

New England Shrimpers Face Low Quota

CLARKE CANFIELD, Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — Shrimp-fishing regulators on Monday set a short winter shrimp season with a low quota following a warning from scientists that the Gulf of Maine shrimp population is in poor shape due to environmental conditions.

An Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission panel set the allowable catch for the upcoming season at about 1.4 million pounds. That's about a quarter of last year's catch of about 5.3 million pounds.

The season will begin Jan. 23 for net fishermen, who were allotted about 1.2 million pounds of the harvest. Fishermen who catch shrimp in traps begin their season Feb. 1, with a quota of under 200,000 pounds.

In their assessment of the Gulf of Maine shrimp population, scientists recommended having a shrimp-fishing moratorium this winter. If a fishery were to be allowed, scientists said it should start after at least 50 percent of the shrimp have hatched their eggs, which typically takes place in mid-February.

Gary Libby, a fisherman from Port Clyde, said a moratorium should be avoided at all costs because fishermen rely on shrimp for a few paychecks each winter, when their fishing options are limited.

"We really need a season," he said during Monday's meeting in Portland.

Shrimp provide a small, yet valuable, fishery for New England fishermen each winter. Maine fishermen catch about 90 percent of the harvest, with New Hampshire and Massachusetts fishermen accounting for the rest.

The ASMFC shrimp panel, which includes representatives from Maine, Massachusetts and New Hampshire, sets the season and the quota based on scientific surveys of the highly variable shrimp population.

Shrimp is a volatile fishery, where the catch can vary greatly from year to year based on the status of the shrimp population.

The population in the Gulf of Maine has plunged the past couple of years, said Anne Richards, chairwoman of the ASMFC's scientific panel that wrote the 2012 shrimp assessment report.

Based on the evidence, the likely culprit for the decline is warming ocean temperatures, she said.

"The environment is hot, it's warming and it's reached the warmest levels on record," she said. "That's not a good thing."

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Maine Department of Marine Resources Commissioner Pat Keliher argued for a higher quota than what was eventually approved. Fishermen, he said, are paying a steep price for something beyond their control.

"The environment is what's affecting this fishery," he said.

But regulators are taking a gamble simply by allowing a season this winter, said Mike Armstrong, a member of the shrimp panel representing the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries.

"We are being extremely risk-prone in having a season, and there may be consequences to that," he said.

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