

Maine's Baby Eel Harvest Starts Slowly



In this March 23, 2012 file photo, Bruce Steeves uses a lantern to look for young eels known as elvers on a river in southern Maine. The state's elver season is off to a slow start, with the catch only around half of what it was last year. State regulators say a resurgence in foreign markets may have cut back demand for Maine's baby eels. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty, File)

PORTLAND, Maine (AP) — Maine's lucrative baby eel season is off to a slow start, with cold weather and resurgent foreign markets combining to depress catch and prices paid to fishermen, officials say.

Baby eels, called elvers, are Maine's second most-valuable fishery after lobsters. The volume and value of the state's elver fishery have boomed in recent years, with catch topping 18,000 pounds and \$32 million in value for each of the past two years.

The state, concerned about overfishing, instituted a quota this year for the first time. But more than three weeks into the eight-week season, Maine elver fishermen have caught only about 2,900 pounds, about 1,000 pounds off last year's pace and a quarter of the 11,749-pound quota, said Maine Marine Resources Commissioner Pat Keliher.

Prices paid to fishermen are down, too, with elvers fetching about \$500 to \$800 per pound, said Darrell Young, an Ellsworth-based fisherman and the founder of the Maine Elver Fisherman Association. While that price will likely go up, last year's price was about \$1,000 higher, he said.

Fishermen and government regulators attribute the slow start to the chilly spring, which left Maine's rivers and streams too cold to lure the baby eels away from warmer saltwater. European markets, which collapsed in recent years, and Asian markets also have begun to rebuild, causing more competition and lower prices, said fishermen, state regulators and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries

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Commission.

Fishermen are hoping for warmer weather this month.

"I'm a long ways from my quota, that's for sure," Young said. "We just need some good weather to straighten us out."

Maine's elver season began April 6 and ends May 31. This is also the first year the state is utilizing electronic swipe cards to record sales of elvers, a move intended to enforce the quota and prevent illegal transactions. The season was originally slated to begin March 22 but was delayed so the new rules could be implemented.

The elvers are caught in rivers and sold overseas as seed stock for aquaculture companies in Asia that raise them to maturity and sell them for food.

Keliher said the implementation of the swipe card system has been smooth, with only one report of a card failing and one report of a card reader not working.

Maine is one of two states with an elver fishery. The other, South Carolina, has only a handful of permitted fishermen, while Maine has hundreds.

The exact impact of foreign elver sources on the American market is tough to gauge, said Kate Taylor, eel fishery management plan coordinator for the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. European countries that harvest elvers are trying to rebuild depleted stocks with trade restrictions, which means they aren't selling to Asian countries that are the biggest buyers, she said. It's unclear, she said, whether the European countries have rebounded to the point where an impact would be felt in the U.S.

"One or two good years may not be enough to make up for decades prior," she said.

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission has said it will review the elver fishery by the end of the year. The agency recommended that the state scrap its season, but the state opted instead to proceed with quotas.

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