

WHERE HAVE ALL THE FISHERMEN GONE?

Yvette Alexander
President, Maine Fishermen's Wives Association
Harpwell, Maine

Portland's once thriving commercial fish pier today has the eerie feel of a ghost town movie set.

- The only store in Portland to sell fishing gear recently put an "out of business" sign in the window.
- Fishing boats sit idle at the dock with no sightings of men repairing nets, painting boats or offloading catch.
- The Portland Fish Exchange, which until recently supported dozens of well paid, blue-collar jobs, and moved millions of pounds of fish between boats and local processors, has cut its workforce by 50%.
- Local fish processors now buy the fish caught by Maine fishermen from Massachusetts where most of Portland's fishing fleet has relocated.
- Millions of dollars of federal, state and private investment in bringing fresh seafood to consumers has been lost and millions more will be continue to be lost until Portland's fish pier truly is a ghost town.

What's driving this awful reality? No fish in the ocean? Hardly.

In 2004, New England fishermen landed two-thirds of the allowable catch set by scientists, representing lost revenue of at least \$35 million. In 2005, New England fish landings were half of what could be safely harvested, at a loss of nearly \$50 million. For the next couple of years, the gap between what scientists say fishermen can catch and what they land is expected to become even wider.

The majority of fish caught by Maine fishermen is from stocks that are considered to be healthy by scientists. New restrictions are driven by a couple of stocks, specifically Gulf of Maine cod and Gulf of Maine yellowtail, which for several years have not been the target of Maine's fleet.

All New England fishing ports have suffered from the difficulty with crafting regulations that protect a couple of weak stocks while allowing fishermen to land what can be safely harvested - but Maine's fleet faces a significant disadvantage not faced by fishermen elsewhere.

Maine fishermen are prohibited by State legislation from landing their lobster bycatch in Maine – bycatch that *is* allowed under federal law and by all other states in New England.

A change in Maine's law would not have a negative impact on lobster stocks because Maine fishermen are already landing lobster bycatch in Massachusetts – instead, Maine would benefit from both lobsters and fish landed in Maine.

In 2004, Governor Baldacci convened a Task Force “to formulate recommendations about how best to rebuild groundfish stocks, and preserve and enhance Maine’s groundfishing industry in the face of significant challenges and changes”.

The Task Force, comprised of industry and legislative experts, produced a report that sets out a number of recommendations including: “Eliminate disadvantages for vessels working from Maine ports. A combination of state and federal policies makes Massachusetts a more attractive port of call for groundfishing vessels. Most of these disadvantages can be reduced or eliminated “

More than two years later there has simply been no follow-up and no action to eliminate any of the disadvantages for fishing boats working from Maine ports. As a result, Portland has seen a steady attrition of its fleet to Massachusetts, and step-by-step along the way, Portland’s fishing infrastructure is crumbling.

It is time for the State of Maine to respond in a meaningful way to the current condition of Maine’s groundfish industry. Once the historic and economic value of this industry is lost, we will never get it back.

The Maine Fishermen’s Wives Association urges State leadership to support LD170 An Act To Permit the Landing of Lobsters Harvested by Methods other than Conventional Traps.

The mission of the Maine Fishermen’s Wives Association is to promote seafood consumption, to increase public recognition of the historic and economic contributions of the fishing industry, and to improve conditions for safety at sea.