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Sunday, June 26, 2005

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Protesters urge Red Lobster to boycott Canadian seafood

Web-posted Jun 26, 2005

By ANN ZANIEWSKI
Of The Oakland Press

The face of a baby harp seal peered from Sharon Deming's white T-shirt.

Words underneath it pleaded, "Do something!"

Deming and two dozen others outside the Red Lobster restaurant in Novi on Saturday afternoon protested the killing of young seals in Canada, and urged Red Lobster restaurants to boycott Canadian seafood.

Organizer Darryl Braun of Inkster said Red Lobster is the largest buyer of Canadian seafood.

"The only way to get the fishing industry to stop the slaughter is to make them feel it economically," he said.

Braun and others criticize seal hunting as barbaric.

He said this demonstration was one of at least 96 on Saturday at Red Lobsters across the United States and Canada. They were sponsored by several animal rights groups, including the Humane Society of the United States.

Jim DeSimone, Red Lobster's vice president for corporate affairs, said the company does not purchase from Newfoundland, where a majority of seal hunting takes place.

"Our policy is simple," he said. "We purchase no seafood from Newfoundland. We never buy or sell seal products ... We will not be joining anybody's cause or protest."

He said Red Lobster officials discussed concerns about the sustainability of marine life and

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methods used to harvest seals at a meeting with officials from the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans earlier this month.

DeSimone declined to say whether Red Lobster officials suggested a smaller seal quota.

He also declined to say how much seafood the company purchases from Canada. Forty countries supply the company, he said. It has 679 restaurants in North America.

Braun said 365,000 seals were killed in 2004 as part of a three-year quota set by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

Hunters often kill seals by clubbing them on the head or piercing their skulls with a hook and dragging them to an area where they can be skinned.

Many seals are skinned alive, Braun said.

The pelts are used to make hats, boots and other fashion accessories.

A 10-year moratorium on seal hunting ended in 1995, Braun said, after fishermen blamed seals for destroying the cod population.

Braun said the declining population was due to overfishing, and that a typical seal diet consists of only 3 percent cod.

At the protest, Deming, of Sterling Heights, carried a sign with a picture of a seal looking up at a man holding a club above his head.

In the sticky heat, Wendy Freedman Patrick of West Bloomfield Township dabbed water from a water bottle on her neck.

"It's an abomination," she said, "what they do with the baby seals.

"Animals should be treated better than this. We have to be their voice."

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