

Fishing expo support exceeds expectations

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NEW BEDFORD, Mass. — In its inaugural year of hosting the 2010 Commercial Marine Expo, the city will welcome exhibitors from throughout the country and thousands of attendees, offering a boost to the local economy and a rally cry to the industry.

The Commercial Marine Expo (formerly the Fish Expo Atlantic) is June 9-10 on the State Pier and features hundreds of exhibits, seminars, film screenings and workshops. The business-to-business trade show for professionals who earn their living on the working waterfront was formerly held in Providence, and the move to New Bedford already appears to be paying dividends: The 50,000-square-foot of inside booth exhibit halls sold out weeks ago. "We now have a waiting list — that's unprecedented in the event's 42-year history, and representative of the enthusiasm we're seeing for a commercial marine show in the Northeast," said Ted Hugger, show director.

In addition to moving the event to New Bedford, which allows exhibitors direct access to the water (including outside displays on the pier aprons and in-water space on floats and piers), Hugger, who bought the show in 2007, previously expanded the scope of the show to embrace all commercial marine businesses — fishing and fish processing, tug and barge operations, fire, police and harbor security, marine construction, military, ferry, freight, pilot and port operations.

The biennial show began in Boston and Seattle, before moving to the convention center in Providence about a decade ago. "The Providence location really didn't work very well in terms of the industry because there's not a lot of commercial fishing out of Providence," Hugger said. "On top of that, the fishing industry has contracted quite a bit, so that put a lot of pressure on the show. When I bought the show in 2007 I knew I was buying kind of a wounded duckling."

In addition to expanding the scope of the show so that it could include the entire commercial marine industry, and renaming it, he sought out a different location for 2010.

"I thought we really needed to bring the show back down to the waterfront," he said. "Commercial marine fisherman and marine operators — they are there to see boats, and gear and engines. So when the opportunity arose to bring the show to New Bedford, that fit the bill in so many ways."

In addition to water access, the new location reduced overhead costs, giving Hugger more funds to invest in marketing the show, a move that appears to have paid off already with the unprecedented sell-out of inside booth space.

Exhibitors run the gamut, from local retailers to manufacturers of equipment and products. Among the more than 140 exhibitors are John Deere Power Systems, ZF Marine, MTU Detroit Diesel and Raymarine.

"It's unique in that we are a regional show but a lot of the manufacturers treat us like we are national," he said.

He said MTU is bringing a "mammoth engine" and that visitors will see "lots of gear, and the latest

equipment that manufacturers are presenting."

"It's really a great place for people to shop. It's a good business to business kind of a platform," Hugger said.

The Expo features a seminar program that is being produced by the editors of Professional Mariner Magazine and Commercial Fisheries News. "Some real movers and shakers are presenting," Hugger said. The event also features ongoing demonstrations, the New England Fisherman of the Year competition, and net-mending and knot-tying competitions for cash prizes presented by National Fisherman Magazine.

Those in attendance will include anyone who earns their living on the waterfront — including commercial fisherman, dock workers, businesses that sell seafood or provide services to the industry, boat repairers and charter boat operators. And even though the gear is commercial grade, the event is likely to draw avid area boaters, as well.

Among the exhibitors will be Guy Cotten, Inc., maker of foul-weather gear and marine clothing, with locations in New Bedford, France, Great Britain and Spain. The company offers a complete line of commercial fishing clothing, yachting wear, leisure wear, fleece clothing and safety equipment, and manufactures its fleece garments in New Bedford with fleece purchased from Mass.-based Polartec.

"We have been participating in this trade show for many years when it was called Fish Expo when it was in Boston and then Providence, mostly to support the fishing industry on the East Coast as this is one of the few trade shows remaining on the East Coast," said Patrick Jaquet of Guy Cotten, listing the exposure, contact with fishermen, and the opportunity to show its new products as the main reasons for participating. "This year we will show our new survival suit which is in the process to be approved by the U.S. Coast Guard," Jaquet said.

Hugger said the event is as much a trade show as it is a community networking event.

"There's a lot of business that's conducted on the show floor, but there's a lot of stuff that happens before the show or because of the show," Hugger said. He mentioned one connection made by John Reardon of IMP Fishing Gear in New Bedford.

"We were approaching another company to participate, but they didn't have a New England rep," Hugger said. "I introduced them to John, and as a result, John has signed on as their rep."

"So there's a lot of subtle things that these shows do to generate and boost the local economy," he said.

Reardon said that that new relationship with that company, Wescold, is one of the many benefits that can come from the expo.

"You get a lot of positives to it," Reardon said, noting that his company tries to make it interesting, bringing hardware for display and holding a couple of contests to make it fun.

This year, the company will focus on safety. "We've had a big push on safety, it's a big part of our business, and it's growing," he said.

Reardon said he thinks the move to New Bedford is a positive one, with the city's standing as the biggest port in the country, and with the current climate for the fishing industry.

"People are really upset right now," Reardon said. "This could be a year where we see some dramatic changes in the fishing industry."

