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# Powerful US, Canadian wholesale network Sea Pact shares COVID-19 strategies

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Sea Pact, a network of 11 large to mid-sized US and Canadian wholesalers, move 225 million pounds of seafood worth more than a combined \$1.6 billion annually, quantities that would make it the fourth-largest seafood company in North America. So when it suggests a set of standards to promote sustainable fisheries, it makes a difference.

Likewise, when the group -- born roughly seven years ago -- turns its focus to helping the seafood industry survive the coronavirus crisis, it's also worth paying attention.

Sea Pact, which includes among its members the likes of Rancho Dominguez, California-based Santa Monica Seafood and Chicago, Illinois-based Fortune Fish & Gourmet, started roughly a month ago to hold weekly Zoom meetings where each member shares their experiences and solutions with each other for dealing with some of the pandemic's biggest problems, like the loss of foodservice customers, managing director Rob Johnson told *Undercurrent News*.

Every member company has provided a representative on each call, Johnson said. Some of the ideas being suggested and refined have included pivoting from foodservice more to retail, direct to consumer sales, home deliveries and developing special seafood boxes.

As an example, J.J. McDonnell & Co., an Elkridge, Maryland-based seafood wholesaler and a member of Sea Pact since 2013, recently shared its experience with implementing the use of a "will call" window for direct-to-consumer sales, Stephanie Pazzaglia, the company's business development manager, told *Undercurrent*. The company, which previously relied on food service for about 60% of its sales, is now making its products available to consumers to pick up six days a week.

After just a few mentions via Instagram and on its Facebook page, the company saw an increase in such sales last week and it's not unusual to get more than a dozen consumer purchases in a day, she said.

Sea Pact members are offering discounts and donations to employees and doing lots of community outreach, too. J.J. McDonnell has been giving out 300 crabcake meals per week, including donations to local hospitals and also a local organization set up to provide assistance to restaurant workers now without jobs, for example.

The member companies are also sharing their best ideas and experiences when it comes to promoting public health and safety, said Johnson. Many have ramped up processing to deal with greater retail demand and, in some cases, switched to more and alternate processing periods to better spread out workers among other health and safety measures, he said. Some are worried about keeping staff employed during a down business period, while others need more workers.

Members are sorting out how to use government employment funds, Johnson said.

"We have laid a strong foundation of trust from working closely together in non-crisis situations, and that 'trust bank' is allowing us to support each other's ability to adapt our businesses and find and replicate creative solutions," he said.



 Rob Johnson, managing director of Sea Pact.



📷 George McManus III, owner of J.J. McDonnell, in Elkridge, Maryland.

Also, for the past three weeks, Sea Pact has been using its platform to share seafood product needs and haves, for sale and bartering purposes -- enabling its members to better meet seafood supply needs, or sell products, and, in at least one case, even share and distribute valuable personal protective equipment (PPE), such as face masks and gloves for processing workers.

The communications are being made via group email chains, in addition to bilateral business exchanges, Johnson said.

“We're finding that many companies are in the same boat or in a similar position for some products,” Johnson said. “There are just sometimes contracts in place with customers or suppliers that one member isn't in a position to take advantage of or utilize this week, but maybe another member can step up and fulfill the role.”

## A 'pre-competitive collaboration'

If you haven't heard of Sea Pact, you've missed out on one of the more interesting stories in the seafood industry. The group, formed in 2013, describes itself as a "pre-competitive collaboration".

It has grown from its six original members (also Intercity Packers Meat & Seafood, in Vancouver, British Columbia; Ipswich Shellfish Group, in Boston, Massachusetts; Seacore Seafood, in Toronto, Ontario; and Seattle Fish Co., in Denver, Colorado) by adding five more (also Euclid Fish Company, in Cleveland, Ohio; Inland Seafood Company, in Atlanta, Georgia; North Atlantic, in Portland, Maine; and Stavis Seafoods, also in Boston).



📷 A Fortune Fish & Gourmet truck.

Members pay annual dues and commit various expertise and resources in addition to agreeing to a set of eight standards, several of which relate to promoting more sustainable fisheries and aquaculture. Sea Pact works with three key nongovernmental organizations active in the seafood sector: Fishwise, Ocean Outcomes and Sustainable Fisheries Partnership.

Together, Sea Pact has contributed more than a half-million dollars to 28 different grants. In March 2019, the group helped support a project to reduce "ghost" gear in China's red swimming crab fishery, an effort to integrate social responsibility into fishery improvement projects internationally and also a program aimed at inspiring students at a Florida high school to pursue careers in aquaculture.

"Sea Pact is focusing its funding and engagement on key seafood sustainability issues and innovative pilots and partnerships for transformational change," Johnson said.

However, on March 24, it declared its additional focus on the coronavirus in a statement:

"By showing leadership and helping each other as colleagues, we aim to inspire strong community sense and collaboration for stakeholders across the whole diverse seafood supply chain," the group said. "It's more important now than ever to come together as a unified seafood industry in all the ways that we can."

"Sea Pact wants to ensure that the seafood industry and the people and communities it serves collectively get through this successfully, to not only survive but thrive when the world emerges from this crisis."

Mary Smith, director of sustainability at Inland Seafood, said her employee-owned company's participation in Sea Pact was valuable before COVID-19, but it's been "really valuable to have that group to tie into right now, especially during a time where we are struggling to find connection.

"Even just on an emotional level, it's been really nice to sort of check-in with everybody and to see everyone's faces and just know that we are all sort of sharing the same struggles," she told *Undercurrent*, speaking of the Zoom meetings. "It's validating also to see other businesses that are similar to ours, how they're pivoting, that we're all making a lot of the same moves, sharing ways that we're working to support our teams inside, making changes for the safety and health of



📷 Santa Monica Seafood's restaurant on Wilshire Boulevard, in Santa Monica, California.

employees, supporting each other in that way, and supporting our major retail customers."

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