

Interviewee Name: Mary Beth Tooley

Project/Collection Title: Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Galen Koch (The First Coast) and Giulia Cardoso (College of the Atlantic)

Interview Location: Rockland, Maine

Date of Interview: 03-02-2019

Interview Description:

Mary Beth Tooley, an employee for O'Hara Corporations from Lincolnville, ME, talks about the looming issue of bait shortage and how it is affecting O'Hara's business, her personal life, and the well-being of her community.

Collection Description:

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Transcribed By: Giulia Cardoso

Start of MARYBETH_TOOLEY_VMFF2019_AUDIO01

[0:05:31.1]

GK: Galen Koch

GC: Giulia Cardoso

MBT: Mary Beth Tooley

[0:00:00.0]

(Mumbling.)

MBT: Oh that's not what I was supposed to put there.

GC: Oh it's okay.

GK: That's okay. Yeah, just your name on the top and that's fine!

MBT: Trying to go fast, I'm not reading it.

GK: No worries. Oh, can you get the sign up?

GC: Oh yeah.

(Noise in background.)

GK: Here, can you put the sign up?

(Noise in background.)

GK: Right (laughs). Oh (laughs). Oh my gosh.

MBT: Okay.

GK: Ok, so Mary Beth I'll just have you say your first and last name.

MBT: Ok. Uhm my name is Mary Beth Tooley.

GK: And how do you spell Tooley?

MBT: T-O-O-L-E-Y.

GK: And what is your occupation and your home town?

MBT: So I live in Lincolnville, Maine, uhm, but I work for the O'Hara Corporation in Rockland, Maine. And O'Hara is uhm, a long-time uhm, family-held company uh, that started in Boston in 1906. So, over 100 years in fishing. And uhm, when the company started out and for most of those years it was, uhm, the company was all about New England groundfish.

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MBT: Uhm, but when the Hague Line decision came in, where our boats fished was now in Canadian waters. So, went through a period of not so good, and one of our captains went to the Bering Sea to make some money, because our boats were not making money. He came back and he said, "Frank, there was fish." So, all of our groundfish interest was now uhm, in the North Pacific and uhm, in New England we have 11 scallop boats that run out of New Bedford and two herring boats that are ho—home ported out of Rockland, Maine.

GK: And so they're doing in the North Atlantic section, in the Bering Sea? Or . . .

MBT: North Pacific.

GK: In the North Pacific. Okay.

MBT: Yeah, so our boats are operating in the Bering Sea.

GK: The Bering Sea is in the North Pacific.

MBT: Yeah.

GK: You're seeing all of my geographical like (laughter in background).

MBT: It's alright.

GK: Horrible knowledge. Oh my God.

MBT: Yeah. So, we, we fish in, in the Bering Sea, Aleutian Islands and the Gulf of Alaska. So that's the North Pacific region.

GK: Ok, okay. And so those boats are based out of Rockland?

[0:02:00.4]

MBT: No, those boats are home-based out of Seattle.

GK: Okay.

MBT: And pretty much uhm, all of your Bering, the vast majority of the Bering Sea uh, fisheries are prosecuted by vessels that are home-ported out of Seattle.

GK: Okay.

MBT: Uhm, they're big boats, getting the work done, what you need to do, everyone comes down once a year, gets all the work done and heads back up.

GK: Okay.

MBT: So. The pollock boats you know, the larger, longline fleet with the non-pollock groundfish, crabbers, most of those boats are really out of Seattle.

GK: And so, is that then er, is that catch being shipped back here to be sold, or . . .

MBT: Some of it, yes. Yep. We, uhm, you know, we hadn't got on board and freeze and so we, uh, pull into Dutch Harbor and uh, take those sh—the, you know, block frozen fish, put it right on to trampers, most of it goes to China, because it's flatfish and needs to be hand-filled which is not something you can really get done in the US. But when we first went we were bringing fish back to Boston for filleting.

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But it doesn't pay, it didn't, you know, money-wise, that just doesn't pan out. So, but, now, however, we, we send it in to China and then bring it back. And so a lot of our fish goes to Eastern Fisheries in uhm, in New Bedford, which is a joint-venture company between the O'Hara Corporation and Nordic Fisheries. And, uhm, they have it, have a, a good-sized marketing team. And so we'll go to the Boston Seafood Show in a couple of weeks and we'll have uhm, you know, scallops laid out, and, and catch out of the, the Bering Sea as well.

GK: Wow.

MBT: Yeah.

GK: And how did you, how did you end up in this line of work? What's your fisheries history?

