For seventy-two years, the Maine Lobster Festival has drawn crowds from across New England to the mid coastal town of Rockland, Maine in late July. A crowd of over 85,000 participated in its lobster parades, face-painting, costumes, and other summertime games all devoted to the sacrificial lobster. The event culminates in the consumption of over 25,000 pounds of fresh lobster (“Maine Lobster Festival”). The sea crustacean is celebrated in Maine and its popularity has spread across the United States and globally, yet it hasn’t always been this way. A delicacy that was once served to prisoners has taken dramatic shifts over the past century, much in part from sweeping environmental regulations placed on the lobster fishing industry. The once largely unregulated industry has stayed within families for decades, evolving with industry-wide changes and public preferences. However, global trends of warmer oceans and a sharp outcry from the public over environmental concerns have begun to challenge these industry norms ushering in regulations that restrict lobster fishing. Special interest groups and lobbying efforts have failed to recognize the far-reaching implications of a public policy that now puts livelihoods at stake. The careful balance of public policy comes in sharp contrast with the invested value society places on the consumption of lobster, threatening the livelihoods of fishers who have traditionally relied on its catch.

[Selected piece continues with the third paragraph]

There exists an intense social divide among fishers in the competitiveness for fishing lobster. Most fish from the same harbor as family and neighbors, setting traps within four miles from each other, although few do venture out further. All however hold the same goal, who can
produce the largest output the satisfies current policy requirements. Jennifer Brewer, professor of Geography at East Carolina University and a leader in sociodemographic oceanography explains that the average lobster license holder in the United States, aged 50, male, is the son of a legacy of three or four lobstering generations before him and often a longer fishing or maritime background. He will see these people almost daily, either on the water or back onshore, and often counts on them as partners in negotiating access to marine and terrestrial resources for himself and his family. Brewer argues that both kin and neighborly relationships are powerful social identifiers with strong historical precedent in this industry, yet she fails to recognize that individuals leverage or manipulate them for different purposes, slowly reconstituting and adapting fishing area boundaries to accommodate changing socio-ecological needs and pressures. Fishing jurisdiction is directly attributed to revenue and in a competitive market, fishing boundaries can be cutthroat. When fishers encroach on a neighbor’s area, this breaks the social norm and is a catalyst for potential retaliation. Hence, the government has had to step in and create policies to turn what traditionally relied on social normative behavior and transform it into an official legal code and policy.