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Mass. weighs commercial striped bass fishing ban

By Jay Lindsay

Associated Press Writer / January 18, 2010

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BOSTON—The feisty and enormously popular striped bass would be off limits to all commercial fishermen in Massachusetts under a proposal being considered by state lawmakers.

The bill would ban the commercial catch of striped bass in state waters and limit recreational fishermen to taking home one striped bass per day -- down from two -- while imposing new size restrictions.

The proposal to make stripers a "game fish" comes at a time when regulators say the once-rare sport fish is abundant, not overfished and reproducing at a healthy clip. But the bill's backers say the science is off and fear regulators are setting up a population crash by allowing commercial fishermen to pluck out the most productive stripers -- large females.

"They managed to crash the fish once before, why do we want to let them do it again?" said Craig Caldwell, a recreational fisherman and member of Stripers Forever, a group that supports the bill and "advocates eliminating all commercial fishing for wild striped bass," according to a mission statement.

Darren Saletta, a commercial fishermen from Chatham, said the bill is being driven by Stripers Forever's "greedy intention of retaining the entire catch for their recreational side."

If saving fish is the goal, Saletta said, it makes no sense to go after commercial fishermen when recreational fishermen catch more than 80 percent of the stripers landed in Massachusetts. Still, he added, there are plenty of striped bass.

"(Striped bass) is a poster child for fisheries," he said. "It's healthy. It's flourishing. ... It's creating jobs. It's putting food on the table."

Stripers are popular among sport fishermen because they can be tough to catch and are fiery fighters when hooked. Fishermen are protective of the stripers because they saw the stock collapse to about 5 million fish in 1982, before rebounding to an estimated 56 million in 2007, according to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, which manages stripers on the Atlantic coast.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Matthew Patrick, D-Falmouth, said a healthy striped stock is worth about \$1 billion to the state's tourism business, and keeping it robust is essential.

"The worst thing that could happen is for this fishery to collapse again," he said.

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The bill's advocates see troubling signs, including a wasting disease that's hit the species, anecdotal evidence of fewer fish and federal numbers that showed a steep 71 percent drop in stripers landed in Massachusetts -- from about 9 million in 2006 to about 2.6 million last year.

Patrick said he's also troubled by a decline in the number of breeding females, which fell from 2003 to 2008, though the 2008 estimate is still higher than any year in the two decades before 2003. [Continued...](#)

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