Harsh Winter Keeps Maine Lobster from Shedding Shells

PATRICK WHITTLE, Associated Press

ROCKLAND, Maine (AP) — The cold winter is still being felt in the waters off Maine, where the nation's largest lobster fishery is off to a slow start.

The season typically picks up after the bulk of the lobster population sheds its shells and reaches legal harvesting size. That occurred in late June last year and mid-June in 2012, but state officials and lobstermen say it hasn't happened yet this year, leading to small catches.

State lobster biologist Carl Wilson said the cold winter and spring may have held back molting. Some lobstermen and buyers are reporting catches half the size they saw at this time last year.

Molting could start happening "any day now," Wilson said, adding that this year's molt appears similar to what the state typically experienced 10 years ago. The last two years — which brought record catches of more than 125 million pounds of lobster each — were seasons that featured an early molt, he said.

Wilson and lobstermen said they expect the season — which they still expect to be a strong one — to take off after shedding.

"The trend has been earlier and earlier each year," Wilson said. "It's not when they start, it's where they end up."

Lobsters molt so they can grow into new, larger shells, often shedding 25 or more times in the first five to seven years of life. After that, adult males molt about once per year and females once every two years. They can be legally harvested in Maine once their carapace reaches 3 1/4 inches long. A recently molted lobster, which has a soft shell, is typically called a "shedder" by Maine lobstermen and savvy consumers.

The state's lobster industry, which accounted for 85 percent of the nation's catch in 2012, has boomed, topping a record $364 million in 2013. The abundance of lobsters has sparked tensions between the industry players in the U.S. and Canada, where Canadian fishermen blockaded truckloads of Maine lobsters from processing plants in 2012 because of falling wholesale prices.

David Cousins, president of the Maine Lobstermen's Association and a South Thomaston lobsterman, said lobstermen expect shedding to pick up and catches to escalate at the end of this month, if not the end of the week. He said the slow season indicates that Maine lobster are "back on the old time clock" of shedding later in the summer.

Rockland lobster dealer Jamie Steeves said he also expects the season to pick up soon, but he added the slow start has been a pain for an industry that grew accustomed to early starts and huge catches in 2012 and 2013. However, he said, it's not time to panic.

"Lobsters will take care of themselves," he said. "It's going to be a normal year."

Prices of lobster are up slightly from last year amid the decline in catch, Maine Import Export Lobster Dealers' Association's President Tim Harkins said. The value of last year's lobster fishery was $2.89 per pound, the second lowest figure in the past 18 years.

"This is more representative of a traditional lobstering season," Harkins said. "The lobsters will come."

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