

Lobstermen gear up to fight landing bill

By GREGORY D. KESICH, Staff Writer *Portland Press Herald / Maine Sunday Telegram*
Wednesday, February 21, 2007

Leaders of Maine's thriving lobster industry launched a pre-emptive political strike Tuesday on a proposed law that would let financially struggling groundfishermen land lobsters that get caught inadvertently in their nets.

With a scheduled public hearing before the Legislature's Marine Resources Committee still two weeks away, leaders from four of Maine's lobstermen's associations said that, if it is enacted, the bill will undo careful conservation measures that are responsible for the health of Maine's \$300 million lobster industry.

"We sympathize with the groundfishing industry," said Bob Baines of Spruce Head, president of the Maine Lobstermen's Association. "But this ill-conceived bill will not help them while it will harm a thriving fishery."

The legislative hearing on the bill is scheduled for March 5, at the Augusta Civic Center instead of the committee's regular meeting space, to accommodate the possibility of a big turnout by opponents, said Sen. Dennis Damon, D-Trenton, the committee's co-chairman.

Maine has more than 6,000 lobstermen, who make up a highly organized and potent political force spread out among legislative districts along the state's coast.

The groundfishing industry has about 100 boats, most based in the Portland area.

Organizers expect that hundreds of lobstermen will attend the public hearing.

"I would be disappointed if there wasn't 2,000 guys fighting against this thing," said Ted Bear, 64, a lobsterman from Harpswell who attended the press conference on Tuesday.

In the other coastal New England states, fishermen are allowed to keep and sell the lobsters they catch in their nets.

Federal regulations allow each fishing boat to keep 100 lobsters a day, or 500 per trip, which can be sold in ports such as Gloucester and New Bedford, Mass.

But the practice is illegal here, so Maine fishermen must throw their lobsters back or take their catch to out-of-state ports to sell them.

Fish landings at the Portland Fish Exchange last year were about half of what was landed in 2004, in part, say industry representatives, because of Maine's prohibition on lobster sales. If that continues, the state could lose what's left of its groundfishing industry, said Thomas Valteau, president of the Portland Fish Exchange.

"For the sake of 500 lobsters, we lose 30,000 pounds of groundfish on every trip," Valteau said.

With every vessel that relocates to Massachusetts, Maine loses business for companies like fish processors, gear shops and the fish exchange itself. Valteau is worried that in a few years, when conservation measures start to pay off in rebounding fish stocks, Maine will not be in a position to take advantage because the infrastructure of its fishing industry will be gone.

The lobstermen who assembled at Tuesday's news conference said they would not accept any changes to the laws that affect their conservation practices.

Maine lobsters are caught only in traps, and lobstermen are subject to regulations that limit both the minimum and maximum size of lobsters they can sell.

They say that throwing back the biggest, most fertile lobsters is the key to the health of Maine's lobster industry, one of the state's iconic industries.

Changing the law would turn that practice upside down, the lobstermen say.

Limiting the number of lobsters that groundfishermen can keep encourages the practice of keeping the biggest lobsters and throwing the smaller ones back. Because Massachusetts allows sales of bigger lobsters than Maine allows, the fishermen would still have the financial incentive to sell their catch in ports like Gloucester, Baines said.

Baines also said that the offshore lobsters are brood stock to the inshore lobster fishery and are important to its health. The groundfishing industry disputes that there is any relation between the two populations.

Baines said other fisheries should use the lobster industry as a model for sustainable practice, not weaken its conservation measures. "It sets us apart from all the other fisheries in the world," he said.

Staff Writer Tom Bell contributed to this report.