MBT: Did not grow up in a fishing family. I grew up in a coastal town in, in New Hampshire, in Portsmouth. And, uhm, ended up marrying a fisherman, so that'll do it (laughs). But, uh, he was from here, uhm, he grew up in Camden and uh, so, I don't know, he was, I think I met him when I was 20 and still in school, and uhm, then.

[0:04:00.3]

There's still that, I, I moved to Maine. And then, you know, and then in, in the uhm, we had state-managed herring, uhm, during that period of time, so there was some meetings and things that I, that I had gone to and then, uhm, because I started going because, uh, all he did was complain about everything. And, you know, growing up in New Hampshire, have a lot of access to elections and I mean, as kids, we always, you know, everybody . . . grew up in a family of 5, every presidential election, everybody picks their candidate and then we all go out compete against each other. It was great (laughs). But you meet a lot of politicians along the way, you know? I mean, you know, they, they come to New Hampshire and so, public process to me was just something we kinda grew up with and it's like, well, in, you know, my house growing up nobody had a right to complain about anything unless they were doing something about it. So . . . it was just like, so you need to either shut up or go to meetings (laughs) one of them, right? Of course, in the end, I am the one that ended up in the meetings, but, the New England Fishery Management Council decided in the mid-90s to develop a, uh.

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Federal FMP for herring, which had not been in place before, and we owned a carrier vessel, so we were, we were chasing a, a seiner from uh, Vinalhaven, [inaudible], and uhm, we all

knew this was happening, he called me up, he said, "They're gonna do this, you have to go." I'm like, "Alright, I'll go."

GK: You have to go where?

MBT: To the meetings (laughs) and I'm ok, so I go and even though I'm a full-time employee at O'Hara's and they own half.

[0:05:31.1]

Start of MARYBETH_TOOLEY_VMFF2019_AUDIO02

[0:18:03.5]

GK: Galen Koch

GC: Giulia Cardoso

MBT: Mary Beth Tooley

[0:00:00.0]

GK: Oh I have questions, of course.

MBT: Okay (laughs).

GK: Yeah, but I wanted to, I did wanna ask you about some of what we were talking about right now, that's what's going on for you at O'Hara with the herring quotas. And, uhm, if you just, I don't know, explain some of the experiences that you have had at the Fishermen's Forum with that, and what your concerns as a company and a person are?

MBT: So, first of all, as a company, you know, I, you know in our internal conversations about where we're at, uhm, we're, we're, as an industry we're gonna meet with Pat and uhm, on the, uh, in a week or so. And that discussion, uhm, is gonna be with vessel-owners about requesting a, for, a, the Secretary of Commerce to decl—declare a fishery disaster. So, for us, I mean, Frank O'Hara, who is, who runs the company, it's Frank Junior, so he's my age, and, you know, I've talked about it and pretty much for us, we're a pretty diversified company. And, uhm, you know, the fact that our herring, you know, boats are not gonna make money and may lose money.

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This year and next year, and then we hope for improvement after that, is not going to, you know, break the company. It's not good, you know, we certainly don't like to see boats that don't make money and actually go backwards, but, but we'll be fine, you know? 'Cause it's, we've got a lot going on. But, uhm, we worry about the crew. 'Cause it's not clear if they can afford to stay, whether they want to or not, can you really afford to stay? I mean, they, they, you know, they have houses and mortgages and kids, and . . . So this really, and so people have asked me "Well, what kind of planning are you doing about that?" and I'm like, "We're not. What kind of planning would you do?" We really can't even quite figure out what that's gonna look like until we get there. But they know, I mean, I came home from the uh, last, uh,

you know, working group meeting, uhm, for the assessment and, and I called Frank on the way home, you know, it's, it's information, people are gonna know about it soon enough, so I wanna meet with them right away so they can hear it first from me, before they start hearing stuff on the dock, that generally is not correct.

[0:02:05.8]

MBT: So we did, kind of tough meeting.

GK: And that meeting was saying, you know, is that, if they don't bring in herring, I mean they're paid by their catch, right?

MBT: Right. Yeah.

GK: So that's what you were meeting about and just the reality of that?

MBT: Well. Give them a heads up, you know, I mean, this was last June. It's like, you know, have an opportunity to make some money this summer and save every dime you can. And we'll see where we end up, but . . .

GK: Yeah

MBT: That's the reality, what are you gonna say?

GK: And, I, yeah I mean, so in that situation their only option I guess, would they keep going? Will your boats keep going and trying to catch.

MBT: State won't let us keep going. We'll be put on a limit. So in the past few years, we've had limits because Georges Bank has not been as productive as it had been prior, and the po—political mindset work in managing the fishery.

