

## Oversight is warranted on selling netted lobster

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Maine's groundfishing fleet is facing the toughest of times.

Regulators are trying to rectify decades of overharvesting with increasingly restrictive limits on when and where skippers can fish. Plummeting landings threaten the existence of on-shore support businesses, like the Portland Fish Exchange. One of the state's oldest industries, and one that helped forge the Maine identity as a land of self-reliant seamen, is in grave danger of being eclipsed.

As go the fishermen, so go the support businesses that cater to them. But a significant number of Maine fishermen are taking their hauls to Massachusetts. A bill before the Legislature should encourage Maine skippers to come home again. Yet LD 170 is generating fierce opposition from the one Maine fishing sector that's doing well: lobstermen.

Maine prohibits groundfishing boats from selling any lobsters that get caught up in nets that are dragged across the ocean floor to catch cod, haddock, flounder and other bottom-dwelling species.

Massachusetts, on the other hand, has no such ban. A study by the National Marine Fisheries Service revealed that on 450 occasions between 2000 and 2005, Maine-based vessels steamed to other states' ports to land their catch. NMFS also said many of those fishermen did so to sell the lobsters swept up in their nets. The diverted landings represented \$9.6 million in fishing revenue lost to Maine.

The bill would continue the prohibition on landing lobsters caught in nets within 50 miles of the Maine coast, where most lobstermen set their traps. In areas beyond that, it would allow up to 500 lobsters netted by fishermen per trip to be landed in Maine, and cap non-trap landings at 5 percent of the total haul.

Importantly, it would also require mandatory lobster bycatch reporting. And groundfish skippers would have to adhere to Maine's existing conservation measures, which include maximum and minimum size limits, and a prohibition on landing lobsters whose tails are notched with a 'V' - signalling that they are active female breeders.

There are legitimate concerns: Offshore areas have larger lobsters and more breeders.

Monitoring will be critical to ensure a program designed to market bycatch doesn't turn deep-water lobsters into a target for draggers.

And managers need triggers to restore the ban if taking offshore lobsters proves harmful to the fishery.