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Mackerel Economics in Prison Leads to Appreciation for Oily Fillets Packs of Fish Catch On as Currency, Former Inmates Say; Officials Carp

By JUSTIN SCHECK

When Larry Levine helped prepare divorce papers for a client a few years ago, he got paid in mackerel. Once the case ended, he says, "I had a stack of macks."

Mr. Levine and his client were prisoners in California's Lompoc Federal Correctional Complex. Like other federal inmates around the country, they found a can of mackerel -- the "mack" in prison lingo -- was the standard currency.



"It's the coin of the realm," says Mark Bailey, who paid Mr. Levine in fish. Mr. Bailey was serving a two-year tax-fraud sentence in connection with a chain of strip clubs he owned. Mr. Levine was serving a nine-year term for drug dealing. Mr. Levine says he used his macks to get his beard trimmed, his clothes pressed and his shoes shined by other prisoners. "A haircut is two macks," he says, as an expected tip for inmates who work in the prison barber shop.

There's been a mackerel economy in federal prisons since about 2004, former inmates and some prison consultants say. That's when federal prisons prohibited smoking and, by default, the cigarette pack, which was the earlier gold standard.

Prisoners need a proxy for the dollar because they're not allowed to possess cash. Money they get from prison jobs (which pay a maximum of 40 cents an hour, according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons) or family members goes into commissary accounts that let them buy things such as food and toiletries. After the smokes disappeared, inmates turned to other items on the commissary menu to use as currency.

Books of stamps were one easy alternative. "It was like half a book for a piece of fruit," says Tony Serra, a well-known San Francisco criminal-defense attorney who last year finished nine months in Lompoc on tax charges. Elsewhere in the West, prisoners use PowerBars or cans of tuna, says Ed Bales, a consultant who advises people who are headed to prison. But in much of the federal prison system, he says, mackerel has become the currency of choice.

Mackerel supplier Global Source Marketing Inc. says demand from prisons has grown since 2004. In recent years, demand has switched from cans -- which wardens don't like because inmates can turn them into makeshift knives -- to plastic-and-foil pouches of mackerel fillets, says Jon Linder, a vice president at supplier Power Commissary Inc., in Bohemia, N.Y.

Mackerel is hot in prisons in the U.S., but not so much anywhere else, says Mark Muntz, president of Global Source, which imports fillets of the oily, dark-fleshed fish from Asian canneries. Mr. Muntz says he's tried marketing mackerel to discount retailers. "We've even tried 99-cent stores," he says. "It never has done very well at all, regardless of the retailer, but it's very popular in the prisons."

Outstripping the Tuna

Mr. Muntz says he sold more than \$1 million of mackerel for federal prison commissaries last year. It accounted for about half his commissary sales, he says, outstripping the canned tuna, crab, chicken and oysters he offers.

Unlike those more expensive delicacies, former prisoners say, the mack is a good stand-in for the greenback because each can (or pouch) costs about \$1 and few -- other than weight-lifters craving protein -- want to eat it.

So inmates stash macks in lockers provided by the prison and use them to buy goods, including illicit ones such as stolen food and home-brewed "prison hooch," as well as services, such as shoeshines and cell cleaning.

The Bureau of Prisons views any bartering among prisoners as fishy. "We are aware that inmates attempt to trade amongst themselves items that are purchased from the commissary," says bureau spokeswoman Felicia Ponce in an email. She says guards respond by limiting the amount of goods prisoners can stockpile. Those who are caught bartering can end up in the "Special Housing Unit" -- an isolation area also known as the "hole" -- and could lose credit they get for good behavior.



For that reason -- and since communications between inmates and nonprisoners are monitored by prison officials -- current inmates can't discuss mackerel transactions without risking discipline, say several lawyers and consultants who represent incarcerated clients.

Ethan Roberts knows about mackerel discipline first hand. Mr. Roberts, who was released in 2007 after serving eight years on a methamphetamine charge at prisons including the La Tuna Federal Correctional Institution in Texas, says he got busted for various piscine transactions. "I paid gambling debts" with mackerel, he says. "One time I bought cigarettes for a friend who was in the hole."

Mr. Roberts and other ex-inmates say some prisoners make specially prepared food with items from the prison kitchen and sell it for mackerel.

"I knew a guy who would buy ingredients and use the microwaves to cook meals. Then people used mack to buy it from him," says Jonson Miller, an adjunct history professor at Drexel University in Philadelphia who spent two months in federal prison after being arrested at a protest on federal property.

Mr. Miller was released in 2003, when prisoners were getting ready for cigarettes to be phased out, and says inmates then were already moving to mackerel.

Since the Pensacola Federal Prison Camp commissary in Florida was only open one day a week, some inmates would run a "prison 7-Eleven" out of their lockers, reselling commissary items at a premium in exchange for mackerel, says Bill Bailey, who served three months last year on a computer-hacking charge. "I knew one guy who would actually pay rent to use half of another guy's locker because his locker wasn't large enough to store all his inventory," he says.

Big Haul

The Pensacola lockers, at about 4 feet high, could store plenty of macks, he says, a good thing for inmates who played poker, since a winning hand could result in a big haul. A spokeswoman for Pensacola said prison authorities discipline inmates who are caught bartering. At Lompoc, says spokeswoman Katie Shinn, guards "are not aware of such a problem with mackerel." When officials do catch inmates bartering, she says, punishments can include a loss of commissary privileges or moving to a less desirable cell.

There are other threats to the mackerel economy, says Mr. Linder, of Power Commissary. "There are shortages world-wide, in terms of the catch," he says. Combined with the weak dollar, that's led to a surging mack. Now, he says, a pouch of mackerel sells for more than \$1 in most commissaries.

Another problem with mackerel is that once a prisoner's sentence is up, there's little to do with it -- the fish can't be redeemed for cash, and has little value on the outside. As a result, says Mr. Levine, prisoners approaching their release must either barter or give away their stockpiles.

That's what Mr. Levine did when he got out of prison last year. Since then, he's set up a consulting business offering advice to inmates and soon-to-be prisoners. He consults on various matters, such as how to request facility transfers and how to file grievances against wardens.

It's similar to the work he provided fellow inmates when he was in prison. But now, he says, "I get paid in American dollars."