Commercial harvest and processing of seafood is a significant part of Rhode Island’s economy. The estimated total value of sales of fish in RI is over $200 million annually. Wild caught seafood is harvested by a fleet of fishing vessels ranging in size from small skiffs used in Narragansett Bay by quahoggers to large offshore trawlers and lobster/crab vessels fishing as far out as 200 miles offshore.

Coastal waters off of Rhode Island support a variety of species, and the state’s fishing fleet in turn targets several different types of fish depending on what is seasonably available, what the allowable harvest levels are, and what the market demands are (which drive prices). Some of the species landed in RI ports are: squid, herring, lobster, Jonah crabs, monkfish, various species of flounders, butterfish, haddock, cod, hake, whiting, black sea bass, scup, sea scallops, quahogs, and pollock.

What should consumers realize about RI seafood?

Most consumers do not know that as much as 90% of the seafood consumed in the U.S. is imported into the country, with little of it being inspected. Local sources of seafood can provide much fresher, healthier choices, and local fishermen need the support of their local communities. Consumers often get used to certain types of food and when it comes to seafood, they often confine themselves to a few species or dishes they are most familiar with eating.

Wild caught seafood harvested in RI and elsewhere in the U.S. is considered to be sustainably caught because of the rigorous U.S. management system in place that provides for continuous monitoring of fisheries. The best source of information on this is the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration’s website called NOAA Fish Watch located at http://www.fishwatch.gov

Scup – An example of a locally abundant, underutilized fish species

Scup (Stenotomus chrysops - also called Porgy) is a species found from Maine to North Carolina. It is relatively small, mild tasting fish that can be caught using a variety of means but usually by fish trawls. Scup are typically found in inshore waters in the summer and migrate offshore in the winter, but are available to RI fishermen year round.

Scup is considered an underutilized species because the amount landed is less than the allowable catch. For example, in 2013, the Commercial Annual Catch Limit was 30.19 million lbs. but the actual Commercial Landings for that year were only 17.87 million lbs. Pt. Judith, RI is currently the leading port for scup landings with 6.2 million lbs. landed in 2013. The reason for the low landings is that market demand for this species is low. There is a relatively small market for whole scup but this is limited.

One of the major challenges with scup is it is difficult to process into fillet form because of its bone structure. Current research has uncovered a line of seafood machinery that can be adapted to process scup effectively, producing a boneless fillet (CFRF).

Scup has the potential to replace farm raised imports such as tilapia. A higher demand for scup could result in higher prices and create more of an incentive for local fishermen to target this relatively abundant species.