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Mass. weighs commercial striped bass fishing ban

By Jay Lindsay
Associated Press Writer / January 18, 2010

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Page 2 of 2 -- Caldwell, 46, of Harwich, said he caught about 40 stripers last year, compared with 100 or more in years past. And he didn't see the mid-sized fish that would become the fishery's key spawners in future years.

"What the old guys tell me is this is exactly what happened before the last crash," he said

Stripers Forever says ending commercial striper fishing has worked to improve the stock's health in other New England states -- including Connecticut, New Hampshire and Maine -- and, subsequently, the value of the recreational fishery. Meanwhile, it would affect what group spokesman Jeffrey Krasner called a "tiny handful" of commercial fishermen.

The state Division of Marine Fisheries issues an annual average of 4,000 commercial striped bass fishing permits, but only about 1,200 permit-holders report selling at least one fish, said agency spokeswoman Catherine Williams. About 275 fishermen sell a thousand pounds or more (at around \$3 per pound), with 35 or those selling 5,000 pounds or more.

Saletta says he's in the latter group this year, but is also a shellfisherman and lobsterman. It would be devastating to hundreds of fishermen if the bill passed and they suddenly lost a chunk of income, he said.

"You've got to take part in several fisheries in order to piece together a living," said Saletta, 34.

The dropping catch is not a sign of an unhealthy stock, but a changing environment that's moving the stock away from fishermen, said Ben Martens, a policy analyst for the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association. All striper fishermen are restricted to state waters, which extend three miles from shore, but the fish are following their food to deeper waters and also moving away from rising inshore water temperatures, he said.

Nichola Meserve, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's striper coordinator, said the stock assessments are based on the best available science and show striped bass, including the female population, well above target levels. The drops in recent years reflect a return to the average from a historic high in 2004, she said.

"It's considered, I think, to be one of the healthier (stocks) along the Atlantic coast," Meserve said.

The Massachusetts bill has yet to move before the House, and Patrick said

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Friday he's open to compromise, perhaps buyouts for commercial fishermen or tighter restrictions on them.

"I just want to get to resolution of this problem that I foresee," Patrick said. ■

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