[0:03:01.0]

MBT: Had, had shifted, the historical split between the Gulf of Maine and, and Georges, so that there was more fish quota available on Georges than in the Gulf of Maine. So we really had been not, you know, uhm, most of our harvest coming from the Gulf of Maine so we already had, you know, the, the Commissioner shorting our available fish and, and how much each boat can catch, so this year would just be, you know, much more severe than that, but . . . So, yeah, it'll be managed tightly. Nobody wants to see it go over. And we don't wanna see it go over either, because if we go over, then they deduct it from next year. So that doesn't benefit us in any way, to go over, we gotta stay within those limits and, and we will. We'll do it.

GK: And what are some of the . . . are there different, uhm, like infrastructure thin—you were talking about uh, fre—the freezing of some of this bait, and.

MBT: Right. So we, uhm, have sold frozen bait, uhm, a variety of different species for, uhm, you know, a good many years.

[0:04:02.5]

MBT: And, uhm, it's not the preferred bait, it's more expensive, uhm, you know, some people do like it at certain times of the year, it's generally harder bait, herring is soft and so in the spring and the fall uh, you know, some people would rather just use frozen bait if the catch rate is decent and supported, but, uhm you know. So we're gonna need to increase that, but, uhm, and we have the largest freezer capacity for bait company in Maine, but, uhm, it's not enough. So that the issue truly is, uhm, you know, what, there's plenty of products you can buy. I mean, that's not necessarily the limiting factor. But, you have to, the State of Maine has a prohibited and allowed list, so if you're gonna bring in something from another region you have to, you know, submit your request to, to the DMR and then they have a committee of, uh, scientists, pathology type of people, who review it for, if it's allowed or not allowed, if there are concerns. Which is great. I think it's super important.

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And I was talking to a lobsterman today, "Some people gonna bring in all kinds of stuff and it'll be fine." I said, "No" (laughs), I said, "If you see that, please, you know, pick up the phone, first of all, tell that person, "No, it's not ok," and then if they continue, you pick up the phone and you call the Marine Patrol, we cannot do that." We cann—we've been putting anywhere from, you know, 50, 60, somewhere near 70 thousand metric tons of herring in, in bait bags in, in New England. And that's a lot of fish going in the water. We cannot have people do that. So we have, you know, sent in some request of our own, just sort of broaden, uhm, you know, what we could utilize. So there's that. So that's one, one issue relative to frozen bait. Another one is, uhm, you know, is transportation. Transportations are expensive and, you know, we, you have a certain prize poised. Like, can we get it to Rockland for this prize? And, uhm, and tha—and that's generally how we look at it. We might go a little higher, but, uhm, we hate, we really will strive to try to keep that price as close to where we are.

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I mean, I think, it can go up some, but we, we, our preference is not have it go up too much. I think fresh herring is gonna go up, I don't think there's any way around that but, uhm, you know, but frozen is already more expensive. And so, we'll do our best and see where that goes. So there's that. And then there's just storage. So, we can't like, just buy a whole bunch of it and bring it now, because where are we gonna put it? Yeah, there's no place to put it, and, and Frank says there's not enough uh, freezer capacity in New England to cover the, the, what you need for the herring, for the lobster fishery. It just doesn't even exist. Now I don't know how he calculates that, I didn't ask and he . . . you know, maybe there's some freezers that are just for groceries or something, and he's not counting. I, I don't really know, but, but he does know what he's talking about, so I just took it at face value, right (laughs)? And, uh, so what we need to do is try to be able to roll fish in on a schedule.

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So we're looking at freezer capacity in Seattle, we're looking at freezer capacity in, in Canada. And, uhm, I don't know exactly where those conversations are at, but . . . 'Cause we have to have it timing-wise, has to be right.

GK: Could you sell, uhm, some of the different fish that you're bringing in as bait? I mean, a different kind of [inaudible].

MBT: We certainly talk about it. Right now, that's not really pricing out all that great. And uh, our frozen bait guy, he's been here all weekend and uhm, you know, chatting this afternoon and uhm, like, "What do you think about them freezing heads on board?" And, uh, 'cause he was, 'cause we were talking about having racks come back from China, and, and he says, "Oh, I don't know, racks without heads," and I'm like, "Well, you could ask them to freeze the heads on the boat," and then I thought about it a minute, I'm like, "Oh, they're gonna hate that. I don't think they're gonna do that."

GK: 'Cause of the work involved or, the s—?

MBT: Yeah, it's, it takes some space, it makes the economics of a, of a trip very different.

