

Maine Scallop Season Starts With New Regulations

CLARKE CANFIELD, Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — Maine's scallop fishermen are operating under new regulations that divide the state into three zones and establish a rotational management system similar to crop rotation on land.

The rules aim to give fishermen flexibility while rebuilding the scallop population, regulators say. Fishermen — rarely ones to embrace more regulations — say they're willing to give them a try if it means more scallops down the road.

"I haven't heard of any other plan I thought was the silver bullet that we need," said Mike Murphy II, a fisherman from Machiasport. "A lot of us understand we've got to do something to make things better; we've got to give something a try. If not, they'll just force something on us."

Sea scallops have been a boom-and-bust fishery since they began being harvested along the Maine coast in the late 1800s. The current season began Sunday and continues into March.

Maine scallops are considered high quality because they're brought to shore the same day boats drag them off the ocean floor or divers harvest them by hand. Last year, 242 boats and 34 divers took part in the fishery.

The catch was strong through the 1980s and into the early 1990s, when the annual harvest typically came in at 1 million to 2 million pounds of scallop meat, without the shell, valued at roughly \$5 million to \$10 million.

But for the past decade, the catch has been a small fraction of its old self. The past few seasons started out strong but died out quickly.

In an effort rebuild the scallop population, the Department of Marine Resources and fishermen have worked together for the past year to come up with the new regulations.

While the scallop-rich waters of Cobscook Bay along the Canadian border in far eastern Maine has had its own set of regulations for many years, this season marks the first time the rest of Maine's long jagged coast has been divided into zones, east and west.

It's also the first time the state has established a rotational management system, which will be used in the eastern zone from the Penobscot River to Lubec. Under the system, localized areas in the zone will be open and closed to fishing year-to-year on a rotational basis to allow scallops to replenish and grow to legal size.

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In federal waters on the Georges Bank fishing grounds 50 miles east of Cape Cod, rotating open and closed fishing areas has resulted in higher catches with less fishing effort, said Trisha De Graaf, of the Department of Marine Resources.

"We're trying to look down the road 10 years and give the industry a stable regulatory environment as well as a resource that's stable instead of having these booms and busts all the time," she said.

Murphy said he's hopeful the scallop population and harvest will rebound to give him a decent paycheck during the winter months, when he's not pulling lobster traps.

For this first year, however, he has to motor his 45-foot boat, Murphy's Law, about 10 hours from his home to the fishing grounds because other areas close to home are closed to fishing this season, he said.

That means he'll drag up scallops during the day, sell them on Mount Desert Island and spend nights on his boat. With scallop fishing allowed four days a week, he'll be out for four days at a time rather than returning home each day.

But fishermen are confident that they'll receive high prices this season, possibly \$10 or more a pound.

"We hope for \$10," Murphy said, "and if we get \$9, we're happy."

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