Reardon is referring to federal regulations that went into effect May 1 that assign catch shares to companies, which can buy and sell shares spread across sectors of the ocean. The cities of New Bedford and Gloucester recently joined a federal lawsuit and claim the New England Fishery Management Council illegally gave a greater location to two groups.

"We're looking at potential losses of 50 percent of our fleet," in New Bedford with the new regulations, Reardon said. "It's unfortunate. We've said time and again we don't want (government) stimulus money, we don't want a buyout, we just want to go to work. If there was a shortage of fish, we'd understand. But there's not. It's really a shame."

Hugger said he thinks the regulations have really drawn the stakeholders of the industry together in a way that's not been seen before. "There's a real sense of 'empowered community' on the docks now," he said. "And it's not just the fishermen. It's local, regional and multi-state governmental groups. It's the folks and businesses who supply and service the fishermen with equipment, materials, and services. And it's the other end of the supply chain...the businesses who purchase, process, sell, and distribute seafood."

The Expo features a Roundtable Discussion on its seminar slate, "How Catch-Share Programs Affect You" and a film screening of "TRUTH: Fishing Crisis or Government Mismanagement?" in which Rhode Island filmmaker and draggerman Brian Loftes explores the impacts of government regulation on the New England groundfishing industry.

Hugger said the fact that inside booth space sold out weeks ago is testament to the industry pulling together. "I don't know the last time this show was in a sell-out position, but I'm guessing it's been decades. So there's a real, definable vitality and enthusiasm to the regional fishery from our perspective," he said. "I think that translates into dogged commitment by the industry to address and change the issues the regulations have presented, and an optimism that by working together, they can make the necessary changes so that the industry will continue and thrive."

Hugger said he expects at least 2,000 to 2,500 attendees. "But the wild card is we've never promoted it to the full industry like this before, and the new location can make a huge difference," he said. "So we could be surprised with much higher numbers."

Hugger and Matthew A. Morrissey, executive director of the New Bedford Economic Development Council, both cited a study that indicates that attendees of this type of event typically spend about \$300 a day on lodging and other expenses.

"The ultimate impact on the economy on a two-day event will exceed about a million bucks," Morrissey said.

This kind of multi-day event is something the city expects to see more of with the addition of the newly opened Fairfield Inn and Suites.

"We have worked the last four years to make the downtown and the city a real conference destination," Morrissey said, noting that major conference and corporate events have already come to the city. The one gaping hole, he said, was the lack of a major hotel that could lure and accommodate multi-day programs. "So with the construction of the downtown hotel, what that feeds is new opportunities for conference-type events, for people to come into this city," Morrissey said. "With that basic infrastructure of the hotel, we now get to market any kind of location downtown, for conferences."

In fact, the city recently won over a global company that will host its board meeting in New Bedford.

Originally, the company was going to meet in New Bedford, but lodge its board members in Boston. "The whole thing is now coming to New Bedford as a result of that hotel," Morrissey said.

"We have set up a very strong program," he said, noting that as the first event booked as a result of the hotel, the Commercial Marine Expo "plays a very important role in that this is the largest conference we'll have in the downtown in probably 20 years.

"It will bring a very important constituency to the city. It puts people that are not directly associated with our fishing industry onto the water's edge."

It's also a leverage opportunity for the city," Morrissey said. "With opportunities like these conferences, there will be thousands of people that can come to the city, walk it themselves and receive information about the city," Morrissey said. "They'll get a clear sense of what kind of opportunity New Bedford presents."

Hugger and Morrissey credited both city and state agencies and the Harbor Development Commission with helping to make way for the show, including the completion of renovations at the State Pier.

"The support that we've gotten from the community, I've just never seen this kind of support from the business communities and agencies," Hugger said. "It's my hope that we will be back every other year like gangbusters. If the show comes off the way that it looks like it will be coming off now, we'll be back and it'll have a permanent home. It's the right place for the show."

"The Commercial Marine Expo will allow our city to show off its beauty downtown and its great restaurants," said Mayor Scott W. Lang. "It will also bring thousands of people into New Bedford who may not be acquainted with all of the maritime resources New Bedford has to offer."

Among other highlights, the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association will host a cooking demonstration with scallops. Guests can have refreshments at the ZF Marine Beer Garden, and the ZF Marine is hosting a reception on the last hour of both days.

National Fisherman will host a formal dinner and award the New England Highliner award. "That's the pinnacle of the industry," Hugger says of the event.

"We've got a new award, the Mayor's Professional Mariner Award, sponsored by the city of New Bedford and Professional Mariner Magazine. This award will be giving out each time the show comes to town, honoring an individual or organization who has made a significant contribution to the marine industry," Hugger said.

The New Bedford business group, Downtown New Bedford, Inc. will have a booth at the expo. Executive Director Diane Nichols said the informational booth will guide attendees and exhibitors to downtown businesses for entertainment, food, shopping, and necessities, and a copy of the new Downtown Visitor's Guide is being provided to all exhibitors.

Show hours are June 9, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and June 10, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Attendance is free for those who pre-register; or \$20 at the door. To register, visit comarexpo.com or call 207-799-1356.

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