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Fishery future hangs on herring vote

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The New England Fishery Management Council will make several critical choices this month on how best to monitor the industrial herring fleet. These decisions will impact numerous fish populations in the North Atlantic, not just herring, and affect commercial and recreational fishing on Cape Cod for decades to come as many of the species fishermen target — cod, haddock, tuna, striped bass, etc. — rely on herring as a critical food source.

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These fish need to be protected to ensure that our way of life can continue; the best way to do that is through a robust and comprehensive monitoring program.

When I started hook fishing in the early 1970s, there were plenty of sea herring for bait and cod for fishing, and business was good. But then the foreign industrial trawlers moved in to fish for herring and the Georges Bank herring population collapsed.

In 1976 the federal government passed the Magnuson-Stevens Act, which created a 200-mile exclusive economic zone off the coast for U.S. vessels, essentially removing the industrialized foreign fleet from U.S. waters. It took almost two decades for the herring population to recover.

Then, in the late 1990s, the New England Fishery Management Council allowed a new fleet of industrial midwater trawlers to fish for herring out of the ports of Gloucester and New Bedford. Since then, the herring stocks have been in a downward spiral, and the fish that feed on them are at risk of further depletion.

A crucial part of any comprehensive monitoring program is the collection of data that tell the story of what's taking place out on the ocean. Over the past decade there have been very few observers on herring fishing trips. These observers are the ones who can document the amount of Atlantic herring being taken — or dumped, dead, because they can't be sold — by these midwater trawlers. They are also the only ones who can tell when river herring are caught in these massive nets along with sea herring and later sold. River herring have been illegal to catch in Massachusetts for the past five years because of a six-year moratorium on the species.

Recreational fishermen on the Cape depend on river herring to draw game fish like striped bass into shallower waters accessible to fishing. Commercial fishermen depend on sea herring to feed the cod, haddock and tuna they need to catch to make a living — the same fish consumers like to eat.

It is critical that the at-sea and dockside observer options the council chooses be as comprehensive as possible to make sure all of these stocks recover. With timely data we'll be able to determine whether enough herring are being left in the ocean to feed bigger predator fish. We'll also know when groundfish, river herring, dolphins or whales are being caught in the boats' massive nets and then released — dead — with no one the wiser.

The herring industry is trying to argue that increased observations over the past couple of years is enough. But it's not even close.

The council needs to make sure these boats are truly being observed. The people of Cape Cod, with a vital stake in the health of the marine ecosystem, need to band together and make sure this happens.

Ray Kane, a Chatham fisherman, is the vice chairman of the CHOIR Coalition.

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