

## MICHIGAN LOCKER-PLANT SURVEY

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### BACKGROUND

Sales of frozen fishery products can bring extra profits to locker-plant operators. This was well established in a survey conducted in Michigan in 1953 by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Branch of Commercial Fisheries. Locker plants are well adapted for merchandising frozen fishery products because of their superior cold-storage facilities and steady customer traffic. These two factors alone enable the locker-plant operator to become an important distributor of frozen fishery products in his locality. This is especially true in towns with a population of 5,000 or less since there are usually no frozen-food distributors or wholesale fish markets located in such towns with ideal zero temperatures for storing frozen fishery products and bulk storage space for holding fairly large stocks of frozen fish. On the other hand, locker plants are able to buy and sell in quantity and serve as wholesale distributors to restaurants, hospitals, school-lunch programs, and small grocery stores.



The entrance of a locker plant in Eaton Rapids, Mich.

### SURVEY METHODS

During the summer and fall of 1953, 163 locker plants were interviewed in Michigan by a fishery marketing specialist of the Service's Branch of Commercial Fisheries. The following questions were asked each locker-plant manager:

1. Are fishery products being sold in the plant?
2. What is the monthly volume of sales?
3. What varieties are handled?
4. How many lockers are rented in the plant?
5. What kind of advertising is being done with regard to fishery products?

### SUGGESTIONS FOR INCREASING LOCKER-PLANT SALES

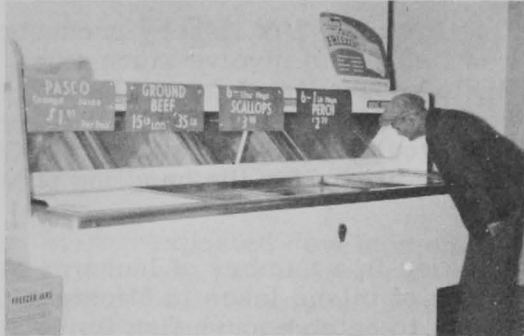
The main purpose of this survey was to determine which locker plants in Michigan required ideas, suggestions, and assistance in increasing their sales of fishery products. From the answers to the various questions asked each locker-plant operator as well as a visual inspection of the locker plant, the fishery marketing specialist was able to make certain recommendations which would enable the operator to increase his sales of frozen fish and shellfish and thereby increase the profits of his locker-plant business. Frequently the main ideas and suggestions offered to the locker-plant operator were: (1) improvement of display in the frozen-food cabinet, (2) better location of the frozen-food cabinet for customer traffic, (3) the use of attractive window signs, (4) advertising specials on certain fish and shellfish,

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(5) increasing the number of varieties handled, (6) advertising in local newspapers, (7) the distribution of fish recipes to locker customers, and (8) active promotion by word of mouth by the locker operator when talking to his customers. Fish recipe booklets were distributed to a number of the operators as well as information on proper methods of handling fishery products.

### SURVEY FINDINGS

The actual survey revealed that 129 locker plants out of the 163 plants contacted were handling fishery products. Only 40 of these plants were selling 100 pounds or



A Lansing (Mich.) locker plant's frozen-food display case, in which frozen scallops and ocean perch fillets are displayed.

over of fish and shellfish a month. Fishery products were being sold both wholesale and retail by only 24 plants. The rest of the plants sold to the retail trade only. Less than half of the operators interviewed were selling fish to their regular locker-plant customers, and the operators of these plants estimated that less than one third of their locker customers were being sold fish. Of the plants called on, 16 were handling or selling fishery products for school-lunch programs. Principal wholesale outlets for fishery products were hotels and restaurants. Fresh fish as well as frozen fish were being handled in only 13 locker plants. The main

varieties sold fresh were whitefish, lake trout, herring, smelt, and yellow perch.

