

The Bollard Report: Maine's fishing industry is fried

By Chris Busby

PORTLAND (Oct 11): A word of warning is in order for readers of this column who visit the Bollard online to read our special report on Maine's groundfishing industry: The word I chose to describe this trade's fate in that report's headline is also the past participle of a verb that starts with "f" – the one not suitable to print in a family-friendly publication.

I chose to use that word because it's no longer accurate to write of how Maine's groundfishing industry is "declining," or "struggling," or even "collapsing." The news is actually much worse than that, both as it pertains to the industry's current state and its future prospects.

Less loaded words also fail to reflect the anger and frustration groundfish harvesters and city officials in Portland, the hub of Maine's fishing industry, are feeling and expressing about this situation.

The cruel irony, they say, is that groundfishing could again be a booming industry in Maine if only it can survive the next few years.

A task force appointed by Gov. John Baldacci released a report two years ago recommending over 30 measures to bolster the industry during this crucial stretch. However, few of these recommendations have been acted upon, and the one fish harvesters say would make the biggest difference – allowing lobsters caught in fishing nets to be sold in Maine, as is legal in Massachusetts – is too politically noxious to generate serious discussion in Augusta.

Federal regulations intended to help stocks of cod, yellowtail flounder, haddock and other groundfish rebound from decades of overfishing have been taking a heavy toll on Maine's fishery since the 1990s. Additional restrictions on the number of "days at sea" harvesters can spend – a set of rules, known as Amendment 13, implemented two years ago – further disadvantaged Maine's harvesters, who must spend more time traveling to major fishing grounds, like Georges Bank, than those working from ports in Massachusetts and elsewhere.

In the state task force's 2004 report, the group wrote that the businesses "most vulnerable" to Amendment 13's negative impacts are "shoreside facilities such as fuel, ice and gear dealers, piers, wharves, welding and repair shops, and net-makers." Before the new regulations went into effect, "these services were at the minimum critical mass to support the fleet," according to the task force.

Two years later, that "critical mass" of shoreside infrastructure is slipping below the "minimum" necessary to support what little remains of Maine's groundfishing fleet. In August, Maine lost its last purveyor of commercial fishing gear when Vessel Services, the sole business still selling ice for the industry, stopped selling gear.

Even more troubling, the Portland Fish Exchange is fast approaching bankruptcy. The city-owned auction house, opened two decades ago, is handling the sale of fewer fish than ever, losing \$8,000 a week, and will be broke within 12 to 18 months, according to its general manager, Hank Soule.

"Once the critical mass is gone, you don't get it back," said Judith Harris, of the Portland-based industry group Associated Fisheries of Maine. "We will not have a fishing industry."

Though federal regulations are pinching fish harvesters throughout New England, differences in state laws make fishing in Maine a less attractive option than doing business in Massachusetts, where diesel fuel costs are lower and fish harvesters can make extra money selling lobsters caught in their dragging nets.

Maggie Raymond, owner of a Maine commercial fishing vessel and spokesperson for Associated Fisheries of Maine, said her boat landed all of its catch in the Bay State last year, a move that saved about \$7,500 in sales tax on fuel and generated about \$100,000 from the sale of lobster by-catch.

Maine's groundfishing advocates say the state's lobster industry would not be negatively affected by the sale of lobster by-catch, which would be strictly limited and phased out after five years, by which time federal fishing restrictions are expected to ease.

"Even if every [Maine] groundfishing boat landed the maximum in every trip, their take [would be] not only a drop in the bucket, it [would be] a drop in the sea," said Portland City Councilor Ed Suslovic. "Most of these lobsters are being caught and landed anyway. They're just going to Massachusetts."

Suslovic, a former state legislator who chairs the Portland City Council's Legislative Committee, is struggling to get even the key parties involved in this issue in the same room to discuss it. (We didn't have any luck getting the Baldacci administration or the Maine Lobstermen's Association to comment for our report.)

"There doesn't seem to be any willingness to lift a finger to help the groundfish industry," said Suslovic.

By doing nothing while this traditional Maine trade disappears, state officials are, in essence, lifting a finger for fishermen – the one between the ring and index. In another year or two, they can lift their whole hand and wave the fishing industry goodbye.

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