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Patrick: Bass bill is dead in the water

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January 21, 2010

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The author of a state bill to ban commercial striped bass fishing and severely limit recreational catches does not think it will go very far.

State Rep. Matt Patrick, D-Falmouth, said Tuesday that it was "highly unlikely" that his bill would make it out of the Joint Committee on the Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture.

"The language in the bill doesn't have a chance to pass as it is written," Patrick said. "I suggested to the committee that I was willing to compromise to make it viable."

Patrick said he was open to a limited commercial fishery.

The original bill banned the sale of striped bass in Massachusetts, and cut the number of fish recreational fishermen could keep from two to one per day. It also sought to protect fish between 26 and 40 inches in length, while allowing fishermen to keep fish as small as 20 inches. The current minimum size is 28 inches.

Patrick and other supporters of the bill, which had a public hearing before the joint committee on Jan. 14, contend that current fisheries data show that striped bass are in trouble.

According to the National Marine Fisheries Service, the recreational catch, for instance, has dropped off dramatically over the past four years. In 2006, recreational fishermen caught nearly 9 million fish. Last year, they caught less than 2.6 million. Along the Atlantic coast, fishermen caught 28.6 million fish in 2006 but only 6.9 million last year.

But scientists at the state Division of Marine Fisheries and at the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, which has authority over fish whose territories span two or more states' coastal waters, believe the striped bass population remains extremely healthy and does not require any drastic measures at this time. They point out that, despite a recent downturn, the spawning stock remains at a level nearly double what is required to maintain the population at healthy levels.

DMF Director Paul Diodati blamed poor environmental conditions in southern spawning areas for the decline.

State Rep. William Straus, D-Fairhaven, chairman of the environment committee, said he entered the Jan. 14 hearing with an open mind, but left convinced there was no need for new conservation measures.

"The testimony that came in raised serious questions that there was any inkling of scientific data that said there was a problem with striped bass," he said in an interview this week. Straus said the bill has little chance at passage.

"The Legislature at large has not been convinced that (Rep. Patrick's) idea should become a law in Massachusetts," Straus said.

Jeffrey Krasner, a spokesman for Stripers Forever, which is lobbying to end commercial fishing on bass for the entire East Coast, believes it is still too early to say Patrick's bill is dead.

Committee members could send the bill to the House for a vote with a favorable or unfavorable recommendation. Or they can recommend it for further study, considered a dead end for most bills. The committee has until March 10 to decide, in order to meet deadlines for the new fishing season, Krasner said.

"It's not surprising that those who are opposed to the measure are speaking as though it is already decided, when it isn't," he said.

Krasner said the measures could resurface as an attachment to another bill, and he recommended that legislators dig deeper into the issues.

Ben Martens, a policy analyst at the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, said there were appropriate safety measures built into the fishery management plan for striped bass that would make it impossible to have a collapse like the one that happened more than 30 years ago.

He didn't understand why the focus was on ending commercial fishing.

"(Striped bass) were brought back with both fisheries coexisting, and they've been coexisting for a long time," he said.

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