



# 24 hours in the life of American workers

## 4 a.m. Maine

September is pollock season, and if conditions were good, Kayla Cox would be headed to Fippennies Ledge in this predawn mist for a day of fishing. But for the second time in history, five tropical storms are swirling in the Atlantic, causing eight-foot swells in the Gulf of Maine.

So instead of dropping hooks and lines to catch the groundfish that feed New England Fishmongers' customers, Cox preps for a future journey, checking tackle boxes and inserting rods and reels into holders along the Finlander's gunwale. Once done, 200 pounds of Alaskan coho salmon need filleting. Light has yet to pierce the sky as she and Tim Rider, her partner in life and work, drive to their processing facility.

The demands are relentless. Only hours ago, after filleting more than 1,000 pounds of coho, the pair had finally finished delivering the last of that bounty, on a loop that had taken them to homes across three states. A few weeks before, they'd hauled 6,000 pounds of frozen pollock and scallops to Illinois for Midwest distribution.

"Who else would do it?" Cox asks.

In between runs like these, they sell fish out of their vans at farmers markets and specialty produce shops. To supplement their catch, they drive to Cape Cod for scallops and to the airport in Boston for Northwest salmon less than a day out of the ocean. A handful of staff members assist, but, for the most part, the success of [New England Fishmongers](#) rests with Cox and Rider.

Yet they feel grateful. Grateful that they eke out an income during a pandemic when so many others don't. Grateful that they pivoted to selling directly to consumers a year before the coronavirus struck. Had they remained reliant on restaurant sales — the focus when Fishmongers began in 2015 — they would be among the thousands in their world struggling for survival.

They were fishing and without cellphone service that day in March when state officials announced a shutdown. As they pulled up to the pier, their phones exploded with calls from customers ordering 10, 20, 30 pounds of fish. Cox remembers shaking her head and wondering how they would deliver that much to hundreds of people. They were set up for weekend markets, not UPS-like drop-offs.

Those early weeks remain a blur of calling, cataloguing, invoicing and driving, changing gloves at every stop, wiping down every cooler left outside a door. Cox eventually created an online store, which simplified the logistics. “But it is not perfect,” she says.

At their processing facility across the New Hampshire line in Dover, Cox slips on orange rubber bib overalls. She flips her long brown ponytail behind her back, pulls her fingers through blue gloves, picks up a knife and begins. Slice fillets into chunks. Weigh each chunk. Note weight on label. Slide chunk into plastic bag. Vacuum seal the bag. Salmon, then black sea bass. All must be finished today.

At 25, Cox could be rested and dry as an environmental consultant, her first job out of college. But summers spent baiting traps on a lobster boat connected her to the sea, and despite the challenges of being female in a male-dominated industry, she has learned to ignore the taunts, to concentrate on product supply and sales. Not easy in any scenario, because so many factors — weather, permits, warming water — are out of her control. Then add the pandemic, mandatory masks, constant disinfecting and hand-washing.

If either Rider or Cox fell ill, Fishmongers would collapse. Without him, the boat wouldn't leave the pier. Without her, there'd be no deliveries, markets or social media promotion.

Before the black sea bass, Cox needs a break. She removes her overalls and marches to the office in back where she brews an espresso, then sits down at the desk. Coffee in one hand, she plots the week's distribution and market schedule on a paper calendar. Those she can control.

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