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Fishermen urge quick action on herring fleet

By **Doug Fraser**
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Local fishermen have requested that Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke impose an emergency action on the herring fleet currently fishing in waters off Cape Cod.

The measure would require federal fishery observers on every boat and that no catch be dumped overboard unless it has been sampled by those observers.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is working on a similar set of regulations, but local fishermen are worried the herring boats could catch a lot of fish that are currently protected in closed areas before that takes effect.

"They could be catching a bunch of haddock in there right now," said Tom Rudolph, the director of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association's herring campaign. Herring vessels use large nets and catch a lot of fish per tow. Even a small amount of fish other than herring (bycatch) could result in large numbers of a protected fish being killed.

The owners of 16 Cape vessels, along with hook association director Susan Nickerson, sent the letter to Locke on Sept. 3. Many of these vessels participated in a rigorous permitting process with the fisheries service that allowed them to catch haddock in Closed Area I – the area southeast of Chatham closed to fishing – only after they demonstrated they didn't catch other species. Haddock is one of the stocks that has come back in big numbers.

The emergency actions would apply only to herring vessels that want to fish in Closed Area I. Along with two other large areas of Georges Bank, Closed Area I was shut down to all fishing in 1994 to protect overfished cod, haddock, flounders and other bottom-feeding species known as groundfish.

Herring fishermen use nets known as mid-water trawls that catch fish that swim well up off the bottom. The fisheries service allowed them into the closed areas because groundfish stay close to the bottom.

But, in 2004, two herring boats that had fished in the closed area were found with nearly 50,000 pounds of juvenile haddock mixed in with their catch of herring. That incident ultimately triggered these protective measures.

Skip King, spokesman for herring vessels in the Sustainable Fisheries Coalition, said his boats supported full observer coverage because it would show that they are not catching much of any species other than herring.

"We will be able to show that our bycatch is low," he said. "Until we get the coverage, groups like the hook (association) will be raising unfounded speculations."

Mary Beth Tooley, spokeswoman for the East Coast Pelagic Association, said the herring fishermen she represents are opposed to requirements in the new NMFS regulations that say a vessel must return to port if it has to open its net and dump fish before the observer can sample it.

"This is quite an investment to head offshore," she said, noting it costs \$10,000 in fuel alone for her vessels on a trip. She was also concerned that new regulations say vessels headed into the groundfish closed areas would not be able to leave without an observer, even if the person was late to the docks or didn't show up at all.

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PUBLIC COMMENT

- Comment period on new herring regulations ends next Sunday.
- To view proposed regulations, including how to comment, go to: www.nero.noaa.gov/nero/regs/com.html
- For electronic submissions, go to: www.regulations.gov.

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