

OCEANS OF FISH, FOR NOW

An oversupply leads to bargain prices, but also raises concerns for the future of the industry

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For Roger Dang, president of Fresh Island Fish, navigating business amid fallout from the coronavirus crisis means tapping into a different set of sensibilities.

"We need to look at the whole picture with our whole hearts and our whole minds," he said.

At his company this means putting Hawaii fish directly into the hands of the public.

The objective: to get fishing boats back out on the ocean and help keep Hawaii's fishing industry afloat. More on that later.

Fresh Island Fish wholesales to hotels and restaurants, which means it has a lot of inventory with few places to send it. So, since March 21, it has been selling this bounty direct to the public at unheard-of prices. Early Monday morning on Instagram, for instance, it listed 5 pounds of ahi for \$4 per pound and 5 pounds of marlin and hebi at \$3 per pound.

Sales take place curbside at Pier 38, initially creating a traffic jam along Nimitz Highway. The company was unprepared for the response. Consider that its first announcement was "a Microsoft flyer — we're not social media people, we're fish people," said Dang. "We didn't expect more than 50 people. We had a small tent outside our facility and saw a line of more than 100 cars."

Operations have since settled in, even as demand has increased to more than 300 cars, and sales are extending through April.

Dang said prices will rise because fish prices are rising in general, but he wants customers to understand that he's not trying to make a big profit. "We're running the numbers, and we will charge the cheapest prices to keep the lights on," he said. "This is only about helping the boats."

Dang said Hawaii has a fleet of about 150 boats, including some from his family of commercial fishermen. Of those, about 100 are currently docked. Fishermen have told him if they can't get back to fishing soon, they won't be able to recuperate.

He initially approached retailers with his products, offering deep discounts, but none were able to make purchases. That's

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More sources for fresh local fish

>> **Local I'a:** Works directly and exclusively with Oahu fishers who employ ethical fishing practices and whose fish can be traced to its source. Customers can join its CSF (community-supported fishery) and subscribe to a weekly share of fish, or shop at participating farmers markets. Visit localiahawaii.com for details.

>> **Flash sale:** At Nico's Kailua today, purchase 5 pounds of ahi for \$25, swordfish for \$20, from 10:30 a.m. until it runs out. In support of the fishing industry, chef-owner Nico Chaize occasionally purchases fish from the United Fishing Agency auction and sells it curbside at Nico's Pier 38, also setting up a lunch truck that sells dishes from the Nico's menu. Call 983-1263.

>> **Supermarkets:** During this time of excess supply, fresh local fish is in greater supply at many grocers. Ask about it at seafood counters.

Nson Echikar washed down an area around a row of ono Monday at Fresh Island Fish on Pier 38.



Find video at
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John Kahilihiwa loaded salmon and ahi into Brianna Guro's car Monday at the Fresh Island Fish drive-thru.

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when he turned to the public.

"It's highly expensive to operate a vessel. Right now, they can't even pay for fuel and bait. If we don't pay fishermen, there will be no fish coming," he said.

His efforts so far have helped eight or nine vessels get back to work.

Supplying Hawaii with local fish has been tremendously important to Dang. When his family acquired Fresh Island Fish in late 2018 from Bruce Johnson (founder of Uncle's Fish Market & Grill restaurants), Dang told workers the company would prioritize local product. He said the same to the restaurants and hotels he supplied.

"I told clients it would be a little more money, but when visitors come to Hawaii, they look forward to eating Hawaii fish," he said.

His approach worked, and his business grew.

Expecting that coronavirus restrictions will last at least until the end of summer, the company is working on its sales system to include online ordering, prepayment and selecting pickup times to make the pickup process more manageable. Dang is even thinking about continuing the retail model after things return to normal.

For now, he keeps his focus on his community-centric approach.

He recalled one restaurant owner who now works alone, having laid off his entire staff. When Dang gave him fish for free, the man asked if there was anything he could do in appreciation. Dang suggested that he let one of Dang's unemployed family members help him in the kitchen, in exchange for a meal.

"The volunteer component is so important right now," Dang said.

His approach is yielding inspiring dividends. "I told my workers it's hard, but I'm trying to keep the lights on. They told me they'll come in even if I can't pay them," he said through tears. "If I shut down, I know I can be proud of everything I did."

Visit freshislandfish.com or Instagram @freshislandfish for updates.