

Warm ocean could mean early boom in 2016 lobster catch

March 3 2016, by Patrick Whittle



In this July 29, 2014 file photo, Brandon Demmons measures the carapace, the shell of the lobster, to determine if the crustacean is within the legal size limits while working as a sternman aboard a lobster fishing boat off of Monhegan Island, Maine. Maine's lobster catches will likely peak early this year, which could mean an abundance of cheap lobster for consumers and bad news for the state's signature industry, a group of scientists reported on Thursday, March 3, 2016. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty)

Maine's lobster catches will likely peak early this year, which could mean an abundance of cheap lobster for consumers and bad news for the state's signature industry, a group of scientists reported on Thursday.

Maine's busy summer lobster fishing season typically picks up around early July, the same time the state's tourism industry gets in gear. But scientists with the Portland-based Gulf of Maine Research Institute predict this year's lobster season will get rolling two or three weeks early.

The scientists, who unveiled their findings during the Maine Fishermen's Forum in Rockport, pinned the early lobster season on warming ocean temperatures. Along Maine's coast, temperatures are 2 to 3 degrees Fahrenheit higher than normal. That means lobsters are likely to move inshore, shed their shells and become more easily trapped earlier this summer, they said.

An early lobster season can disrupt Maine's valuable lobster supply chain, which is partially dependent on big July and August catches, and make prices plummet. Prices at the dock fell 16 percent in 2012, a year of early catches, and prices to consumers fell, too. The 2014 haul shattered state value records because of a high-volume catch that arrived on schedule.

"If the timing is off by just a few weeks, it can have a major impact throughout the supply chain," said Andrew Pershing, the chief scientific officer with the research institute.

Maine is by far the most productive lobster fishing state in the country, accounting for more than 80 percent of the haul in 2014, and the industry has been riding a wave of heavy hauls and high values in recent years. Annual lobster catches in the U.S. grew from 71.7 million pounds in 2003 to about 148 million pounds in 2014. The total value of the catch about doubled in that time.

Scientists with Gulf of Maine Research Institute were quick to point out that early lobster catches don't necessarily guarantee a drop in price. One of the big factors influencing price is the volume of catch, and there's no way of predicting that, said Katherine Mills, a research scientist with the institute.

Mills added that in recent years the industry has worked to open up new markets for [lobster](#) that aren't tied to summer tourism, such as increased exports to China. Also, the industry will be able to prepare in advance for early hauls, unlike in 2012, she said.

"From harvesters to dealers and transporters all the way up to processors and marketers, people have been wondering what to do if this happens again," Mills said. "This will give them 2 to 3 months of lead time."

But Dave Cousens, the president of the Maine Lobstermen's Association, said the possibility of early lobsters is "not good" for lobstermen, even if it means prices to consumers fall.

"We need them when the people want them," he said. "If it comes early, in any amount, we really have nowhere to put them."

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