand policy, proposed changes to policy, and how the changes will affect their work on the water. Most fishermen are busy trying to stay in business and appreciate a person or group that helps them stay up to date on policy issues. I work with policy analysts to assure that I understand the issues and will be able to answer questions from fishermen. Specific examples of outreach I have conducted on fisheries policy include the Magnuson Stevens Act Reauthorization, Individual Fishing Quotas and the removal of the four lower Snake River dams.

A personal goal of my outreach is to help people to understand that fish is food and not just a species to be managed or caught or a product to be sold. Bringing chefs and restaurateurs together with fishermen around fisheries policy and conservation issues has proven to be a valuable tool to connect the ocean to the plate for consumers.

What made me and keeps me working as an advocate for sustainable seafood and the fishermen who catch it is that each year I can see commercial fishing becoming more industrial and excluding the small boat fleet. The boats are fewer yet larger. Processing and distribution are controlled by a few key players. It seems that commercial fishing has more in common with industrial agriculture than with the small family owned businesses that used to make up our fishing fleets on the West Coast of the US.

The many in the agricultural sector is moving away from the industrial food production model and moving towards regional and local food production as a sustainable option. Even large retail chains are increasing shelf space for organic food. This is at a time when the commercial fishing and seafood industries are becoming more industrial and consolidated.

Our panel today is discussing how doing the right thing for the environment isn't always the best way to make a profit. I think this is true. It is easier to run a business if you don't have to pay attention to anything but the bottom line. I think this is especially true in the Commercial Fishing and Seafood industries. I draw a distinction between the commercial fishing and seafood industries. Both revolve around fish and each business needs the service that the other provides but these two industries are not managed with the same goal in mind. Commercial fisheries are mandated by governmental policy to maintain sustainable fish populations. There is no law that requires seafood buyers to consider the sustainability of wild populations in their purchasing decisions. The seafood industry's goal is to increase seafood sales not to maintain the sustainability of our oceans. It is their choice to purchase sustainably harvested fish or not to. Once the fish hits the dock, it is no longer being managed and becomes marketed.

There have been varied degrees of success in managing fisheries to maintain sustainable fish populations. It is probably time for a major overhaul of the fisheries management system. As stated earlier the commercial fishing industry is becoming more industrial and consolidated each year while independent fishermen from coastal communities are struggling to stay on the water. Fisheries policy values efficiency but could just as easily value small family businesses that support coastal communities

Consolidation on the water is mirrored on land by the disappearing infrastructure of seafood processing and distribution facilities. Mom and Pop operations in smaller coastal communities have not been able to compete with large vertically integrated seafood companies. As a result many small buyers have folded and with them went the infrastructure to support small scale fisheries. For the most part seafood buying and processing on the West Coast of the US is now in larger ports where bigger fleets land more fish.

However, there are still many ports on the West Coast of the US that have small boat fleets that catch fish sustainably but they have lost their infrastructure to easily move their fish to market. These fleets land salmon, tuna, crab, Blackcod, rockfish and halibut using hook and line or pot gear. All of these species are in demand in the market place. Hook and line or pot gear types allows fishermen to handle their fish individually and there is potential to produce superior quality product. A market place challenge is that fish caught in lower volumes will cost more than fish from large scale fisheries where volume equals value.

Though I have talked a great deal about the problem of consolidate fisheries, I do understand that we need to have large boats on the water to meet the needs of the market place. My concern is that we will loose small scale fisheries in the process of becoming efficient harvesters. We need policy that supports all scale of fishing operations seafood.

From the dock to the grocery store, seafood companies at all steps of distribution need to consider the health of the oceans in their buying practices and business

operations if they wish to have wild caught seafood to sell. Seafood marketing needs to be restructured so that sustainability is considered along with profit margins in their purchasing policies.

Many wholesale and retail companies that buy seafood also buy and distribute other food products. When companies purchase food items from land based producers, the issues of water conservation, use of chemical and fertilizers and waste management practices of food producers should be considered. Land and sea overlap as part of the same ecosystem. What happens on land directly affects the sea.

In closing I would like to share with you a snap shot of what I do in Alaska. I operate a boat that has a minimum of infrastructure and support a small community of fishermen that fish sustainably.

Five years ago, the salmon tender that I work on was converted so that in addition to buying fish we act as an at sea micro-processor. Our boat named the Angie is 74' long. She is our home and work place for the 10 weeks of salmon fishing season.

A working crew of 10 people is hired at the start of salmon season and drops to 6 crewmembers as the fishing slows. We buy hook and line caught salmon out on the fishing grounds from 10 to 20 independently owned salmon boats that range in size from 28' to 45'. The salmon that we buy is filleted by hand, vacuum packed and flash frozen down to a minimum of -30°F. We offload the frozen fish fillets to a freezer container on the dock in our home port of Craig, Alaska. When the container is full of salmon it is loaded on a barge and towed 600 miles to Seattle where it goes into the market. While the boat now creates a value added salmon product, the shift from acting solely as a fish buyer to buyer-processor vessel reduced our buying capacity by about 60%. This is due to the increased handling and time required to create a high quality blast frozen salmon fillet.

The fish processing we do on the Angie in Alaska with salmon could be done on land in any West coast fishing community that has a year round multi species catch. Most coastal fishing communities on the West coast of the US are somewhere between 80 to 150 miles from the I-5 corridor. No barges or airplanes would be needed to get the fish to market. What is needed is infrastructure such as a blast freezer fitted into a shipping container and a simple processing area with running water. What is missing is a business or entrepreneurial individual who wants to share their knowledge of distribution and business management with a small group of fishermen. The partnership would result in a direct source of sustainable seafood, a great story to brand the new product line with and a new model for an old business called commercial fishing.