

Interview with Bob Hessler,  
Assistant General Manager, Maine Shellfish Company

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**School:** Ellsworth High School  
**School Location:** Ellsworth, Maine

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CC: What role does Maine Shellfish serve in the fishing industry in Hancock County?

BH: The role that they have in the fishing industry is multifaceted. We are a whole sales supplier to restaurants and institutions. We provide restaurants with a full line of seafood. We are a buyer of a number of species that are caught locally so we try to provide a steady market for those fishermen and we buy a lot. We mostly buy lobster, Maine shrimp, native shrimp, and clams. Those would be the majority of species we would buy direct from harvesters. Also, crabmeat but usually there's an intermediate step in there. We won't buy many live crabs but we will buy picked meat from a small processor in the area. So we provide a stable market for the harvester and ,hopefully, a reliable supplier for restaurants and institutions in the area.

CC: What is your position in the Maine Shellfish Company?

BH: I do a number of jobs (laughs). I deal with the accountant and the data processing, and am also a buyer. As a buyer I buy lobsters which keeps me busy mostly in the season when the Maine fishermen are catching lobsters which starts about now, We have had a little bit of a low during the month of June as the lobsters go under the rocks to shed, then hopefully early in July it will just explode and they will have a great season as do we.

JW: Do you buy lobsters, probably a combination from Co-ops as well as individual lobster fishermen?

BH: We buy them from...

JW: How far and wide do you go to get them?

BH: We don't go that far and that wide because they are available almost everywhere. In the summer when the lobsters have a softer shell the less you can transport them, the better of you are, I feel anyway. So we tend to buy of the island, from the Blue Hill Peninsula over to the Gouldsboro area and then we buy clams down east toward Harrington, Steuben, and Jonesport, We have lobster suppliers down that way. Since we have that route as a supply route, it is sort of common to combine the trip so that we can get muscles, clams, and lobsters.

JW: And, if I follow through on that question: Why is it better to get them that close?

BH: Well, first of all, there is that cost of going further, Lobsters like to be in the water. The less time you have them, the shorter your trip, and less time you get them out onto the water, the better off they are: the happier they are. I feel this area is safe from Stonington to the east and especially from Stonington to Gouldsboro. It truly has better lobsters during the summer. I can't tell you why, then the southern part of the state does. Maybe you can tell me why? Especially the Stonington, Blue Hill area lobster. They tend to be just a little bit stronger. Maybe they shed a tad earlier so they are in better shape the same time the season comes.

JW: Do people ever ask for the Stonington, Blue Hill lobster verses other lobsters?

BH: Yes, if we mention we are going to buy from that area then it can be an advantage. Especially if some one was going to ship the lobsters, you know, rather than just a restaurant going to receive them and have them and cook them. Then it's not that big of a deal. If you where going to ship the lobsters air freight or something like that then you would have a harder lobster.

CC: Where do you sell the fish?

BH: Our biggest customers are a group of restaurants in the state of Maine, We deliver almost all the fish that we sell, in our own trucks to the end user. So if I'm selling to you, you are going to see one of our employees right at your front door. Very often sales are made at the point at sales. So you'll say you need some haddock, clams, this, that and the other. We have trucks that are capable of carrying modest inventory so that if you had a better day at your restaurant then you thought you where going to have and say, Gee, I could've used more haddock. It is very likely our sales driver person would say, "No problem, I have a little extra."

SG: Are the fish farmed or just come from the ocean?

BH: We have both aquaculture fish and wild fish. The biggest aquaculture species would be salmon, shrimp, and to a certain degree mussels.

AG: Do you sell fish by the pound?

BH: The pound sells most everything. It is a market driven business and I can tell you that it is a very difficult business. You are dealing with a perishable product and if things are in tight supply then you probably do a little better than when there is too much. In other words, if there is not quite enough fish to go around then things are little bit better for us, I don't mean to say we benefit from fishermen having a worse time with it but if there is more fish than people want to

eat and you know it is only good for a certain period of time then that is bad for someone who's left holding the fish. If there is just enough to go around then I am certainly in a better situation afterwards.

SG: Is there one type of fish that you get more than the other?

BH: I think that haddock happens to be our biggest seller. There is a tremendous demand, it's a regional thing and Maine people like to have haddock verses cod. If you go south of Cape Cod the preferences change and you have more cod consumed and you go just a little bit further south and everyone's eating flounder.

