

Canadian Lobster Fishermen Union Reaches Agreement

the Associated Press

FREDERICTON, New Brunswick (AP) — The union representing lobster fishermen in New Brunswick said Saturday that it has reached an agreement with the provincial government and fish processing plants after fishermen blockaded several Canadian plants, demanding that they not accept cheaper lobsters from Maine.

Christian Brun of the The Maritime Fishermen's Union said a tentative deal was reached Friday night and approved by most of the fishermen early Saturday morning.

Tensions over lobster prices bubbled over last week, when fishermen in the province held demonstrations in Cap-Pele and Shediac and trucks were blocked from delivering Maine lobsters to processing plants. Canadian lobstermen say the low price of Maine lobsters is driving down prices in Canada and stealing their livelihood.

By Wednesday, every lobster processing plant in New Brunswick had shut down operations.

Maine each year ships millions of pounds of lobsters to Canada, where they're turned into a variety of products that are sold on retail markets, mostly in the U.S.

Canada has more than two dozen processing plants, while Maine has only three of any size.

Processors in New Brunswick agreed more than a week ago to pay a minimum of CA\$2.50 (US\$2.52) per pound for processed lobster and CA\$3 (US\$3.03) per pound for live market lobster but the union said it wasn't enough.

Calls for financial compensation were rejected by the New Brunswick government and the protests continued for a week before a provincial judge issued a 10-day injunction Thursday preventing fishermen from blockading the plants.

The dispute tested relations between New Brunswick and the state of Maine, where Republican Sen. Olympia Snowe called on Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to raise the matter with Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird.

Brun said the deal reached Saturday calls for processors to pay an additional 25 Canadian cents per lobster, to be matched by the union.

That will bring the price up to CA\$3 (US\$3.03) per pound for processed lobster and CA\$3.50 (US\$3.53) per pound for live market lobster.

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Brun said the union plans to take out a loan to cover the extra expense now that the province has pledged to extend a CA\$11-million (US\$11.09 million) loan program for another three years as part of the agreement.

"There is no injection of funds, no loan guarantees, nothing," he said.

"We, as a union, have gone to a bank and negotiated a loan... we borrow the money now, pay them during the season and repay it for the next three years as a loan instead of paying the province."

The union's 25 Canadian cents will come from snow crab revenues and will be capped at 15,000 pounds (6,800 kilograms) of lobster for each harvester, or less if the funds get used up sooner, he said.

The resolution only applies for the current fishery, which starts Monday in the Northumberland Strait and in the southern part of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

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