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WHEELS

Thursday, August 14, 2003

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# Officials warn harsher rules would send fishermen south

By MEREDITH GOAD, Portland Press Herald  
Writer

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Portland Fish Exchange officials and members of a new city groundfishing task force say the federal government is underestimating the economic impact of proposed fishing regulations on Maine.

A federal analysis that predicted Maine could lose up to 500 jobs under the new regulations does not take into account that many Maine fishermen may relocate to Massachusetts, said Hank Soule, general manager of the Portland Fish Exchange.

The sweeping new regulations, known as Amendment 13, could reduce the number of days a boat can fish from 70 to 40 per year. It is a move designed to help rebuild fish stocks, but it would put Maine fishermen at a disadvantage because they have farther to travel to reach prime fishing grounds on Georges Bank.

By moving to Massachusetts, they could cut down on their "steaming time" and save 10 to 15 travel days a year, using them for

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fishing instead.

"A good number of fishermen are saying 'If this goes through, I'm leaving,' " Soule said.

Portland Mayor James Cloutier said the city's new fisheries policy advisory committee, made up of a dozen people who work in or with the fishing industry, is developing an "anecdotal analysis" that will outline the problem and detail how Portland has already been affected by tighter fishing restrictions.

That analysis should be completed sometime next week, when the committee will draft a resolution to take to the City Council. The committee also will call on the state to perform its own economic analysis of the effects of the regulations, Cloutier said.

Officials from the state Department of Marine Resources who are on the New England Fishery Management Council did not return phone calls Wednesday. One official was participating in a council meeting in Peabody, Mass.

The council will hold public hearings in September on four options for satisfying Amendment 13. In addition to the cuts in fishing days, the options include measures such as fishing area closures and strict quotas on cod, haddock and other groundfish. The council will vote on a final plan in November, and the regulations that are ultimately adopted will go into effect next May.

The city has already lost about half its fishing crews and boats because of fishing regulations, Cloutier said. More restrictions would be "unwise and unfair," he said, and do "some fairly large damage to the Portland economy."

The loss of fishing boats in a port has a ripple effect on shore because it impacts fishing-related businesses that supply food, fuel, repair work and other commodities that fishermen need.

More defections from Maine could have a devastating effect on the Portland Fish Exchange, which has already lost 20 percent of its landings to Massachusetts, according to Tom Valleau, president of the organization's board of directors.

"They don't want to go down to Massachusetts," Valleau said. "They want to stay in Portland and in Stonington and in Rockland where they've been all their life. But there comes a tipping point where . . . in order to survive they're going to have to change what they do."

Besides saving travel time, another economic advantage to moving to Massachusetts is the ability to land bycatch lobsters there.



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Under current federal law, fishermen can keep up to 500 pounds of any lobsters they inadvertently pick up in their nets as bycatch. Maine does not allow fishermen to keep those lobsters, but Massachusetts does.

That extra income will start to look more attractive to fishermen struggling to make ends meet, Soule predicted.

"Those sources of income become more and more important as your primary source of income is cut," he said.

The Portland Fish Exchange landed 22 million pounds of groundfish last year, about half of which came from 25 larger boats that work farther offshore. Soule said he expects most of those boats to move their operations to Massachusetts.

In addition, there will be economic impacts on the other 175 fishing boats serviced by the exchange each year.

"I am going very quickly, I believe, from 22 million pounds here to 10 million pounds," Soule said. "That's a pretty significant reduction, and the exchange hasn't operated on that volume of landings since it opened."

The loss of the fish exchange would be disastrous to Portland's economy and its image, Cloutier said.

"It's a resource that has helped Portland become one of the biggest fishing ports in the eastern United States," he said, "and so it's going to be a huge blow to our waterfront and to our civic morale if the place has to close."

Staff Writer Meredith Goad can be contacted at 791-6332 or at:

[mgoad@pressherald.com](mailto:mgoad@pressherald.com)

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