Whitmore: Did 9 11 affect your business?

BH: September 11<sup>th</sup> affected every living thing. I am going to address the lobster situation, the borders were uncertain. Could you sell things across the border? Although I said we sell almost entirely to Maine and some into New Hampshire. In the lobster business I do sell quite a few lobsters to Canada, especially during the months of August through early November, When that occurred there was a question as to whether a lot of buyers would stop buying all together because things were so uncertain and we have a strong relationship with some lobster processors in Canada. We were able to continue to buy but some fisherman weren't certain what the right thing to do was. You know what I'm saying? Things were uneasy because they felt the market was very bad because of that and maybe not fishing was the right thing to do just to stabilize the market. We thought because of the relationships with the processors we were able to give the fisherman the option of saying if you fish we will buy and if you choose not to then we understand.

Whitmore: Did you loose anything because it could not be flown out?

BH: We do almost no air shipping. I hate to say this was a good position because it was such a tragedy to even think about that. Our responsibility to the people we buy from was to say "You know this is what we can do, we can sell and we can buy and we will buy whatever you catch because we have made these arrangements and you know in a terrible situation I felt as good as I could possibly feel knowing that. There were a lot of dealers that either wouldn't buy or just selling for very low prices because of the uncertainty in the market.

CC: How far away do you get these requests for your fish? Do you ship it to other countries?

BH: Well, Canada but by truck. Eastern Canada is not that far away. We don't ship that far but a lot of Maine seafood is shipped that far, On the Union River right now there are elver nets and I am not having elvers for dinner and I don't know of anyone here who is. So you know those elvers, or eels and sea urchins are going to the Far East.

SG: Do you guys have any competition or other companies to deal with?

BH: We have all kinds of competition! We have competition that are full line distributors that handle all other kinds of canned goods and paper products and that sort of thing, like a restaurant supply house that may also handle shrimp and haddock and a lot of fish. We have competition

from somebody in their pick up truck who may buy from fisherman and then peddle their wares. A lobster fisherman can go right to the restaurant and sell to them directly. So if you have a restaurant that is right near a wharf then it is easier. So we are competing with our suppliers so to speak. So, its all kinds of different levels of competition, and you have to look and say: "What can we offer a restaurant that this other person can't." There are some types of seafood that are just inconvenient to handle. Clams come to mind because there is a very strict reporting requirement on clams. If you were to dig clams right in Harrington, then when you brought them in you would have to tell me that you harvested those clams on a certain day, in a certain place, and I would have to keep that record with that clam. Then I would have to transfer that record to the restaurant that has the clam, and we would have to hold onto that; that is just not something that a big, full-line distribution company does well.

JW: Is that because of red tide?

BH: That's because of red tide. If they say, "The water quality in Harrington on May fourth was not good," they could come to us and say, "We need you to tell us where all of the clams that you got from Harrington on May fourth went."

SG: What's red tide? (Laughter)

JW: Good question.

BH: Red tide is, um, an algae boom that happens most often, but not always in the summer. It causes a condition in filter-feeding fish, and filter-feeding fish are muscles and clams, and not lobsters, that filter water through. The algae causes, I am not sure how to word this right, paralytic shell-fish poisoning, and it causes a nervous system problem that in extreme cases could shut down the respiratory functions. So, the Department of Marine Resources test the water frequently, especially at times that they think that this condition would occur. But, all the time, they test the water from different areas, and if they get a count of these algae, they will perhaps shut down that area, and say that you cannot harvest clams in that area.

JW: Why are clams so more expensive today? I think clams are very expensive. (Laughter) What do I want to say?

BH: Yeah, yeah, I think that's a fair statement.

JW: In the summertime, you know working for these cruise ships, whenever we go to a restaurant no longer do they serve steamed clams, what they now serve are steamed mussels. So, it seems as though, from my perspective, that the clam has been replaced by the mussel. Is it because the clam is more expensive, or there are fewer clams, or there are many more mussels, or if people's tastes have changed... Oh, I don't know! I've wondered about that because I've always, I mean, being brought up in Maine, you never used to eat a mussel when I was a child.

