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## Numbers reveal amount of Maine fish catch going to Mass.



By Clarke Canfield, Associated Press Writer | January 15, 2007

PORTLAND, Maine --More Maine fishing boats are taking their catches to Massachusetts ports, where they can legally sell lobsters caught in their nets and boost revenues at the expense of the Portland Fish Exchange.

From 2004 to 2005, the number of trips by Maine-based trawlers to Massachusetts to sell both fish and lobsters grew from 76 to 160, and the amount of seafood sold on those trips grew from \$1.6 million to \$3.8 million, according to a new analysis.

The new data will be used in a long-shot effort to change a Maine law that prohibits dragger fishermen from landing lobsters in Maine.

Supporters say the change is needed to bring Maine in line with other New England states, where boats targeting groundfish are allowed to bring up to 100 lobsters per day, or up to 500 per trip, to shore.

The volume of fish passing through the Portland Fish Exchange has shrunk because of declining catches. The fish auction suffers even more when trawlers unload in Massachusetts because they can sell lobsters there.

In 2005, Maine fishermen sold 120,000 pounds of lobster in Massachusetts, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the agency that regulates commercial fishing. That's a tiny fraction of Maine's total 2005 harvest of 67.3 million pounds.

"For the sake of these few lobsters, we're losing whole boatloads of fish," said Tom Valleau, president of the fish exchange.

Maine's lobster industry opposes changing the rules.

If Maine passed a law allowing fishermen to land lobsters, that would open the door for scores of fishermen to target lobsters by dragging the ocean bottom with their nets, said Pat White, chief executive officer of the Maine Lobstermen's Association.

Lobstermen fear there's already too much effort put on the lobster population.

"We're trying to figure out how to reduce effort, not increase effort," White said.

Maine lobstermen also insist that boats that catch fish in nets go to Massachusetts not only because they can sell their lobsters there. They say fishermen also get higher prices for their catches there, while paying out less in fuel costs.

Fishermen know the odds are long that Maine, the nation's leading lobster state, will change its landing law for lobsters. After all, there are more than 6,000 licensed lobstermen in Maine, the industry has a politically powerful voice, and lobstering by far is the state's No. 1 fishery, worth more than \$300 million in 2005.

But until now, there hasn't been any statistics to quantify just how much seafood was being sold in Massachusetts instead of Maine.

The new numbers came from fishermen's log books and seafood dealer records that are collected by NOAA. The numbers were crunched and analyzed by an economist at NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center in Woods Hole, Mass.

According to the analysis, Maine lost \$9.5 million in seafood revenues to Massachusetts from 2000 to 2005 because of the law outlawing lobster landings.

Valleau hopes to use those numbers to persuade the Legislature's Marine Resources Committee to consider a law allowing fishermen to sell lobsters that are caught more than 50 miles offshore. Those lobsters would have to meet the same regulations for Maine lobstermen regarding minimum and maximum size.

State Rep. Anne Haskell, D-Portland, will sponsor the bill. Haskell said it's designed to help the Portland Fish Exchange survive the hard times while groundfish stocks like cod and flounder are rebuilding in New England waters.

The Fish Exchange last year handled 9.5 million pounds of product, down from 17.1 million pounds in 2005. In the early 1990s, the auction handled more than 30 million pounds a year.

One reason for the decline is the increasing number of Maine boats headed to Massachusetts. One of those boats, the 70-foot Olympia, is owned by Maggie Raymond, who's the executive director of the Associated Fisheries of Maine.

Last year, her boat stopped going to Portland. Instead, it brought about 400,000 pounds of fish to Gloucester, Mass., and to Boston, she said.

By going to Massachusetts, her boat also brought in about \$50,000 in sales of lobsters that were caught in the fishing nets, Raymond said. She also saved nearly \$9,000 in sales taxes that Maine charges on diesel fuel but that Massachusetts does not.

Raymond said she would bring her catch to Portland if Maine law allowed her to bring the lobsters there.

"These lobsters are being landed anyway, they're just being landed in other states," Raymond said. "If there is any hope of preserving what's left of the groundfishing infrastructure in Maine, which is the Portland Fish Exchange, something has to be done."

But Patrice McFarron, executive director of the Maine Lobstermen's Association, said changing the law is a "Band-Aid" approach to bigger problems in the fishing industry. There is no magic bullet that will serve as a cure-all, she said.

"The Maine Lobstermen's Association is on record for supporting the groundfishing industry," she said. "We'd be glad to support groundfishermen in any way we can -- other than this."

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On the Net:

Better Lobster Law: <http://www.betterlobsterlaw.com>

Maine Lobstermen's Association: <http://www.maine lobster.org> ■