

Groups unite to save herring

By [Doug Fraser](#)

STAFF WRITER

July 02, 2007 6:00 AM

Alarmed by the influx of large vessels into the herring fleet, and concerned that a key species in the ocean food chain might be overfished, environmentalists and fishermen are asking federal fishery managers to ban the boats from coming within 50 miles of shore.

"Our organization has seen the significant ramp-up of the herring fleet as a threat," said Earthjustice attorney Roger Fleming. "We see this as a serious national issue that must be dealt with immediately."

Earthjustice was just one of 11 environmental groups that united as the Herring Alliance and held a press conference at the New England Fishery Management Council meeting in Portland, Maine, last week to publicize the problem.

Herring are important because they graze on ocean plankton, transferring the tremendous nutritional power of oceans' floating prairies into food for many of the world's most important commercial species.

Locally, New England's breadbasket species like cod and haddock, as well as commercially valuable bluefin tuna, the resurgent striped bass population and whales, all depend on herring.

New England Fishery Management Council Fishery Analyst Lori Steele said the council was concerned about the impact the big boats were having on inshore stocks and did attempt to push them offshore with a plan that took effect this spring. In that plan, the inshore Gulf of Maine is closed to herring trawlers during the spring and summer months when these fish are most abundant close to shore.

The National Marine Fisheries Service also reduced the inshore herring quota from 60,000 metric tons last year to 50,000 this year and is proposing another 5,000 metric-ton cut for next year.

They are also making it harder for larger vessels to get the permit needed for the inshore herring fishery.

Largely ignored by New England fishermen after the large foreign fleet of factory trawlers was kicked out of U.S. waters in 1976, herring are now so numerous that the herring fleet has not been able to come close to catching the 145,000 metric-ton-recommended annual quota, averaging 100,000 metric tons in landings a year.

The industry has been beefing up, though, adding two processing ships that are nearly 400 feet long.

The Herring Alliance said it was important where the fish are caught, not just how many.

With many of New England's fish stocks still struggling to recover from historic low populations, some worry that wiping out inshore herring stocks would make that recovery less likely.

"As they begin to rebuild, we want to make sure we protect their food source," said Priscilla Brooks, director of the Conservation Law Foundation's Marine Conservation Program.

Steele said herring are an important food source for many species, but their importance to individual species and the impact on predators by taking large numbers of herring from one specific area is still being studied. She said the council has several efforts under way to encourage that research.

Doug Fraser can be reached at dfraser@capecodonline.com.

Hunted herring

Herring are a main staple for other fish species, such as cod and haddock.

The Herring Alliance wants to preserve the herring population to restore marine wildlife populations.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is trying to make it harder for large boats to get permits for inshore herring fishery.