

# Protection sought for Atlantic herring

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**W**ith less than a week remaining in the public comment period, a coalition of environmental groups, commercial and recreational fishing organizations, and whale-watching operators are voicing support for a measure to protect Atlantic herring from being depleted from the Gulf of Maine.

The National Marine Fisheries Service will decide whether to create a Buffer Zone in the Gulf of Maine. The mid-water trawl fleet could still fish farther offshore.

Peter Baker, of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, explained that a fleet of about 35 vessels called mid-water trawls have seriously depleted the herring populations. The lobster fishery relies on herring for bait in the traps.

"You are jeopardizing an entire sustainable fishery just to catch bait fish," said Baker, who is heading the Coalition for the Atlantic Herring Fishery's Orderly, Informed and Responsible Long Term Development.

Herring is also being caught as bycatch in other fisheries.

Baker said the council recently reduced the total allowable catch for herring in the gulf from 60,000 metric tons to 50,000 metric tons.

Scientists agree that the role of herring in the ecosystem cannot be understated.

"Herring appear to be extremely important to predators," said Bill Overholtz, task leader for pelagic fisheries at NOAA National Marine Fisheries at Woods Hole.

He explained that herring is a primary food source for fish including cod, striped bass, tuna, sharks and other species including whales and sea birds.

Although visually similar, Overholtz said Atlantic herring spawn in the deep cold waters off Georges Bank and are different from river herring. Ongoing studies will look at the role predation impacts the stocks.

River herring is also threatened and a three-year moratorium on taking the fish in Massachusetts was instituted last year.

Baker said members of the coalition are concerned that the decline of the herring population could impact the recovery of depleted fisheries such as cod. Recreational fishermen and the whale-watching industry fear that any changes in the size and location of the herring population could affect marine mammals and sport fish and change their migration routes farther offshore.

The public comment period ends Nov. 13.

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