

Update on River Herring Conservation Efforts

On February 4th, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (Commission) was expected to vote on what conservation measures to include in Amendment 2 to the River Herring Fishery Management Plan. Currently listed as Species of Concern since 2006, river herring numbers have declined 95 to 99 percent in many river systems. It is widely believed that bycatch (the accidental taking of non-targeted fish and ocean wildlife) of river herring in the Atlantic Herring and Atlantic Mackerel fisheries is one of the chief reasons for river herring's precipitous decline in the last two decades.

Public comment on Amendment 2 closed on January 1, 2009, but not before the Commission heard from over 4,000 individuals expressing a deep concern about river herring bycatch. One of the public comment letters featured over 100 signatures from organizations from Maine to South Carolina, noting the importance of river herring as a forage fish for other predator fish, marine mammals and sea birds.

Yet, despite all of the public support for stronger conservation measures, the overwhelming support of the Commission's Advisory Panel to minimize bycatch and increase observer coverage on fishing boats to monitor bycatch, and a Technical Committee recommendation endorsing similar measures, the Commission ultimately voted to delay taking action on river herring conservation until May at the earliest.

The vote came on the heels of a presentation which echoed dire straits for river herring. Regardless of what criteria were considered – status, age, or harvests – in determining the health of the fishery, declining trends were the rule. The rare exceptions to the downward trend gave a glimmer of hope for recovery efforts, but were no reason for the Commission to delay action until more information is available.

To its credit, the Commission voted to establish a subcommittee that will develop: 1) more detailed options including a basic level of resource protection that all states must adopt; and 2) definitions of what constitutes a sustainable fishery and excessive bycatch. The subcommittee is expected to meet two times before the next scheduled Commission meeting in May. In addition, the Commission will send a letter to the regional Mid-Atlantic and New England Fishery Management Councils requesting greater cooperation in understanding the true extent of the river herring bycatch problem in all small mesh fisheries. Since river herring spend most of their lives at sea and are encountered as bycatch in both state and federal waters, cooperation and coordinated action by the Commission and the regional councils will be essential to address the river herring bycatch problem.