BH: No, mussels are a nuisance to walk over when you went swimming, right? So, two questions: one, why are mussels so expensive? And two, why are people eating mussels? I think the two are pretty much related, because clams are expensive and pretty productively as the Fourth of July approaches, the price will increase substantially in clams. That is strictly a supply and demand situation, um, and the Maine clams

are probably nicer than other clams, and they are most useful as a steamer on your plate. During the summer months, almost all of the Maine clams go onto plates as steamers because they are so well suited for that. Certainly, the closures of some areas because of pollution, and what have you, restricted the supply of clams, but I think that we are turning the corner on that a bit, and municipalities are better managing their clam flats with their clam licenses. The clam licenses are issued locally, not statewide, so you get a license for a certain area. On Beals Island, they have a clam hatchery. They are seeding some clam flats and there are paying more attention. More municipalities are having sewage treatment. I'm not saying that clams will be cheap in the summer, but I think that the supply and demand is going to be back into balance a little bit better. Supply and demand is the thing, people want to eat more steamers than are coming out of the flats during the months of July and August.

CC: About the supply and demand thing, has the demand for like different fish changed over time?

BH: Absolutely. Tastes have change. Different fish have become more available. It used to be that salmon was available mostly just around, well salmon and peas for the Fourth of July. Salmon was available late June and July, and now with farm raised salmon it's available year round. It's a tremendously fresh fish, and salmon is certainly one species that there is much more demand for. There's a demand for easier to prepare fish. We tend to sell more fish that's close to being ready to put on a plate, so that we sell fewer whole fish. We don't sell very much whole haddock, or whole this with eye balls, you know what I am saying? And we sell more prepared and skinned and boned and portioned and whatever else the restaurant is going to put on their plate. Something that, you know, makes it easier for the restaurant to serve. We used to sell a good deal of whole halibut, or whole swordfish. I don't think we've had a whole swordfish go out of the plant in half a dozen years.

SG: Now at restaurants you can just get the lobster boiled or you can get the lazy man lobster or whatever, do you guys get the portions out or does the restaurant do that?

BH: Most restaurants buy live lobsters. You have to cook them. (laughter) To the restaurants we sell live lobsters, and we also cook and pick meat, and we'll sell fresh picked meat to the restaurants. So with the same line of thinking as having things that are better prepared, or one less step away from serving. Our fresh lobster meat business has been very good over the past several years.

AG: How many people does Maine Shellfish employ?

BH: Fifty people.

SG: Everyone has their specific job they do, or is it kind of mixed?

BH: We have people in processing, we have people in warehousing, we have people in sales, and administration. Everybody has a job, but we're not a huge company, so that I think that we tend to pitch in and help one another a lot.

CK: How has the company itself changed over time, or has it?

BH: It must have. (laughter) Technology has affected us a good deal. All of our driver sales people have palm pilots. You know what palm pilots are? (comments: oh wow) All the sales are done on palm pilots. I used to drive a truck and deliver fish, and when I delivered fish I would have blank invoices and I would write all the invoices out by hand. I would have to be able to do the math in my head which I no longer can do since I have gotten away from it.

JW: I understand that. (laughter)

BH: Now they do their invoices on palm pilots. And, of course, when I got back to the shop, someone would have to read my handwriting and someone would have to correct my math if I, heaven forbid, made a mistake. Now they do all their invoices on palm pilots. The sales histories are in there, the customers are in there, so they just have to tap on the products and the quantities. With a hook up to a printer they print the invoice right at the point of sale. They come back and they download the palm pilot into our computer system, and it's all done like that. And then we check out their inventory, to make sure they punched the right buttons and sold the right amount to all the customers.

There's one big thing. We deal with a lot more regulations than we ever used to, thank heavens, we deal with a lot more regulation. It helps protect the species. There's a much greater contact with the Department of Human Resources, as far as their regulations. The FDA has a series of regulations they call HASOP, which is a requirement where we look at what we do, and guess what could wrong. This is the Murphy's Law regulation. When you say, "What can go wrong this afternoon when I leave here?" Well, we have to look at our operation and say, "What could happen to the fish at this point of the production?" And then we have to say, "What could we do to ensure that it doesn't go wrong?" And that's what the HASOP regulations are. So it's a self regulation based on what you do as a business. That's a big change. Just more stringent regulations from all levels of government.

JW: And do people come in and check every now and then?

