

WOLFE NEWS WIRE **TD Banknorth Donates \$76,000 to Maine Charities to Help Strengthen Communities**
[Click here for news release](#)

Whole Foods says 'no tanks' for lobsters

By **ELBERT AULL**, Staff Writer
Portland Press Herald / Maine Sunday Telegram

[E-mail this page](#)
[Reader Comments \(below\)](#)

Thursday, February 8, 2007



Associated Press Photo by Tom Martin, a Portland lobsterman, says, "When ...they tell us we're doing everything wrong, it doesn't sit well with us."

A grocery chain that roiled Maine lobstermen when it cut live lobsters from its inventory has angered the fishing community again.

At issue is whether storing lobsters in individual plastic drop-slots from catch until sale is more humane than traditional methods, and whether suggesting as much is an affront to the state's lobster industry.

"When they say they buy local and support local fishermen and farmers, and then they tell us we're doing everything wrong, obviously it doesn't sit very well with us," said Tom Martin, a Portland lobsterman.

Austin, Texas-based Whole Foods Market Inc. decided last month to sell live lobsters at its soon-to-open store in Portland.

The decision means the store along Franklin Arterial will be unique among the chain's 190-plus locations when it opens next week with live lobsters in its inventory. Whole Foods dropped lobsters in June because of concerns about animal rights. Lobster groups were fine with the ban until the company announced that it will change its rules for Portland after finding a New Hampshire company with a more compassionate way to bring lobsters to retailers.

"The suggestion is, they know how to do it better," said Kristen Millar, executive director of the Maine Lobster Promotion Council.

The advocacy group fired off an angry press release Wednesday, calling the chain's decision a "flip-flop" and its contract with Little Bay Lobster Group, based in New Hampshire, an insult to Maine lobstermen.

Whole Foods and Little Bay, which runs a lobstering operation in Vinalhaven that will supply the Portland store, said the council's response was exaggerated and misleading.

"We're not saying anybody's bad, or wrong. We're saying this meets the standards we have," said David Lannon, regional president.

Whole Foods signed a contract with Little Bay to receive live lobsters from its operation in Vinalhaven. The fishermen who supply Little Bay and Whole Foods arrange their lobsters vertically, claws up and tails down, in plastic cubbyholes that don't allow the lobsters to crawl on one another, officials from both companies said.

The critters will remain isolated in small plastic slots at the Portland store until they are purchased, at which point they will be electrocuted for people who want their lobster cooked in the store. Customers who leave with live lobsters will be given a card outlining a humane preparation method, they said.

Craig Rief, president and chief executive officer of Little Bay, said isolating lobsters instead of storing them together in crates has reduced the number that die before they get to retailers. Rief said the storage method also improves the appearance of lobsters at market, where picky customers might not want one with its antennae chewed off by one of its crate-mates.

That's good for Little Bay, which adopted the alternative storage units as a way to preserve lobsters shipped overseas and not because of animal rights concerns, he said.

Mortality rates for lobsters in transport fluctuate throughout the year, but average around 2 percent, said Robert Bayer, a professor of animal science at UMaine who studies lobsters.

Bayer said suppliers have stored lobsters in individual slots for years, but the method has not carried over to grocery stores and fish markets. "At the retail level, it is new," he said.

Bayer said the grocery chain's concern about treatment of lobsters is misplaced because they have a nervous system too primitive to feel pain. "It's like an insect," he said.

Whole Foods based its decision to stop selling live lobsters on a 2005 report from the European Food Safety Authority Animal Health and Welfare panel, which concluded that lobsters and crabs appear to feel pain.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, which applauded Whole Foods' decision to drop live-lobster sales, was less enthusiastic on Wednesday.

"We certainly wish that no live lobsters were sold at any Whole Foods, or any other store for that matter," said Matt Prescott, a spokesman for the animal-rights group based in Norfolk, Va. Prescott said Whole Foods should be applauded, however, for trying to improve lobsters' living conditions before sale.

Little Bay's Rief said a company study showed a mortality rate of between 3 and 5 percent for lobsters stored together. During the same study, the company did not lose any lobsters that were stored in individual slots, he said.

"The main motivator for (the change) was bottom line," Rief said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Staff Writer *Elbert Aull* can be contacted at 791-6325 or at:

eaull@pressherald.com

Reader comments

kennebunked of Kennebunk, ME
Feb 14, 2007 12:00 PM

We are talking about lobster right, not the slaughter of large animals with complex brains or about the other silly problems facing our nation and the world...people, you need to get out more and forget about how a lobster feels. If Whole foods wants to do something to help humanity they can talk about the energy efficient showcases they have or maybe don;t have (incidentally 40% of the national electric bill comes from industrial usage like Wholefoods stores)...maybe this would be a more constructive conversation? Maybe its not as touchy feely?

angela of portland, ME
Feb 14, 2007 11:19 AM

The lobster that is sold at Whole Foods is caught in Maine, by Maine lobstermen and women. The company that sells them to Whole Foods in Portland is not based in Maine. If people want to buy lobster from Whole Foods it is their choice, and if they want it electrocuted first, that is their choice too. It's not rocket science.

Holly Eaton of Portland, ME
Feb 14, 2007 9:23 AM

I think the safe thing to do is buy lobster from a lobsterman who lives and works in Maine. It's more about supporting our Maine economy. That's part of what Whole Foods is supposed to encourage! I'm not quite sure how this recent decision is supposed to increase their popularity here in Portland? As a company they don't support inhumane capturing/fishing of wildlife, but they're making an exception in Portland, just because it's Maine? Seems more like an exception to make money, and not really to support the Maine economy or Maine way of life.

Robert Sezak of Waterville, ME
Feb 8, 2007 10:22 AM

I don't eat Lobster. I know what they eat! Ug. But everyone I know who does eat lobster buys them alive to take home to cook. They would never buy a dead lobster! Plus who are these misguided people who run Whole Foods? They should purchase them directly and locally! Sheesh. I suspect that it really doesn't matter as was pointed out to me folks drive out of town to shop at the Box Store. My questions are How does this effect the Maine Lobster Quality seal that the State endorsed? Will WF lobsters have the seal? After all the claim is that even though they are purchased from a New Hampshire outfit, they are being sold to the broker by Maine fisherman. When are Maine Lobsters not really Maine Lobster? When they are caught by Maine fisherman fishing in Massachusetts? Or sold by Maine lobsterman to an out of state facility?

You must be a registered user of MaineToday.com to post a comment. [Register or log in.](#)

