Northeast Lobstermen Begin to Realize Benefits From the USDA’s Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) Program

Since the program began in the early winter of 2010, more than 4,100 lobstermen, lobstermen’s spouses, and sternmen signed into the program. To date, over $2.1 million in direct financial assistance has been distributed to participants. The TAA program covers industry members in Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut, and is targeted at building business skills, stimulating business activity, and delivering financial aid.

While the program has had its share of lumps and bumps, the dollars and the training have come in handy, even to those who were pretty skeptical of the program in the first place.

Money helps-
Ed Hutchins, a commercial lobsterman from Cape Porpoise, ME, registered for the program despite very mixed feelings about TAA as a use of taxpayer money. The TAA program helped to offset the costs of his investment in electronics upgrades, which Hutchins had planned to do before the TAA program came around. While he would not look for the program to be run again, Hutchins said he did notice an immediate improvement in his catches.

Training helps-
For others, the business training has been the real key. Ed Heaphy of Dover, NH has been fishing for more than 50 years, “The marketing information was really good,” he said, “it’s not a cure-all, and you can’t do much about fixed expenses, but it was really good to hear about other opportunities.” Heaphy plans on venturing into some limited retail and delivery. “We really have to try to get more value from our catch,” he said.

Some of those “other opportunities” have been linked to fishing, and some have not. For Steve Hale, who was a full-time fishermen before a dockside injury a decade ago, the TAA program came at “just the right time.” While he still fishes 200-300 traps, he has been focusing on his lobster tourism business – Captain Jack Lobsterboat Adventures, sailing out of Rockland, ME.

“When I first heard of it, I thought it was a chance to get some money to expand; I’d been wanting to expand. Then I heard there were people (business consultants) to help me grow my business, it really got my ears perked up.”

“I think the lobster industry is changing. We can do two things: we sit at the dock or at home, or we can get up off our butts and do something about it. This program affords fishermen an opportunity to get up and get out there, and try to make a change,” said Hale.

Family helps–
Karan Cushman, of Port Clyde, ME, is enrolled in the program as the representative for her
husband's fishing business.

But the time she spent learning about business planning and development will help her own business, Cushman Creative, which does everything from logo design to messaging and brand imaging.

"Every business should go through this process before starting out," she said. “It's the foundation for building a viable business. Often small business owners' overlook the importance of some of these steps because they are too busy doing the actual work. Going through the process of business planning can help people decide if their idea is a good one."

About 1,600 registered fishermen have not yet started the workshop portion of the program. The workshops can be completed online or in person, and 12 hours are required to qualify for the initial payment of $971. While far short of the original amount expected maximum it still works out to a rate of about $80 per hour, and it essentially means that participants are getting paid to learn information that might make their businesses more profitable.

With additional payments for completing the in-depth business plan, participants receive nearly $3,000 for valuable training, and funds that can be applied to their fishing operation or some new venture. Trainings continue to be held in person through 2012 and early 2013, and the on-line versions are available any time. The deadline for the program overall is September 2013. Participants are encouraged not to wait until the last minute, as the in-person workshop will end in early 2013.

Some of the people who signed up but have not yet started the TAA program might be thinking that the program is going to be too complicated, or too difficult. Not so, says Todd Babula, of Portsmouth, NH. “I've been working with (business consultant) Suzanne Knight, and she's been great."

"I definitely think this will help my business” he said; “I know a lot of guys haven’t started because they’re gun-shy, but it’s been really interesting and it’s not that hard."

All TAA information, workshop materials and schedules are available on several websites:

TAA For Farmers:  
www.taafarmers.org

Maine Lobstermen's Association:  
www.mainelobstermen.org

Maine Sea Grant:  
www.seagrant.umaine.edu

©2012 Fishermen's Voice  |  Website design by Lynn Pussic - e-mail