

Overfished halibut under scrutiny as Maine's catch increases

December 11 2016, by Patrick Whittle

Federal fishing regulators say they are looking to change the way they manage Atlantic halibut in the wake of a surge in catch of the fish.

The government lists Atlantic halibut as "overfished" and conservationists want to protect it. But many fishermen say the catch is up because the stock has been rebuilt over recent years.

East Coast fishermen caught more than 215,000 pounds of Atlantic halibut in 2015 in the most productive year of fishing for the flatfish since 1972. Catch of the fish in nearshore Maine waters is helping drive the increase, regulators say.

The regulatory New England Fishery Management Council decided last month to review management of halibut, which is popular with diners and chefs for its thick, meaty steaks. Exactly what form regulation changes could take isn't yet known.

"We've identified that this is an issue, and this will be a priority for 2017," Janice Plante, a spokeswoman for the council, said.

The council has also asked that Maine's state fishing managers adjust the way they oversee halibut. Part of the issue is that if fishermen exceed their quota for the fish, it can trigger restrictions on fishing that impact fishermen who operate in federal waters. About 40 percent of the halibut catch for the 2015 fishing year was taken in state waters, mostly in Maine.

Ben Martens, executive director of the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, said Maine should consider limiting the amount of halibut fishing in state waters. Otherwise, federal fishermen will be negatively affected by the surge in state catch, he said.

Martens also said better data also is needed because many fishermen believe the stock has rebuilt significantly in recent years, and that's why catch is up.

"The story is that this is a rebuilding success," he said. "In New England, we don't know what to do with successes."

A spokesman for the Maine Department of Marine Resources declined to comment beyond acknowledging that the agency is reviewing the council's request, and taking it seriously.

Some conservationist groups have tried to dissuade consumers from buying Atlantic halibut.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration lists it as a "species of concern," meaning there are "concerns regarding status and threats," but also insufficient information about whether a listing under the federal Endangered Species Act is warranted.

Atlantic halibut is fished commercially off New England, with the majority of the catch coming ashore in Maine and Massachusetts. The fish is of high economic value, frequently serving as an entree item in the \$30 range, and its price per pound at the dock has doubled for fishermen in the last ten years.

The much larger Pacific halibut fishery, which is based around Alaska, generates more than 20 million pounds of fish per year.

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Citation: Overfished halibut under scrutiny as Maine's catch increases (2016, December 11)
retrieved 9 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2016-12-overfished-halibut-scrutiny-maine.html>

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