VILLAGE SOUP CITIZEN

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Maine ground-fish groups petition federal government

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Earthjustice, a nonprofit environmental law firm, filed a petition with the U.S. secretary of commerce Thursday afternoon asking that the industrial-scale midwater herring trawler fleet be banned from protected fishing grounds in the Gulf of Maine and George's Bank.

Earthjustice is representing two Maine fishing groups, the Midcoast Fishermen's Alliance of Port Clyde and the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance of Saco. Representatives from the three groups met for a press conference Thursday morning before the petition was filed.

The representatives included Roger Fleming, an attorney with Earthjustice, Glen Libby, chairman of the Midcoast Fishing Association, and Craig Pendleton, coordinating director of the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance. Both Libby and Pendleton are ground fishermen in Maine.

"[We're] asking that the secretary of commerce take emergency action to exclude herring midwater trawlers from the ground-fish closed areas that currently exist throughout the Gulf of Maine and George's Bank region here in the northeast," Fleming said at the Thursday press conference. Haddock, cod and pollock are among the different kinds of fish that Maine's ground fishermen would be catching.

"Specifically, we're asking that the secretary take this action because ground-fish stocks in New England continue to suffer from overfishing and many of our ground-fish stocks continue to be severely depleted," Fleming said.

New scientific data recently released have demonstrated that the midwater trawlers have a much larger and more negative impact on the ground-fish population than first believed.

"We now understand that midwater trawlers are capable of catching ground fish including significant levels of juvenile ground fish and spawning ground fish," Fleming said.

The midwater trawlers' negative impact on the ground fisheries calls for emergency action, Fleming said.

Midwater trawlers are currently permitted to fish for herring in areas off limits to small ground-fishing vessels. "Ground fishermen in new England have for many years been excluded from these specific areas," Fleming said.

"Midwater trawlers were originally let in to the ground-fish closed areas on the premise that they either did not catch ground fish or caught only negligible amounts of ground fish," Fleming said.

New data from the National Marine Fisheries Service observation program provided evidence to the groups that incited them to organize the petition. Besides recent analysis of data collected in the observation program, there were also "high-profile by-catch events," Fleming said. "By-catch" is the term for fish caught in nets that are trawling for a different species of fish. For example, when midwater boats trawl for herring, any haddock, hake or other ground fish they catch in the nets is by-catch.

"We now know that midwater trawlers can and do catch significant amounts of ground fish," Fleming said. "They're impacting the fishery and are contributing to the overfishing and stalled recovery for New England ground-fish stocks."

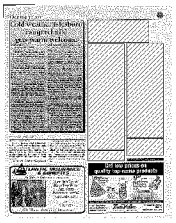
Ground fishermen in recent years have faced evermore stringent federal regulation and limits on their access to the ground fisheries, for the sake of protecting the depleted ground-fish populations. "We are being restricted to the point of extinction," Pendleton said.

At the same time, the midwater trawlers are permitted to fish in the very areas that were designated as protected because they have been identified as prime spawning areas for the ground fish.

"One of these vessels will legally be allowed to land more haddock in one day than most of us will catch in an entire year," Pendleton said.

Said Libby, "It doesn't make sense to till these giant nets through the places that you're trying to restore ground fish."

A midwater trawler, of which there are approximately 40 in the region, uses nets that are the length of a football field, the width of a soccer field, and approximately six stories high, Fleming said. "They use 1.5-inch mesh and are towed



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through the water at about 11 to 12 knots," he said; 11 knots is the equivalent of approximately 16 mph.

The nets are like a "wall moving through the water column at a very high speed," Fleming said.

"Tows last a fairly long time so they catch everything in their path and when they bring it up it's dead," he said.