



PRESS RELEASE

Recreational Fishing Alliance

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NJ & MD ANNOUNCE RIVER HERRING CLOSURE RFA Says Anglers Should Not Be Blamed For Long-Term Decline

Several Atlantic coast states have announced changes to the management of the herring fisheries in coastal waters, with both Maryland and New Jersey shutting down both the recreational and commercial harvest of river herring as of 2012. They join fellow Atlantic states like Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, DC, Georgia and Florida in having no present harvest on river herring primarily due to questions regarding the overall health of the stock.

Recent media reports out of New Jersey indicate that the reason for the closure is lack of funding at the Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), though more careful analysis of the issue reveals that the issue with Atlantic and river herring has been coming to a head on a coastal basis for the past two decades.

“The mainstream media seems to have allowed the state of New Jersey to blame the herring closure on saltwater anglers for not wanting to pony up additional cash in the form of a fishing tax, but the fact is that nearly every one of our river herring fishermen in New Jersey fishes up river at places like Batsto and Forge Pond where a freshwater license is already required,” said Jim Donofrio, executive director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA).

“Perhaps the state agency responsible for managing freshwater license funds can address that issue as to where those license monies are going and why research into the problems with anadromous herring wasn’t started 10 years ago, before the economy tanked and when the fishermen first started focusing on coastal herring issues,” he said.

Much of the herring available as fresh bait in coastal tackle shops is actually Atlantic herring which spends its entire life in saltwater, though anadromous (freshwater/saltwater) river herring are targeted by some coastal and freshwater anglers who will find the recent closure restrictive. NJDEP announced that the river herring fishery in marine waters is now officially closed, but added that the freshwater fishery for migratory herring will close later this month. Similarly, Maryland’s Department of Natural Resources says anyone possessing river herring as bait must show a receipt indicating where it was purchased.

The last river herring stock assessment was completed in 1990. In 2008, a river herring stock assessment was initiated by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) in response to concern over population decline and the impact of ocean bycatch. Preliminary results from the current stock assessment indicate that commercial landings are at historic lows and that recent trends in stock size were inconsistent. The stock assessment is scheduled to be completed in 2012.

Overall, ASMFC said that commercial landings of river herring declined 95% from over 13 million pounds in 1985 to about 700,000 pounds in 2005. In 2010, river herring landings were reported from Maine, New Hampshire, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, the Potomac River Fisheries Commission, North Carolina, and South Carolina, totaling 2,052,601, which represents a 9% increase from 2008 and a continued increase since 2007. The majority of the landings were reported by the state of Maine at 64%, followed by South Carolina with 24% and Virginia coming in with 9%.

Another concern for RFA and its members is that as of 2009, recreational data is no longer provided through the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for river herring which includes both the alewife and blueback herring, due to what the ASMFC cites as “a result of the unreliable design of MRFSS (Marine Recreational Fishing Statistical Survey).”

Since 2002, RFA and a large group of commercial and recreational fishermen along the Atlantic Coast have been working together through the Coalition for the Atlantic Herring Fishery's Orderly, Informed and Responsible Long-Term Development (CHOIR), advocating for the responsible development of the Atlantic herring fishery in the face of a growing fleet of mid-water single and pair trawlers. Donofrio said RFA members in Rhode Island have been growing increasingly frustrated by the presence of herring pair-trawlers targeting Atlantic herring funneling into Rhode Island this season through Nantucket Sound.

Utilizing small mesh bottom trawls, pair trawlers team with another vessel and drag a net through large swaths of sea, with boats holding anywhere between 600,000 and 1 million pounds of herring, most of which is transported out of state and processed in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

"It's easy for pensioned bureaucrats and their team of lobbyists to lay the blame for the herring closure at the feet on the saltwater anglers who refused to submit to the notion of paying more fees for this fine service we've been afforded, but this issue with Atlantic and river herring is a heck of a lot more complex than someone's support for an individual tax on fishing," Donofrio said.

For information about CHOIR, visit www.choircoalition.org

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The Recreational Fishing Alliance is a national, grassroots political action organization representing recreational fishermen and the recreational fishing industry on marine fisheries issues. RFA's Mission is to safeguard the rights of saltwater anglers, protect marine, boat and tackle industry jobs, and ensure the long-term sustainability of our Nation's saltwater fisheries. For more information, call 888-JOIN-RFA or visit www.joinrfa.org.