[0:08:00.9]

And, and, you know, they would make less per trip, I don't think they would, you know, I don't think we're going there (laughs). I thought it was a good idea, but . . . (laughs). They would hate me for it though

GK: It's interesting to me that, uhm, you know, you're in a position, it seems like, as being a part of this company, were you're also put in the position where you're tryna think of solutions for a problem that's pretty.

MBT: Pretty big.

GK: Pretty big, and also, you know, is that what you thought your job was going to be? I don't know, I guess you have to think of solutions to maximize your profit, but, it [inaudible].

MBT: Well, it's more than just . . . means, that's, I mean, clearly we don't want to operate divisions within the company that lose money. I mean, that's not what you're in business for. That, we don't wanna do that. But we also, uhm, at the same time, uhm, we live in this community. And our coastal communities and the lobster fishery is so intertwined. And so we care, whether or not, you know, lobster fishery does well or not.

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And so, think that relative to that frozen bait price, I mean, you know, people come up, in, and, and I don't normally spend my time thinking about these things. It's just I think everybody's kinda brainstorming, "What about this? and what about that?" and of course people ask me these questions all the time, and we have all these wild ideas, then we go to Frank and he looks at us, he says, "Too expensive. Too expensive" (laughs). "No, no!" (laughs). Every once in a while, you get, "Uh, check that one out." But every, you know, everybody's doing it, but, uhm, but yeah, everybody's tryna think of, you know, w—we want people to fish.

GK; Yeah. And so, and you, people come to you sometimes with questions, 'cause of the company you work for?

MBT: Right. 'Cause I'm the one that's out at meetings and, and whatever and so, yeah, and so, I mean, you know, they used to call me the Herring Lady, the Federal Management Councils, to . . . now I think well, "I work on scallops too, now, you know" (laughs).

[0:10:00.5]

I was, I was "Mary Beth the Herring Lady." So yeah, so I get a lot of questions. I get a lot of questions about the stock assessment and, you know, because, uhm, like here and stuff, so, I'll see somebody and it's, "Fucking government, they're doing it to us again," and I say, "Well . . . you know." I mean, I went to all the stock assessment meetings, uhm, I think the guy who is the author for the herring stock assessment is awesome. I think he does an awesome job, uhm, you could argue about whether or not you think the data is, uh, good enough, but it is what we've used for more than 20 years and it's served us well. I mean, I can think of ways in which we could do better, uhm, the Gulf of Maine Research Institute tried to, you know, put together an acoustic survey uhm, inshore, which would have really been, uh, help data-wise, because the, obviously the federal survey is, is a bottom survey, it's not the best for pelagics, it's not designed for p—pelagics. Uhm, but uhm.

[0:11:01.6]

And I went to the peer-review for that project, and our vessels had, had, you know, uhm acoustic information on board that they, you know, did and then they did a dedicated survey, and the problem, and they have somebody come from the UK who was really familiar with those types of surveys, and he was a good guy and he says, "You know, your design is good," he thought, oh—most things about us were very good, but, uhm, he didn't think you could use them for management because they weren't able to ground-truth the results. Because there's too many traps in the water.

GK: Mmhm.

MBT: And, it's just really difficult to overcome that one. And so people say, "Well! We'll just call them up and we'll tell them we're coming and they'll move and they'll do this," and it's like, well, uh, it's like, doesn't really work quite like that when you're trying to do, you know, I think they were trying to do a grid pattern, and, and, that's a lot of, like, within time frames. You can't ask anybody in Midcoast Maine, "Oh, we're coming through next week. Everybody, move out!" (laughs). But, anyway. So, uhm.

[0:12:00.3]

So anyway, I, I think that, you know, the, the data was, was clear, uhm, and at the last modeling meeting they took, I was like the only person from the public there and, and uhm, they took an hour and a half and just talked to me about, they had a zillion questions about this and about that and, I don't, I just don't see how they could've been more thorough, so . . . We have had some low recruitment years, it was confirmed both in the commercial catch sampling, which is a good program that's been done a long time by the State of Maine, and, and also in the survey. So I think it's true. I don't necessarily think it's as, as extreme as they do, uhm, but, but I, but I do think it's true.

GK: Do you think it's temporary?

MBT: Yes. We, we already in 2018 saw significant signs of recruitment, both in the Canadian weirs, where their catch went from 2,000 metric ton to 11,000 metric ton. And that fishery is all two-year old, so . . . And then we saw it in our catch as well.

[0:13:00.4]

So that's good. And then, 'cause that's the other thing, that I got all weekend: "There's small fish everywhere!" I'm like, "That's great! I'm so excited" (laughs). That doesn't change anything for now, you know.

