

# Fishing Industry Is Split Over Lobster Dragging Bill

BY STEPHEN RAPPAPORT

ELLSWORTH — The battle over efforts to change Maine's lobster fishing law is heating up.

Depending on who you ask, the change would herald either the end of the world as we know it or the dawn of a bright new day for the groundfish industry.

The Legislature's Marine Resources Committee has scheduled a public hearing on a bill that would end the prohibition against draggers landing lobsters in Maine. The hearing is set for Monday, March 5, the first working day after the three-day Maine Fishermen's Forum in Rockport where the proposed legislation, LD170, will certainly be a major topic of discussion. With an eye to the brouhaha the bill has already stirred, the committee's co-chairman, Sen. Dennis Damon (D-Hancock County), has booked the Augusta Civic Center for the event.

Introduced by Rep. Anne Haskell (D-Portland), LD170 would allow draggers to land up to 100 lobsters per day, with a maximum of 500 lobsters during any seven-day period, in Maine ports. The lobsters would have to have been caught far offshore, in waters, known as Lobster Conservation Management Area 3, controlled by a federal lobster fishery management plan.

An increasing number of Maine's dwindling fleet of draggers have forsaken Portland, and the Portland Fish Exchange, to land their catch in Gloucester, Mass. Supporters of Haskell's bill, led primarily by the Portland Fish Exchange, argue that allowing draggers to land their lobster "bycatch" in Maine would encourage at least some boats to return to Portland, providing a boost to the troubled fish auction and the state's economy.

The Maine lobster industry appears to be united in its opposition to the proposal.

"We strongly feel that the dragging of lobster would have a devastating impact to our fishery, especially to the islands and Downeast regions," Mike Dassatt, a Belfast lobsterman and president of the Downeast Lobstermen's Association (DELA), said this week.

Bob Baines, a member of the Maine Lobstermen's Association (MLA) board of directors, chairman of the Department of Marine Resource's (DMR) Lobster Advisory Council and a lobsterman himself, said that LD170 would compromise the rules and regulations that make Maine's lobster industry economically viable and environmentally sustainable.

"Maine's 6,500 licensed lobstermen have a long history of stewardship and conservation that sets us apart from other fisheries," Baines said last week. "It is one of the few sustainable fisheries left in the world. But dragging for lobsters undermines the conservation measures now in place for the lobster industry."

For nearly 50 years, Maine has stood alone among the New England states in forbidding draggers to fish for lobsters. The state's lobster industry argues that the prohibition is aimed at conserving the lobster resource. Lobstermen, supported by DMR scientists, claim that draggers working in offshore waters will tend to catch oversize lobsters that comprise the primary broodstock that keeps the lobster population stable or growing. They also argue that draggers damage many the lobsters they bring up in their nets and land far fewer lobsters than the actually catch.

"Many fishermen are con-

cerned about the damage to lobsters and their habitat, along with the fishing practices of the draggers such as high-grading, or targeting of prime lobster bottom," Dassatt said.

A few years ago, after nearly a decade of intense and often acrimonious negotiations, Maine lobstermen persuaded the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Management Commission (ASMFC) and the New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) to impose limits on the number of lobsters draggers would be allowed to land outside Maine. LD170 would let draggers land the same number of lobsters in Maine.

The stakes in this argument are significant. According to a study prepared by Planning Decisions Inc. (PDI), of South Portland, for the fish exchange,

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between 2000 and 2005, the number of boats landing at the Portland Fish Exchange dropped by 50 percent, and total annual landings declined 60 percent. Over the past six years, the report continues, the number of Maine-based groundfish boats landing outside the state has nearly doubled, and the number of trips by Maine-based boats landing outside the state has nearly quadrupled.

According to PDI, the shift in traffic has cost Maine nearly \$30 million in lost economic activity, some 355 jobs, and more than \$1 million in state and local tax revenues. The pace of the move to out of state ports is accelerating, PDI says, and the prohibition against landing lobsters in Maine has contributed substantially to that shift in traffic.

Although LD170 would limit the number of lobsters draggers could land to no more than 6 per-



cent of the total lobster landings, lobstermen are arguing that the passage of the bill could have a severe impact on the state's \$300 million lobster industry. They worry that the bill could lead to lower lobster prices and tarnish the image of Maine lobsters.

At a press conference in Portland last week, Kristen Millar, executive director of the Maine Lobster Promotion Council (MLPC), said, "The Maine Lobster Promotion Council is extremely concerned that LD 170 endorses a practice that runs counter to the core of our brand value. Maine lobster's tremendous reputation is built on the reality that ours is a sustainable fishery with exemplary harvesting practices."

At the same press conference, the MLA's Baines made another, more practical, argument.

"This bill won't convince the fishermen to come to Portland instead of Gloucester, but it will put additional pressure on Maine lobsters, a resource that is thriving and sustainable," Baines said.

His position has received at least some support from members of the groundfish industry.

Craig Pendleton is the owner of a Portland-based dragger and coordinating director of the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, a fisheries group devoted to improving fisheries management. According to Pendleton, his boat lands its catch in Gloucester primarily because it takes less time to reach steam between the fishing grounds and the Massachusetts port. That is an important consideration for boats working with only a limited number of "days at sea" during which they can fish. The cost of fuel and supplies is also lower in Massachusetts, he said.