BH: Yes they do.

JW: Unexpectedly?

BH: They do it unexpectedly, yes. Very seldom expectedly, actually. And they'll look over, they'll say "How did you write up this plan to keep the fish from going bad?" and "Are you sticking to it? Show me where you stuck to it." In other words, "You said fish could go bad if my refrigerator gets too warm. How could you avoid that happening?" You could take temperature in the refrigerator very often and record it. You could cover the fish in ice, so that if the temperature were to go up temporarily it wouldn't affect the fish at all. And then they could say, "Okay, those are the solutions to your potential problem. Did you do it?" And we could say, "Yes, look we took the temperature right here, and here's someone who inspected the cooler at the end of the day, and they reported that all the fish were covered in ice.

JW: So you have to have a very accurate recording system?

BH: Yes, we have to have an accurate recording system. And when anything comes into the shop, we have to inspect it and someone evaluates its condition, and then records it. It's very

good for the paper industry. (laughter)

JW: So with a power failure, you're prepared for that?

BH: We're prepared. We have one of the more reliable supplies of power of anyone, anywhere. We are so close to the Ellsworth Hydro dam, and that line going down to the island is so reliable, that during the ice storm of 1998 we lost power for only about forty-five minutes. If we lose power, our first consideration is when the lobster tanks stop circulating, the water in the tanks stops circulating and the water doesn't get aerated, and the lobsters suck the air out of the water and they'll suffocate.

CC: What would you do in that situation?

BH: Take the lobsters out of the water. We could use an auxiliary pump to just circulate the water, we could drain the water out of the tanks and then it would continue to cascade for a period of time, and then we would take the lobsters out of the water and cover them in ice.

JW: And that is what you tell HASOP, right?

BH: You know what, that's not even considered a hazard because a lobster has to be alive in order to go to the next step, and so that if it isn't, then it is not a risk to somebody. The HASOP Plan says that we only sell or process lobster live lobsters, so that we have that hazard taken care of. The only hazard to my job would be if all of the lobsters died in that tank. (laughter) So, that is the first thing, the coolers are the second thing, and the freezers the last thing to take care of if we lost power for an extended point of time.

JW: Are you one of the biggest employers in Ellsworth?

BH: I think that the hospital is the biggest employer, we are down the list a bit. The school system is bigger I am sure. But we're not the smallest.

AG: How long is the shop open, like what are your hours?

BH: 7:30-5:00 generally. Some days in the winter we'll cut our hours back a bit because it's not as busy. And in the summer we might have someone in at any hour. Last night I had a delivery of lobsters that came in about 6:30, and sometimes we'll have shipments that will come through that might be headed to Boston. They want to be at Boston in 6:00 in the morning when the fish pier opens, so they'll be at Ellsworth at midnight or 2 am, so we might have to be in at that time.

JW: Does that mean you too? Are your hours that varied?

BH: Well yes, those darn cell phones. (laughter) They'll go off just about anytime.

JW: Palm pilots and cell phones.

BH: Yep. That's the other one.

AG: So you guys don't sell urchins?

BH: We don't really, we mostly sell what Maine restaurants want to offer, and Maine restaurants tend to offer Maine fish. People come to Maine to eat Maine fish. So we do deal in some exotic fish, but it is such a small percentage of our business. Someone might want to offer a grouper, or something like that, which is a southern fish. But people don't come to Maine to eat southern fish, they come to Maine to have lobsters and clams and mussels and haddocks.

JW: I love those mussels. (laughter)

BH: (smiling) And if they're well to do, then they'll have steamers. It's just a wonderful match, we tend to sell what Maine catches.

JW: I have to ask this question. When we first started this project, the whole feeling out there was, how does fishing relate to this community? Would you say it relates to this community?

BH: It relates to me.

JW: And I believe we are finding overwhelmingly that it does, but it was just something we did not understand, if that makes sense. The more we learn the more we realize how many people are involved in it.