GK: And it doesn't mean that.

MBT: Doesn't mean the assessment was wrong.

GK: Or that we should catch them necessarily yet.

MBT: Well, we don't catch them at, when they're that small anyway.

GK: [Inaudible.]

MBT: The bait market doesn't want 'em and, and, and, and, uh, back in the day, for sardines, it may have taken some of them, but even then, they had moved away from those really small fish as well. So, I mean, there's good news, but people who don't, aren't used to the whole thing don't put those things together, you know what I mean? It's like, this is super, but NOAA doesn't change anything for this shit, that's not how it works. You know . . .

GK: Yeah, you have to wait.

MBT: Yes, we're gonna start a new assessment process next year at this time. Uhm, perhaps even . . . the day of the meeting might be in January or February, so, so in June of 2020, uh, we'll have a new assessment.

[0:14:00.3]

MBT: So I think it's likely to be an up time, uhm, to start picking up, uhm, you know, this year class is coming in. Which is good.

GK: Yeah.

MBT: And I think, my hope is that actually when they do a retro, back, that there might even be, a, you know, the year class people are talking about really should have been, I think, likely to be a 2017 year class. But we'll see how it pans out.

GK: What's a year class?

MBT: So how many fish born in that year, right?

GK: Okay.

MBT: I mean the assessment is really basic. Fish are born, they grow and they die. That's what it is.

GK: Yeah. Did you, Giulia, do you have any questions around this, to, you're . . .

GC: Uhm.

GK: It's okay if you don't (laughter in background). Just wanted to field that to you.

GC: Well, I'm curious, I'm, I've been speaking to a lot of lobstermen 'cause that's what I'm doing my research in.

GK: Mmhm.

GC: And obviously the bait issue is.

MBT: Is huge.

GC: Th—yeah. One of the two things that they talk about, and I'm wondering as a community member.

[0:15:00.1]

And, you know, if you detach yourself for a second from your professional position, how does it feel to be in that professional position. You know? You're, I'm sure that so many people come to you with this concern for their livelihood, and do you feel like they see you as someone who should come up with a solution, do you feel like they put pressure on you in that sense?

MBT: They definitely think we should come up with a solution (laughs). They're all looking at us and go, "What are you gonna do?" (laughs). Because, you know, we have one of the largest bait companies and they know we do frozen and have capacity, so, they're, I think there's more pressure on our frozen guy at, at O'Hara Bait that there is on me relative to that. And when I spoke to him, I think last week, he was really, you could tell that he was having a bad day, says "Oh, my god!" (laughs). He said, "They keep calling," he said, he says, "I cannot solve the problems of the State of Maine!" (laughs). He said, "I'm working on just covering our customers right now, and if we can do better that'd be great, but . . .". Oh my god, he was really, he was feeling a lot of pressure. And then I say to people, jokingly, it's like, "You people don't understand. I, I need to start shopping, grocery shopping in New Hampshire" (laughs). I said, 'cause, I can't go to the grocery store (laughs) without, you know, I mean I look down the aisles, it's like, no don't go down that one (laughs) next one! It's like, even the grocery store manager, uh, it's like, "Really, Bob?" (laughs). 'Cause we, this is where we live, you know? So even if they're not lobstermen, they've got.

GC: Questions.

MBT: Questions, because everybody's like, "Oh! What are we gonna do?" So yeah, you do feel it, definitely.

GC: Mmhm.

MBT: Hard not to.

GK: Yeah. Well, I hope that next year we can get an update from you again and see how it all played out [inaudible].

MBT: Yeah and next year, you know, uhm, is looking to be worse than this year.

[0:17:00.9]

Uhm, w—but if we get a really good stock assessment, so I've been really pushing the agency, they have the authority to do in-season adjustments. And, uhm, even if it's a slight adjustment that would get us back to where we are this year or something, but we'll have to wait and see. That process takes, you know, I mean, they'll [inaudible] uhm, the final stock assessment meeting in June, and then usually by, you know, uh, which would include a peer-review and, uhm, and they need to go to the SSC, and there's a bunch of different steps, but if there's a way to sort of get it moving at a faster pace, I mean if we had even just a little bit more fish in September that would be huge. You know? September's a big month. August, September, early October, it's when the majority of the lobsters are landed, so . . . I don't know if that will work, but I'll try anyway.

GK: Keep trying, yeah.

MBT: Yeah, keep trying.

GK: Well thanks, Mary Beth.

MBT: Oh, you're welcome.

GK: Yeah. I know there's a lot more we could say, but.

[0:18:03.5]