

Herring get inshore protection

Large vessels not
allowed to tow nets.

By DOUG FRASER

STAFF WRITER

PORTLAND - The New England Fishery Management Council yesterday banned large vessels from towing nets to catch herring in inshore areas.

Ever since the National Marine Fisheries Service started encouraging fishermen to go out and catch abundant stocks of Atlantic herring more than a decade ago, herring has been virtually absent from inshore waters. Complaints started to pour in from a wide array of interests - whale-watch companies, tuna and cod fishermen, and even those who monitor the numbers of river herring (a separate species) that return to spawn each spring in rivers and streams all along the East Coast.

Herring are prey to many species, including cod, tuna, birds and marine

Herring: Large vessels banned from towing nets

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mammals. The feeling was that many predators were avoiding inshore waters because the herring weren't there.

Unfairly singled out?

There was the additional fear that large vessels of 100 feet or more, towing huge nets, might also be catching cod and river herring, unintentionally, with Atlantic herring.

Herring fishermen countered that they were catching only a small fraction of the herring scientists said were out there, and that they were being unfairly singled out as a scapegoat.

They said there were other factors: environmental ones like the documented warming trend in coastal waters, or degraded water quality, or human ones, like overfishing of some predator species that could also be responsible.

"Just the principle of it is absolutely wrong," said Geir Monson, vice president of Seafreeze Ltd. of North Kingstown, R.I. His company owns two large herring vessels that catch and freeze herring at sea. He said the arguments for banning his and other large boats from the inshore areas is without scientific backing, and is largely anecdotal.

"It's admittedly anecdotal, but we're out there every day for three to four months," said Dave Linney of Cape Neddick, Maine.

Linney has been harpooning tuna for more than 25 years, and has worked on tuna boats for more than 50. He said he's never seen so few herring in the water during tuna season as there have been in recent years. And even fewer tuna.

"Very bad," said Robert Fitzpatrick, president of Maguro USA, which buys and ships bluefin tuna from Cape Cod fishermen to Japan, where it is a highly prized fish in sushi restaurants. Fitzpatrick said that he bought 940 tons of bluefin in 2001, and just 180 last year.

The inshore herring area in

Herring in danger

■ **Large vessels of 100 feet or more**, towing huge nets, might also be catching cod and river herring, unintentionally, with Atlantic herring.

■ **Herring in inshore waters** has dropped ever since federal regulators in the 1990s encouraged fishermen to go after an underused resource.

question stretches from Cape Cod to the Canadian border.

Coincidentally, while New England fishermen were suffering through some of the worst ever tuna years, the Canadians were catching 400- to 600-pound tuna, Fitzpatrick said.

"Our fish," said Fitzpatrick, who believed that the tuna skipped New England altogether in recent years.

According to the National Marine Fisheries Service, 1,011 metric tons of bluefin landed in 2001 in Massachusetts and just 273 in 2004.

Numbers plunge

While other factors, including overfishing and tough regulations are responsible, state cod landings have also plunged from 12,520 metric tons in 2001 to 5,308 in 2004. And, during the past five years, river herring from Maine to Miami have not been returning to spawn.

At the Bournedale run, for example, the numbers of fish coming back dropped last year to 102,000, the second lowest in 25 years, from 672,000 in 2000.

Chatham fisherman Ray Cane used to see herring surface in the morning in big schools that clouded over the screen of the fish finder on his 35-foot boat. That's when the tuna would come, like cheetahs of the sea, bearing down on herring, eating almost 10 percent of their body weight each day to fuel 50 mph bursts of speed to catch their prey.

But Cane said he, and other fishermen, have seen few herring in inshore waters, and even fewer tuna in recent years, ever since federal regulators in the late '90s encouraged fishermen to go after what they believed was a healthy and commercially underused resource.

"I can't make a living from it anymore," Cane said.

Peter Baker, fishery analyst for the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, hoped the ban would mean more cod and tuna coming into near shore waters, fat from eating herring.

He was concerned that the large herring trawlers were still allowed to tow in closed areas on Georges Bank where they could accidentally catch large amounts of cod.

Ban affects fishermen

Monson dismissed those fears. He said the nets were configured to allow larger fish to escape and that the boat captains used technology like underwater cameras to make sure they had a clean catch.

For one boat captain, the new ban directly affected the two 130-foot herring vessels he works on. He tows an enormous net between the two vessels to catch herring. His boats are two of 24 vessels that get more than 65 percent of their income from the inshore area.

The new regulations allow boats like his to continue fishing using a different type of net, a purse seine.

In this type of fishery, a smaller boat anchors one end of a net, while the second vessel, towing the other end, encircles a school of fish. But he said his company could not afford the estimated \$1 million per boat to convert to that type of rig.

Although he asked to remain anonymous, he believed his fishery was not doing the damage people said it was.

"No one wants to be out there raping the ocean," he said.

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