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Sea to Table Missed the Boat

Sea to Table Exposé Offers Valuable Teaching Moment

Gloucester, MA, Aug. 29— As an organization committed to a seafood system that values the ocean, fishing communities, and all those whose hands touch the fish, we have deep concerns over what has been revealed in the recent AP exposé of national distributor Sea to Table and its implications for the new values-based seafood movement.

We all have a right to know where our food comes from and our seafood community has a responsibility to protect these values and provide support to businesses seeking to align with this vision. Embedded in the broad suite of values that have come to define this movement is that the public demand for seafood shouldn't dictate the supply chain. Rather, our eating patterns should align with the bounty of the ocean and the practices of community-based fishing.

The recent Associated Press (AP) [report](#) accused national Sea to Table of seafood fraud, causing many of us in the seafood community to ask deep questions. On the heels of the report's release, four ex-employees came forward revealing how they raised internal concerns to Sea to Table's leadership that were then either silenced or swept under the rug.

In order to better understand the situation and its implications to our movement, we set out to talk to as many parties involved as possible. From those conversations, we learned that Sea to Table demonstrated a significant lack of judgment in who they trusted and they dismissed early warning signs that should have triggered course correction. As a business committed to positive change in the seafood industry, they should have done better.

Instead, Sea to Table worked with seafood suppliers that many in the fishing community had known not to trust--companies that their own employees had expressed concerns about such as New York-based Gosman's Fish Market. We know Gosman's too. Local fishermen have walked us through Gosman's retail seafood display and pointed out mislabeled fish that couldn't possibly be 'local' but rather came from the world's second largest seafood wholesaler, Fulton Street Fish Market.

[\[Read about Fulton Fish Market co-opting the term 'Community Supported Fisheries' and a sign-on letter from 76 businesses across the country.\]](#)

So it was no surprise when the AP revealed how Gosman's delivered 'Montauk' fish to Sea to Table that wasn't seasonal to Montauk and caught by a fisherman who wasn't bringing fish to Montauk docks.

If Sea to Table executives knew anything about the waters off Long Island or anything about the local fishermen, they would have known there was a problem long before ex-employees and the AP investigation brought this to light.

We believe the Dimin family created Sea to Table with the best of intentions. But they have minimal boots-on-deck experience and a short history for knowing how working waterfronts operate. Sea to Table asks the public to “know your fishermen” yet they don’t really know their fishermen.

The concerns brought forward by employees and fishermen should have caused Sea to Table to alter course. Marketing materials contained information about fishing gear that didn’t always match up with the boat; boat names didn’t always match up with the fish; and fish didn’t always match up with the season.

For many seafood dealers this is par for the course. But businesses like Sea to Table, who claim to have a supply-based business model, depend on local fishermen’s catch and the seasonality of what is locally abundant to drive seafood sales.

But as Sea to Table increased sales and expanded geographical reach the warning signs that should have caused a moment of reflection were ignored. As one ex-employee put it, “The reality is that you cannot create this supply-based model on a national scale unless you are trying to change the buying habits of your customers. And Sea to Table wasn’t willing to do that.”

This is common. Too often we see seafood suppliers striving to fill orders that are mis-aligned with what local fishermen are catching. Rather than say ‘no, our fishermen are not catching this right now,’ they attempt to fill the order gap through the global commodities market which is fraught with mislabeling (among other horrors).

The values of this movement, however, require businesses to educate eaters to ‘[eat with the ecosystem](#)’ and as seafood eaters we must share the risks with fishermen by matching our taste preferences with the ocean’s abundance and embracing the diversity of species that reflect fishermen’s true catch.

Around the country this demand for responsible seafood is giving rise to alternative solutions. Over a decade ago one of those solutions emerged from the Port Clyde fishing community, which together with NAMA piloted the first ever “Community Supported Fishery”, taking its cue from the land-based “Community Supported Agriculture” (CSA) model.

Since then hundreds of other Community Supported Fisheries and other values-based seafood businesses have opened shop, supporting local fishermen, the marine ecosystem, and their community. We’ve been honored to work with several of those communities. That’s why we take very seriously the issue of Sea to Table and any others that compromise the intent and values that gave way to this new seafood movement.

Since those early CSF days, LocalCatch.org emerged to provide a platform for this growing movement and established a baseline [set of values](#) in 2016. LocalCatch.org is now the go-to hub for connecting seafood businesses, organizations, researchers and eaters and features a directory of values-based seafood companies.

To build upon this, LocalCatch.org and leaders within sister networks such as [Slow Fish](#) are considering ‘community accountability’ models that would continue to enhance trust and transparency in seafood. In many ways, the fishermen and ex-employees who raised concerns to Sea to Table demonstrated what this looks like. However, rather than dismiss them, we seek to elevate these voices and help values-based businesses make course corrections when growing pains present a challenge.

Sea to Table can take a step in the right direction by acknowledging the legitimate warning signs that were brought forth by fishermen and employees and put a system in place so that any concerns raised in the future are properly addressed.

In the meantime, Massachusetts Senator Markey is [calling for an investigation](#) on Sea to Table. This action is one of many needed to bring forth the solutions that will improve our seafood system. If the Senator is serious about his intent to find answers and justice, there is more that can be done. For starters, he, and others, should address the reasons for seafood fraud, which include the systemic corporate consolidation of fishing rights and concentration of power along the entire seafood supply chain. These solutions can be implemented in the reauthorization of the Fish Bill (Magnuson-Stevens Act) by including limits on fisheries consolidation, incentives for improving supply chains, [and more](#).

Our hope is that the AP’s exposé will add a new lens to seafood eaters, helping shift purchases to businesses that truly embody Localcatch.org values. We hope that other seafood dealers who find themselves in the same boat as Sea to Table will reconsider their business practices connect with us to identify solutions.

As for NAMA and our network, we will continue our role in moving toward good, clean, and fair seafood.

[Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance](#) is a fishermen-led organization building a broad movement toward healthy fisheries and fishing communities. We build deep and trusting relationships with community based fisherman, crew, fish-workers and allies to create effective policy and market strategies.

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The onus is now on Sea to Table to acknowledge how their intent to offer a transparent supply chain from sea to table relied too heavily on trusting seafood suppliers whose operations they didn’t fully understand. Moving forward the company must do intensive due diligence and demonstrate how exactly they plan to know their fish, their fishermen, and their seafood suppliers to avoid this pitfall in the future.

If you would like more information about this topic or to arrange interviews please contact Amy MacKown at 410-739-0194 or email amy@namanet.org or Brett Tolley at 718-570-2377 or email brett@namanet.org .