Bean once hoped to be to lobster what Perdue is to chicken. What happened?

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Linda Lorraine Bean, the other L.L. Bean, has spent the last decade promoting her lobster empire, one that merged the cachet of her family name with the popularity of the state’s top crustacean.

But last month, she took to the national spotlight for a different reason: to defend bankrolling a political action committee supporting Donald Trump, a move that sparked a boycott of L.L. Bean, where she sits on the board. Trump later tweeted his support for L.L. Bean, even giving Linda Bean’s business a shout-out.

Yet when the L.L. Bean heiress appeared on Fox News to defend both companies and the jobs they generate, what went unsaid was that Bean has largely stepped away from the lobster business. In the last two years, she has shifted her interests, selling off her Rockland lobster distributorship to her employees, unloading a controversial lobster processing facility, and shuttering some of her lobster roll eateries.
Her lobster businesses, under the “Linda Bean’s Perfect Maine” company umbrella, now mostly consist of a restaurant that caters to visitors at L.L. Bean’s retail headquarters, a restaurant in the Portland airport, and a handful of seasonal shacks and kiosks.

So what happened to the sprawling business venture that Bean hoped to make as synonymous with lobster as Frank Perdue’s empire is to chicken?

Bean, now in her 70s, declined to comment despite repeated attempts to reach her and those connected to her.

It’s been a quiet departure for a woman not known to shy away from the spotlight.

Bean first used her family name and fortune as a springboard into politics, running for Congress in 1988 and 1992 as a hard-line conservative opposed to abortion, gay rights, and gun control. She ultimately lost the race to liberal Democrat Tom Andrews after spending $1.4 million and battling criticism that she was out of touch.

Her current wealth is not known, although the Bean family ranked 134th on the Forbes list of Richest US Families in 2015.

Linda Bean was a homemaker and gardener in her 60s when she was approached in 2007 about buying a lobster wharf in the seaside village of Port Clyde, where she lives. Bean, on the heels of a divorce, dove into the endeavor, learning the lobster trade, buying and selling lobster brought into her port.

She also bought nearby wharves, selling more lobster on the wholesale market. Maine lobster was special, she reasoned, and she branded hers with her name and port of origin printed on the rubber band around their claws. She also served up her lobster rolls with buttery charm, appearing in folksy coastal photos as though she was personally working behind the counter at a stand.
“We want to engender in people’s minds a sense of trust about the product that our fish is authentic from Maine, handled professionally and safely, wild caught and sustainable — [so] it’s worth a little more in their mind,” Bean told the Globe in 2009.

In lobsters, Bean had also found a cause, waging war on Canadian companies that processed Maine lobsters at low prices, a move that aggravated Maine companies that were already working with Canadian processors.

In 2009, she then bought her own processing plant in Rockland to process and sell frozen lobster claws and meat, as well as ready-to-eat meals like lobster pie. She also opened her first lobster stand in Freeport, near the L.L. Bean mother ship, and predicted opening a chain of 100 lobster restaurants by the end of 2010, helping the lobster trade find new markets.

“Probably the thing that Linda taught everyone is the power of branding,” said Patrice McCarron, executive director of the Maine Lobstermen’s Association. “Linda was very effective in using the Bean brand or the L.L. Bean name in expanding markets.”

But Bean’s efforts were not without detractors, including lobster industry veterans and Maine companies working with Canadian processors, and others who were suspicious of her newcomer status.

“She’s only been in the business three years and you’re telling me she’s got all the answers?” Peter McAleney, former president of the Maine Import-Export Lobster Dealers’ Association told the New York Times in 2009.

By early 2011, Bean had four wharves, a processing plant, and other properties including restaurants, as well as a deal with Walmart to sell her frozen cooked lobster claws, according to the Portland Press Herald.

Bean’s ideas about bringing lobster to supermarket frozen-food aisles everywhere were not always popular with lobstermen, said Robin Alden, a former Maine commissioner of marine resources who runs the Penobscot East Resource Center for fishermen.

She wanted to turn lobster from a pricey state specialty into a widely available commodity, but some in the lobster industry viewed Bean’s growing operation as a threat to their ability to leverage pricing.

“The lobster boat owner-operator is a critical piece of why the Maine coast has the type of fishery it does,” Alden said. “And that was the one thing Linda Bean couldn’t buy.”
Bean faced other problems as well, including protests by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals at her Rockland plant in 2013. The animal rights group publicized undercover video footage from the plant showing workers ripping claws and tails off live lobsters.

Charges were never pursued by the district attorney, who said invertebrates were not protected under Maine animal cruelty statutes. But just months later, a Food and Drug Administration investigation issued a warning to Bean that the plant was packing lobster in unsanitary conditions.

In yet another setback, Bean’s plant then lost its contract with Delaware North, food provider to stadiums and sports venues, including Boston’s TD Garden. Delaware North spokesman Glen A. White said the company discontinued its business with Linda Bean in 2014 after determining that “Linda Bean Lobster did not meet our standards for responsible sourcing.”

Bean sold the processing plant to New York-based Harbor’s Marine Seafood in 2015, according to Mayor Will Clayton of Rockland. Clayton said the plant closed because it struggled to find workers. He refused to say how many people lost their jobs when it closed, but praised Bean’s investment. The plant is now back on the market.

The final straw came last year, when Bean quietly decided to sell her distributorship, which sold whole lobsters, to her employees.

Annie Tselikis, executive director of the Maine Lobster Dealers’ Association, said that move helped Bean step away from the lobster business to focus on enjoying life.

Bean, she said, deserves credit for upgrading the wharves and coastal infrastructure so that lobstersmen can continue to carry on a generations-old way of life. People talk about the importance of lobstering in Maine, Tselikis said. “She put her money where her mouth is.”