BH: There are a lot of people involved in it. Umm...boat building, fishing gear supply, the bait dealers, and you know, obviously the restaurants. Restaurants in Maine tend to be fish restaurants, it's rare not to have one that handles fish. If you're working in a restaurant, you're pretty much aware of it. Like, "Gee, the wind was blowing today, I wonder if the lobster prices will go up tomorrow?" So I think that there is a tie to the fishing industry in those businesses. A strong tie. But maybe we're doing our job correctly if you're not always as aware of what the tie is. If you're a restaurant and you know you can rely on us to supply you, maybe we're doing our job correctly. Down East Fishing, here on the Bar Harbor Road, is a lobster trap maker. They make them right in the back. And if you go down east, there are boat builders, and engineering folk who put in the power systems for the boats.

SG: Does your company ever deal with those people? Like the boat builders or the bait?

BH: We don't have any boats. They call a business vertically integrated if they go from like the fish to restaurant. So if we owned a restaurant and a fishing boat, then we'd be vertically integrated. And we're not, so we don't have a lot of contact. But we do buy some things from the fishing dealers because our employees use aprons and gloves and boots when they are processing fish. We buy lobster crates to hold the lobsters in. We buy those from the local fish marine supply. I think that would be it. And, if I have a fisherman who says, "Gee, I'd like to sell you lobsters, but I don't have any bait." Guess who's looking for bait tomorrow? So I am talking to bait dealers, and sending a truck over and picking up bait and delivering it to that fisherman. Because if he can't fish for lobsters, I can't buy or sell lobsters or pick lobster meat.

JW: And is bait a difficult thing to get?

BH: Bait can be a very difficult thing to get at some times.



JW: So you're always conscious of where that bait is coming from?

BH: I'm always conscious if someone is saying, "Gee, bait is gonna be a problem." And then I'll buy some frozen bait and have it in our freezer. So that if it's a problem, I like for them to think they can come to me. I'm not a bait dealer, but I like to be a problem solver for fishermen if I can be.

SG: What type of bait do you guys usually use?

BH: Most fishermen use herring bait. They'll use, at certain times of year, a harder bait. They'll want to use a bait that will stand up in the traps for a longer amount of time if they are not hauling as frequently. They want to be able to continue to fish if they have them in the water for a longer period of time. So during the summer, usually herring, and during the spring and fall, herring with some red fish, or some type of other fish that will hold out longer.

AG: So you don't do bait bags? Have you ever done bait bags?

BH: I haven't done bait bags. I've delivered bait at all times of the night to fishermen, but that's not part of the business. That's part of taking care of a fisherman who is in a bind.

SG: What type of education did you get before you got into this business? Like are there schools that you go to?

BH: I just got a business education. I had high school, and then I went to college and majored in finance, accounting and finance.

JW: And if you talked about careers at Maine Shellfish, what would you tell them?

BH: I would tell them that Maine Shellfish is a tremendously solid company. We're a company that is here to stay, and that there are opportunities for people who don't mind getting their hands dirty a little bit.

CK: How long has Maine Shellfish been an operation?

BH: Started in...I think it was 1949.

JW: And you say you service primarily Maine, but you also work with Boston. Why did I have this thing with thinking that Maine Shellfish went all the way down to Florida?

BH: We have affiliated companies along the coast. We have a sister company in Ipswich, Massachusetts. We have another sister in Branford, just outside of New Haven, Connecticut. And yet another in Grasonville, Maryland, just off of Kent Island. If you go across the bay bridge from Minneapolis, toward what they call the eastern shore, where the bay bridge hits the land, is about where the plant is. And we get oysters from our Maryland plant. The Connecticut plant isn't very close to a really good source of a unique fish that we use, but they have an ethnic population that uses a lot of squid, so we'll get squid from that area. We will buy squid in conjunction with the Connecticut plant. The Massachusetts plant is close to the Boston market

so we'll get some fish that might be landed in to Boston.

JW: And you just mentioned squid, have food tastes changed since you started working?

BH: I think that tastes have branched out, but that is because so many people come to Maine to have Maine seafood, like the haddock...I just keep harping on that. Those staples that we catch in Maine are the things that we sell the most of.

CK: Have you noticed a shortened supply of any of those?

BH: Absolutely. The ground fish supply has...changed quite a big deal. We used to get quite a bit, when I first began to work, quite a long time ago, of ground fish from Canada. The Newfoundland's population's stocks crashed, so now we get almost all of our ground fish, like the haddock or the flounder, from either Boston or Portland.

CK: Why do you think that the source of the supplies have gone down?

BH: Over-fished in those areas.

