

letter from **portsmouth, new hampshire**

Retrenchment or renewal: Which way does the wind blow for New England's fishermen? By Terry Farish



THE WIND is what determines Peter Kendall's days. It can turn a flat calm into dangerous seas. Peter fishes year-round on the good days, getting up at 3 a.m.; it doesn't matter what the season.

At 36, Peter is one of the youngest fishermen on the New Hampshire Seacoast fishermen's fleet—but not that young. There aren't many new people wanting to get into fishing these days. The industry is precarious.

When Peter gets up, he checks the weather station and the National Weather Service's marine forecast. He calls "the government"—the National Marine Fisheries Service—to get his sailing number, which will track his

A FISH STORY

"We're getting good at trying to avoid fish," says Peter Kendall, a fisherman based in Portsmouth.





days and hours at sea. On the way to the pier, he checks the sway of the flag in front of Sanders Restaurant on Route 1. He steams out of Rye past Boone Island in the Gulf of Maine and sets out his net.

Pete, as his wife Beth calls him, is a first-generation fisherman. He graduated from Portsmouth High and went on to study resource economics at the University of New Hampshire. While he was still in high school he began as a lumper at the Portsmouth Fishermen's Co-op—the guy who does the unloading, culling, weighing, and icing when the fishing boats land with their catch. He kept the job through summers in college and later became the Co-op's manager, working 80-hour weeks to find out what markets were

paying for a given catch. But he always wanted to fish, and he could make more money fishing with fewer hours.

The day he asked Beth to marry him, he also bought an old wooden boat, a 50-foot trawler, along with a fishing permit. He bought the boat and the permit for \$35,000, and he told Beth he was going to name it for her—the *Elizabeth Ann*.

ON A SHORE DAY with a cool wind, Peter is standing out on the wharf at the Co-op, looking down on the *Elizabeth Ann* who lies low with the tide. Peter looks at her and says, part with irony and part with pride in the skill it takes, "We're getting good at trying to avoid fish." He can catch 5,000 pounds of cod in 20

minutes, so he's learned how long a tow he needs to restrict his catch to the limit of 800 pounds. "We're also getting good at keeping fish alive," he says, referring to the ones caught over the limit. "Cod don't die from trawling now." He can toss them back to the sea alive.

Peter and other fishermen have developed these tactics after concern about over-fishing led regulators to severely restrict the catch of many species and limit the number of days fishermen can spend at sea. From North Carolina to Maine, only 1,400 groundfishing permits are issued—the permit required to catch cod, flounder, monkfish, pollock, hake. The fishermen holding these permits are allowed approximately 70 days at sea in a

Catch limits and rules on days at sea have cut into fishermen's earnings. Some have lost as much as half their income in just one year.

year; the latest proposals would decrease this to 53. As a result, many Seacoast fishermen diversify and also fish for shrimp, scallops, tuna, and lobster—each with distinct catch restrictions—to make up for the days when they can't go groundfishing.

About 26 dragnets, gillnetters, and lobster boats—small boats ranging from 40 to 55 feet—fish out of the Portsmouth Co-op. About as many boats are at the Co-op as there were before the tough regulations started in the mid

1990s, but their income has become more tenuous. Some Portsmouth crewmen have seen their income decline by half over the past year. But this hasn't stopped these fishermen from checking the wind in the trees and taking advantage of every day they can have at sea. For his part, Peter plans to run two boats, each of which will have her own allotment of days at sea so that Peter can fish more. And he continues to diversify with shrimping.

The Co-op that Peter used to manage is also suffering. Its revenue comes from unloading fees, roughly 10 cents per pound, that fishermen pay into the Co-op. But the regulations limiting fishermen's days at sea, the regional closures (the region off Portsmouth is closed from April through June), and the limits on species have all cut into the Co-op's business. In 1998, 6 to 7 million pounds were unloaded. In 2004, it will be 3 to 3.5 million pounds—dropped by half in six years.

Peter and others will watch and plan carefully for the Co-op's future as the impact of the new regulations becomes clear. Peter's been the one at the Co-op who has broken through some of the distrust between fishermen and scientists as they sort out the rules to protect fish stock. He tells the other fishermen, "You can't just tell the researchers there's plenty of

cod. You have to document it." And he works with researchers on his boat to collect data, something not a lot of fishermen want to do. Peter is committed to building new relationships and making it by the new rules.

BETH, TOO, HAS LEARNED to pay attention to the sway of the trees. Often Pete's cell phone is out of range when he's offshore, but some mornings it works and he calls Beth to tell her what it's like at sea. Flat calm, he'll tell her. Fifteen miles visibility. He wishes she could see the sunrise. The sky is oranges and purples and blues. The sun looks like a burning ball in the sky.

But not every day is like that. One time when the phone did work, Beth almost wished it hadn't. Pete called, trying to spare her from hearing about him from the media. "He said he was taking on water," she remembers. She started to cry sitting at her dining room table. It was blowing 40 knots. The seas were 8 foot. "He said, 'Honey, I don't know if I'm going to make it.'"

A seam in the wooden hull had split, and the *Elizabeth Ann* had water in her fo'c's'le (forward bow), the engine room, the fish hold. A boat can go down in minutes. But that day, other fishing boats stayed by until a Coast Guard vessel arrived and gave him a tow home. This week he's closing on a new fiberglass *Elizabeth Ann*.

Pete doesn't want his son to fish. Out on the pier, overlooking the battered *Elizabeth Ann*, he shakes his head. "He wants to come out with me. I want to take him out. He's real interested. But I don't want this life for my son."

Sometimes, if it gets to be suppertime and Pete's not home yet and the trees out back show a strong gust of wind, Beth pops the kids in the car. They drive toward the pier, Beth's eyes on the flag out front of Sanders Restaurant. She pulls out the binoculars and they wait, taking turns watching for the first sight of Pete steaming in. *

TERRY FARISH IS THE AUTHOR OF *HOUSE IN EARNEST* AND *IF THE TIGER*. SHE LIVES ON THE SEACOAST AND IS WRITING A BOOK ABOUT GROWING UP IN A FISHERMAN'S FAMILY.

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