

CONTENTION: Catches taking too many river herring

POSSIBLE: Moratorium on river herring fishing in East

Report: Herring decline accidental

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A new report funded by environmental groups ties declines of river herring in the Eastern states to commercial offshore fisheries for Atlantic herring and mackerel, contending that increased catches of the oceanic species are taking too many migrating river herring by accident.

More government observers are needed at sea, and there should be bycatch limits on the midwater trawl vessels that hunt herring and mackerel, says the report. It was released Wednesday to coincide with a meeting in Annapolis, Md., where officials with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission met to discuss a possible moratorium on all fishing for river herring in the eastern U.S.

River herring is the generic name for two species, the alewife and blueblack herring, that migrate off the coast and swim up rivers in spring. In New Jersey, the annual migration up the Delaware River turns into a spring ritual for anglers at the Route 1 bridge across the Delaware River at Trenton, where fishermen gather to catch herring for food, fun and as bait for striped bass.

Anglers catch herring at Batsto Village in the Pinelands, and "fish ladders" are planned for coastal creeks and lakes where herring once swam up from the sea. But the report sponsored by the Herring Alliance says habitat restoration should be accompanied by offshore fishing controls.

"The inadequate monitoring of bycatch, especially in the midwater trawl fleet, stands as a major obstacle to proper management of river herring," the report states.

While four states have closed their river waters to herring fishing, and less than 1 million pounds are taken annually in sanctioned herring seasons, it's not known how much river herring is taken as bycatch. But the report cites percentages from observed fishing trips and suggests the impact may be approaching that of the early 1970s, when foreign fishing boats in U.S. waters were blamed for a collapse of herring populations.