



THE MONTHLY NEWSLETTER of the **MAINE** LOBSTERMEN'S ASSOCIATION

Better Informed, Better Decisions

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Shell disease studies conclude

BY MELISSA WATERMAN

The results of a three-year, federally-funded study of lobster shell disease were presented in August at the 9th Annual Ronald C. Baird Sea Grant Science Symposium at the University of Rhode Island. The \$3-million New England Lobster Research Initiative brought together experts in crustacean endocrinology, genetics, veterinary medicine, behavior, microbiology, lobster biology, chemistry, environmental science, and epidemiology to work with fishermen and managers to uncover the basics of shell disease.

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What's happening with the herring?

BY MELISSA WATERMAN

We find herring even more and more sporadic in their appearances and disappearances, both from place to place, from week to week, and from year to year ... And herring are such wandering fish in general, here today and gone tomorrow even in their centers of abundance....." Bigelow and Schroeder, p. 88, Fishes of the Gulf of Maine, 1953.

So where are the herring this summer? Landings of herring from inshore waters known as Area 1A are dramatically less than in years past, causing scientists, seine fishermen and lobstermen to shake their heads in confusion. According to the National Marine Fisheries Service Fisheries Statistics Office, herring landed from Area 1A comprised just 1,394 metric tons by July 31. Last year at the same time the cumulative landings were 12,270 metric tons.

"Most seiners aren't even going out," said Jennie Bichrest, owner of Purse Line Bait in Phippsburg. "Earlier on in the season they were there. The tuna and the whales are there now. My guess is that the water is too warm."

"I have heard much from the fishermen about the fish being deep in the water column and un-fishable. I have also heard that with the warm weather fish are simply not in their usual haunts," said Matthew Cieri, fisheries biolo-



MLA photos

gist with the Maine Department of Marine Resources. "I can't tell you why this is. But I can tell you that we have never caught less than 2,000 metric tons by this point in the year in Area 1A since we have been keeping records starting in 1960."

Steve Robbins III, manager of the Stonington Co-op, said that the lack of in-shore herring at this time of year has made it hard for many lobstermen and for the seiners themselves. "It's been extraordinarily tight here," he said. Robbins thinks that the fish are staying near the bottom

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Storing traps on S. Bristol dock at issue

BY MICHELE GRYGA

When David Rice of South Bristol applied for a permit from the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to build a commercial pier in Clarke's Cove, he intended to use it like any commercial lobsterman would use a dock: to pull up to with his boat, switch out gear, dry out and clean traps and store traps in the off season. But in what industry representatives have called an "unprecedented" move, the DEP granted Rice a permit to build the dock with the condition that "No trap storage will be permitted on the permanent pier."

The odd condition resulted from a Department of Marine Resources (DMR) finding that the traps cast a shadow on the rockweed below the pier. The finding made the standards for the permit more stringent because rockweed is essential marine habitat. Rice's permitting expert, Joe LeBlanc of LeBlanc As-



photo by Michele Gryga

sociates, Inc. in Orrs Island, nevertheless was shocked when he saw the condition on the permit. He says he's "never seen it before."

Rice, a 65-year-old local fisherman who fishes 800

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due to warmer surface waters. "If they do come up they disperse through the water. It's been a number of years since we've seen behavior like this. But then, every year is different," he said.

Companies that deal in herring for bait have had an anxious summer. O'Hara Corporation in Rockland runs two vessels, F/V Sunlight and F/V Starlight, which can be rigged for seining or trawling. This summer, they've been running to Georges Bank to fish for herring rather than seining in-shore. Wyatt Anderson, who manages the company's bait division, sees a different pattern even among the Georges Bank schools than in years past. "Our boats have been fishing on Georges since the end of May. Which is different because the fish don't usually show up there until July or August," Anderson said.

"It's been a year to remember, that's for sure," said Mary Beth Tooley, who also works for the O'Hara Corporation and for Alfred Osgood, a bait dealer on Vin-alhaven. "Last time I remember it was like this was in the 1980s. Then the only place you could find fish was up in Jonesport."

Bait dealers are patching together a supply of different types of bait to meet lobstermen's needs. "The catch is down," said Dana Rice, a Gouldsboro bait dealer. "Supply is very, very tight. We're covering our bases with pogies, Canadian herring, the fish from Georges Bank. The landings aren't steady but we're getting by."

Bichrest said that the Georges Bank herring she is receiving now has relieved the pressure for bait she experienced earlier in the season. But even the Georges Bank trawlers are finding it difficult to fish steadily. "They might do two trips, then have to rest because of the haddock bycatch quota. When the fish are bunched up tight, then you can do short tows and not get haddock. But when they are spread out, you do longer tows and you get more haddock," Bichrest explained.

