

Whole Foods lobster supplier had pollution violations

By JOHN RICHARDSON, Portland Press Herald Writer
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LITTLE BAY LOBSTER GROUP

LITTLE BAY LOBSTER GROUP, or Little Bay Lobster Co., is a diversified company based in Newington, N.H.

IT OPERATES a fleet of lobster boats that fishes year-round, and a large wholesale lobster pound in Newington.

LITTLE BAY owns bait and buying stations along the Maine coast in communities such as Vinalhaven and Stonington.

IT BUYS about 3 million pounds of lobster each year from Maine-based boats.

Little Bay operations were formerly known as the Shaftmaster Fishing Co., but were consolidated under the new name a year ago.

The company chosen to supply humanely handled lobsters to the new Whole Foods natural and organic supermarket in Portland appears to have a less-than-wholesome environmental record.

Little Bay Lobster Group of Newington, N.H., agreed to pay an \$86,000 fine last June to settle complaints by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The EPA said the company discharged pollutants into the Piscataqua River without the proper permits and failed to report the storage of a dangerous chemical to regulators or the public. The EPA first proposed a \$255,000 fine, but reduced the amount during negotiations with the company.

The company's president said Friday that the violations were the result of administrative oversights or practices that were being phased out at the time. He said the company cares about the environment.

"I take this stuff very seriously," said Craig Rief, who took over as president of the company in January 2006, after the violations were found.

The fine was substantial enough to make news in New Hampshire last year. Little Bay made the national news this past

week, however, after Whole Foods named it as the chain's first supplier of humanely treated live lobsters.

Rief said Friday that Whole Foods was aware of the fine before naming the company its sole supplier. Executives with Whole Foods did not return phone calls seeking comment Friday.

Whole Foods, which calls itself the world's largest natural and organic foods supermarket, banished live lobsters from its 190-plus stores last June because of concerns about how the animals are shipped and stored. The Austin, Texas-based chain decided to make an exception at its new store on Marginal Way, partly because Little Bay will deliver lobsters packed tail-down in individual slots. The company said the treatment is more compassionate and will increase survival rates.

The Portland store is set to open Wednesday.

Whole Foods' decision steamed some people in the Maine lobster industry, who said they take good care of their lobsters and that the critters do perfectly well when stored and shipped together. They also criticized the company for choosing a New Hampshire-based supplier, though Little Bay says the lobsters will come from its wholesaler in Vinalhaven.

EPA spokesman David Deegan said Friday that the \$86,000 penalty is a significant fine and that the problems found at the company's wharf in Newington posed real threats to the environment and neighbors.

The EPA concluded that Little Bay discharged wastewater containing pollutants from four outfalls into the Piscataqua River without the proper federal permits. The agency did not name the specific pollutants.

The fine also reflected the company's past practice of dipping wooden lobster traps into a pesticide called tributyltin. The chemical, which keeps worms from eating the traps, is toxic to marine life.

The company was allowed to use TBT on the traps. According to the EPA, however, the dipping process led to TBT dripping on the ground and getting washed into the river.

Finally, Little Bay was fined for not telling local and state emergency planning authorities about its storage and use of anhydrous ammonia, which is classified as an extremely hazardous substance, the agency said.

Rief said the discharge violation was a matter of failing to send monitoring reports to the agency, something that is done routinely now. The company phased out the use of wooden traps and TBT and now uses metal traps, he said.

And, according to Rief, Little Bay had informed local authorities about the ammonia, but failed to file a state report.

Rief said the problems have all been corrected, and did not involve any operations in Maine.

"It was an environmental issue that happened before I came on the scene," he said. "I want to be basically the best in class."

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