JW: I spoke with a man from Stonington who said the cod were coming back...

BH: He did, which may not be good news for lobster fishermen because cod love to eat juvenile lobsters. But that's one of the reasons that lobster fishing has been so tremendous over the past ten years now. But, I mean, balance is better.

SG: I heard once that lobster used to be really popular, so it wasn't really considered expensive like it is now...Is that kind of what happened with that?

BH: My grandfather used to drive a car for a wealthy family on the island, and he would live in the servants' quarters there on the island. He said that they had lobsters all the time, so that lobster was something that they fed the servants.

JW: What do you think we should ask you that we haven't?

BH: (smiling) You've done a great job. I am really happy that the school and the students are so interested. I am very encouraged about the future, and I think that your interests and the interests of fisherman...one of the big concerns of fishermen right now is the survival of the fishery. The lobster industry is doing pretty well, and that people are so concerned at a time when it is doing well is a very good sign. It shows that they've seen what's happened to different fisheries and they're concerned from top to bottom... Has anyone mentioned the use of hide bait yet?

SG: I don't think so.

BH: Okay, that's one big concern from fishermen that I've heard a lot of. I mentioned using hard bait, but they also use, at times, some cow hide that's been soaked in certain oils and what have you. It's very effective, but a lot of fishermen are concerned about the affect that might have on the lobsters. You don't catch all the lobsters that nibble on the bait, the undersize ones

can escape through the escape vent and lobsters can get out of traps, so that's a concern. And of course, the undersize ones, or the V-notched lobsters...if you catch an egg bearing female lobster, you have to notch the tail on a certain tail fin, so that as long as that tail V-notch exists, the lobster can't be caught by another fishermen. It means that it is a reproducing female lobster, so that it will be thrown back. A number of fishermen are concerned of the affect that nibbling on marinated cowhide may have on the lobsters.

JW: Are they doing studies at all?

BH: I don't know of any...I'm actually curious...

JW: And where do they get the cowhide? Is that local?

BH: Cows. (smiling) (laughter)

JW: Local cows?

BH: I have no idea. (still smiling)

SG: When they put the V in the tail, how do they get it off, like when she's not carrying eggs anymore?

BH: Oh, this is so cool. The V will be there until that lobster has shed enough times so that the notch is not visible any longer. If a lobster was still egg bearing, it would be obvious to anyone. But what they are trying to say is that it is a proven egg producing female, and we'd like to have this lobster in the water producing more eggs. The V notch has to be a certain depth. Some fishermen use a knife to cut it, and others use like a little hole punch thing. And they have a lobster gage, which measures from the eye socket back to the hip, and it has to be larger than the smallest measurement and smaller than the large measurement. Almost all these gages, if you look at them, have a little point at the end, and that point is to measure the V notch. And if the V notch is as big as or larger than it, that means it's a V notch lobster and you can't keep it. Eventually that will disappear, but until then you have to throw it back.

SG: Does it hurt the lobster at all?

BH: If I was a lobster, and I had two options...you ready for this? One option is I get a little V notch in my tail, and the other option is that I get boiled alive, I would pick the V notch. (laughter) And it's a specific fin on the tail that is for the V notch, so if that fin is mutilated or broken, you have to presume it's a V notch lobster. You can't get by, and just cut it off square and say that "There's no V notch there." If that fin isn't in tact, you have to presume it's a V notch lobster and you can't keep it.

JW: Do you deal in buying strange lobster, like albino lobsters?

BH: If we get one of those we will usually take it down to the MDI bio lab, or DMR...or blue lobsters, that kind of thing. We often have kids from the Knowlton School come over, so sometimes we take it on a little tour, and then give it to one of the aquariums.

SG: So you guys can't eat the blue ones or whatever?

BH: You can, but we just think that they're unusual enough that people would be interested in seeing it.

CK: Where do you see Maine Shellfish fifty years from now?

BH: I see a tremendously old person, sitting at a desk with cobwebs coming off the top of this head. (laughter) I don't know what to think Maine Shellfish will be doing. I hope that we take good enough care of our coast, and manage our natural species well enough so that we will be harvesting clams and lobsters and mussels and cod and halibut and tuna fifty years from now. That's what I hope to see Maine Shellfish.

JW: Well thank you, Mr, Hessler.

BH: Thank you very much.