Robbins supplied co-op members in June with herring harvested with stop seines and now relies on Canadian fish for his bait. He said that when fall comes he will just "take it day by day" in terms of supply. "My concern is that a lot of the bigger seine boats are in hard straits now financially. Some seiners haven't landed any fish."

Rice said that he had noticed the herring landed from Area 1A this year are primarily juveniles, less than five inches in length. "They are acting more like they used to years ago," Rice said. "In recent years we'd never get these little fish around the shore."

He said that juvenile herring act differently than their adult counterparts. Coupled with warm water

temperatures this summer, the young herring are probably gathering on the bottom, Rice said. Seiners set just above the bottom and thus aren't getting the fish.

The Gulf of Maine Ocean Observing System (GOOOS) buoys indicate that surface water temperatures are indeed warm, although whether they are abnormally warm is hard to say. The Eastern Shelf buoy showed a temperature between 56 and 59 degrees F early in mid-August; the temperature at the Central Maine Shelf buoy was 63-65 degrees F during the same period.

Jason Stockwell, pelagic ecologist at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute in Portland, thinks there are a multitude of reasons the herring are scarce this year. "Sure, the warm water could be a factor. They are going deep for colder water," he said. But he also noted that the lack of predators, such as cod and other groundfish, could be affecting herring behavior. "A recent paper I read said that herring have become more bottom-oriented because a lack of predators there. If there are predators along the bottom, the fish will move up in the water column," Stockwell explained. The study by Ian McQuinn of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada looked at distribution of herring in the wake of decreased groundfish stocks in the Gulf of Maine. Researchers found that herring stocks did not increase significantly; rather the distribution of the herring shifted.

Stockwell doesn't see this season's lack of inshore herring as a harbinger of any long-term change in the population. "Two years ago there was a phenomenal fish build up. Keep in mind that they are fish. Fish change their behavior based on many things." Bill Overholtz, fisheries research biologist at the Northeast Fisheries Science Center in Woods Hole, agrees. "We've seen this several times over the last decade," he said. "It may be due to the fish moving to other feed sources in the central or northern Gulf of Maine."

Overholtz noted that this year's warm water temperatures are also not unusual. The Gulf of Maine surface water warms during the summer months while sub-surface water stays cool. Without strong winds to mix the two levels, a firm temperature stratification occurs. "Some years the fish are available and tight along the shore and in other years, they're not. It's a

big ocean. The fish are out there," he said.

Canadian seine boats have also had trouble catching fish in the inshore waters along the Bay of Fundy on both the New Brunswick and Nova Scotian sides. "But the weirs don't seem to be doing too badly," according to Gary Melvin, a fisheries research scientist at Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada St. Andrews Biological Station. "The weirs were doing better than last year although not exceptional." Melvin has begun a new acoustic survey of the local area that indicates abundant small fish in the Bay of Fundy "but we have nothing to compare the data with as this is the first year of the survey."

The Canadian bait supply changes from week to week, said Tony Hooper, vice president of resourcing for Connors Brothers Corporation in New Brunswick. "Earlier in the summer it was a hand-to-mouth situation, but it's better now," he said. "The weir fishing in Nova Scotia is just getting started and already they have brought in more than the entire season last year."

That the herring are somewhere in Area 1A is apparent due the prevalence of other species that prey on the herring, Robbins said that fishermen have seen a lot of blackback flounder, small shrimp and other species. The lack of midwater trawls during the summer months has had a positive effect in general, he said. "Many people say there are more fish and more juveniles because there isn't any midwater trawl activity," Robbins said. "Overall as tough as it's been no one around here wants to see it revert back to the way it was prior to the summertime ban."

In October, when Area 1A opens to mid-water trawlers, Rice expects that landings will go up. "Quite frankly, I'd rather catch them later than earlier. It depends on how you look at it: is your glass half full or is it half empty?" he said.

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tivities to create a focus on product innovation and development that would enable Maine to access the high-end markets that will support a strong boat price.

I know everyone shares in the frustration about what has happened to the price of lobster in the past few years. And I know some people wish we could return to the days when Maine lobster seemed to market itself.

Unfortunately, it's really no longer an option to bury our heads in the sand and hope that people will continue to seek out our product. We need to aggressively promote the availability and versatility of Maine lobster, develop new products that today's consumer desires, and do the branding work to make sure we capture the benefits.

The good news is there is a lot of strength in this industry to build upon: the stewardship ethic the industry is known for; the health of the resource; and the good reputation that Maine lobster already enjoys.

Thanks to the work of the task force, and the interest of many industry members, we have a roadmap to move forward to increased profitability for all segments of the lobster industry. The basic choice is clear – do nothing, and accept the status quo, or make the tough changes to improve the economic foundation of Maine's lobster industry.

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