A monthly comparison of the volume of sales of different groups of locker plants employing different sales practices revealed the reasons for the low fish sales in so many of the locker plants. It is interesting to note that the average monthly quantity of fish and shellfish sold by the 24 plants catering to both the wholesale and retail trade was 258 pounds as compared to 60 pounds a month for the 105 plants selling to the retail trade only. Locker plants offering over 5 varieties of fish and shellfish for sale sold an average of 190 pounds of fishery products a month as compared to an average of 51 pounds a month for locker plants offering 2 and 3 varieties only. Other factors strongly influencing fish sales were found to be the use of a frozen-food cabinet for displaying fishery products, the proper arrangement of fishery products in the display box, the use of fish signs attractively displayed, and the amount of effort and enthusiasm on the part of the locker-plant operator.

Most of the plants handling fishery products had some type of cabinet for displaying or holding frozen fish and shellfish. Some of these cabinets were not well located with regard to customer traffic in the plant. The ideal location for the cabinet is near the entrance of the locker plant where customers are normally entering the plant. The cabinet should also be located so as to be plainly visible to the customers. A number of the frozen food cabinets had poorly-arranged displays of frozen fish and shellfish. In some cases fish packages were completely covered by other items, such as frozen fruits and vegetables displayed in the same cabinet. Each variety of fish should be displayed in full view of the customers. In some cases the size of the cabinet does not allow sufficient space for individual variety display. To overcome this handicap, dummy cartons could be used to advertise the available fishery products. The use of attractive window signs or an attractive sign on top of or near the cabinet would also be a sales aid. Very few of the plants visited displayed attractive fish signs. Many of the plants had only one sign advertising fishery products. This was usually a small sign donated by a frozen food distributor and was usually located on top of the frozen food cabinet. Several plants advertised fresh and frozen varieties of fish with both attractive window signs and signs located at the entrance to the frozen food lockers. Each of these plants were among those with the largest volume of fish sales.

Perhaps the largest single factor influencing the volume of frozen fish sales was found to be the attitude and effort of the locker-plant operator himself. Many plant managers were not actively trying to sell the fishery products available in their plants. A number of locker-plant managers when asked why fish was not being sold to locker customers replied that their customers never ask for fish. These managers apparently overlooked the fact that a number of these same customers could be sold fishery products if they, the managers, would actively promote their product by word of mouth to their customers. In other words, let their customers know that they have fish for sale and try to encourage customers to buy their fish from the locker plant.

Some operators were found to possess very little knowledge of fishery products and seemed to have the idea that handling any type of fish would involve much extra work on their part. Many of these operators had little knowledge of frozen fillets and were thinking mainly of such problems as cleaning and dressing fish in the round. Actually, handling of frozen fish and shellfish would involve no such problem, and the facilities of locker plants provide ideal conditions for the handling of fishery products.

One other reason that may account for low fish sales in a number of locker plants throughout the State is the presence of a number of inland lakes in Michigan which afford an opportunity for many locker customers to catch enough fish for their own use. This was one of the most frequent reasons given by locker-plant managers when asked why fish was not being sold to locker-plant customers. This was especially true in areas where locker plants were located near lakes.

### CONCLUSIONS

Frozen fish and shellfish sales by locker plants in Michigan as indicated by this survey are, in general, very low. Only a few of the plants surveyed were doing an active job of selling fishery products. These few plants, which were handling fishery products in quantity and catering to both the wholesale and retail trade, had succeeded in building up a good business through good advertising methods and active promotion on the part of the manager. The testimony of these locker-plant operators that there are good profits to be realized by plant operators who are willing to handle and actively promote fishery products in their plant should serve as a challenge to others in the locker-plant business.



#### PRECANNING STORAGE OF RAW AND COOKED SPINY LOBSTERS

Experiments on the precanning storage of whole raw and cooked spiny lobsters and lobster tails at room temperature and at 32° F. (0° C.) have shown that the raw meat kept better than the cooked meat. Tails alone kept better than whole spiny lobsters. All samples kept well for 18 hours both at room temperature and at 32° F. but the raw tails withstood storage at 32° F. for 48 hours. Precooked tails in the shell stored for 1 to 2 days in twice their weight of sea water, mixed with the same weight of ice, lost their flavor and texture and were unsatisfactory.

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