

Catch limits debated for 'most important fish in sea'

November 7 2011, By Timothy B. Wheeler

A big fight is brewing over a little fish - a fish that no one wants to eat but that many regard as the most important in the sea.

Catch restrictions loom on menhaden, which is too unsavory to grace a dinner plate but much sought by commercial fishermen. They catch them in staggering numbers to be ground into animal feed, to extract their heart-healthy oils for humans and to be used as bait to catch other [fish](#), including Maryland's iconic [blue crabs](#).

Menhaden also play a vital role in the Chesapeake Bay's ecosystem, feeding on plankton and serving themselves as food for many of the fish, birds and animals that people do eat or care about.

"They're a keystone species," says biologist Paul Spitzer of Trappe. Besides feeding other fish, menhaden are a staple for seabirds such as ospreys, gannets and common loons. When the fish are scarce, he says, it affects the health and abundance of other creatures as well.

Now, driven by a warning from scientists that menhaden levels are perilously low, an interstate panel that regulates fishing from Maine to Florida is weighing a range of actions that could reduce the commercial harvest of the fish by as much as 45 percent all along the coast, including in Maryland.

The proposal, to be taken up Nov. 9 at a meeting in Boston of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, is being hailed by

recreational anglers and conservationists alike, who've long voiced concerns about menhaden levels, and say other animals that depend on them for food, such as highly prized striped bass, are suffering from malnourishment.

"We fished the stock down many decades ago, and have maintained a heavy enough fishing pressure that we've held it at a fairly low level," said William Goldsborough, senior scientist with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and one of three Maryland members on the fisheries commission. It's time to leave more menhaden in the water and give them a chance to increase, he said.

But the proposal before the commission has drawn pushback from commercial fishermen in Maryland and elsewhere, who contend the science shows there's no cause for alarm and any cutback will hurt an already diminished livelihood.

"This is the last thing we've got is menhaden," says Larry "Boo" Powley of Hoopers Island, one of about 100 fishermen in Maryland who catch the fish in a pound net, a fencelike arrangement of anchored nets that lure them into a trap.

A third-generation netter, Powley, 58, and his crew of four supply the bulk of their catch to crabbers on the island for bait. If rules cut his haul back by a fifth or more, as the panel is considering, Powley warns he'll leave his boat at the dock because he won't be able to make a go of it anymore.

Nowhere is opposition more intense than in Virginia, home to a fleet that hauls in 80 percent of all the menhaden caught along the Atlantic Coast. Bait fishermen such as Powley account for the other 20 percent.

Reedville, the picturesque town on Virginia's Northern Neck where

Omega Protein Inc. processes its fleet's harvest, is the second-busiest fishing port in the United States (after Dutch Harbor, Alaska) by the weight of the harvest landed there.

Last year, Omega hauled in 183,000 metric tons of menhaden, according to fisheries commission data, an increase of 27 percent from the year before. About 40 percent came from the Virginia waters of the bay - the so-called "reduction" fishing fleet isn't permitted to work in Maryland.

"I think menhaden are already getting a high level of protection," Ron Lukens, Omega's chief fisheries biologist, said at a recent meeting in Anne Arundel County of a panel attempting to advise the commission on its decision.

With representatives from Omega, Virginia and New Jersey insisting no change is needed, the group reached no consensus.

A nationwide group of 75 scientists, however, says menhaden need greater protection, in part so they can fulfill their role as water filters and food source for other fish and animals.

Scientists reviewing the fisheries commission's latest assessment of the menhaden stock noted that the population has fallen over the last 25 years, to the point that they're now only 8 percent of their historic level. Overfishing occurred in 32 of the last 54 years, the study concluded, including 2008, the most recent year studied.

Omega's spokesman, Ben Landry, says those numbers are deceptive. The menhaden catch exceeded the commission's harvest threshold only once in the last 10 years, he points out, and then only slightly. The population is not overfished, he said, and with an estimated 18 trillion eggs produced in 2008, there's no danger of collapse.

Omega employs 300 people on its nine-vessel fishing fleet and in its processing factory at Reedville, Landry says, and has invested \$28 million to \$30 million upgrading its plant in the past eight years.

Virginia politicians have moved to shield the company with a law removing oversight of menhaden from the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, an appointed body which oversees all other fisheries.

More than 600 people attended 13 hearings held along the coast by the interstate commission, and the panel received more than 30,000 written comments, many calling for greater protections.

"All of us who've been on the bay for a number of years can recall in years gone by huge areas of menhaden feeding on the surface of the bay," says Kenneth Lewis, 78, an avid fisherman from Towson. "Nobody has seen that for quite a long time," he said.

Omega's spokesman said the company is prepared to go along with the proposal to increase the menhaden population in the bay and along the coast to 15 percent of historic levels. If that threshold were in effect now, it would require a 23 percent reduction in harvest from last year's catch.

But many recreational anglers, scientists and conservationists are pressing the commission to set a target of preserving up to 40 percent of the spawning stock in any given year - which could lead to a cutback in commercial harvest of 45 percent.

Omega's spokesman calls that idea "reckless and unnecessary," but advocates contend the role of menhaden in feeding other fish and birds demands steeper reductions in the commercial harvest.

The impact of the decline of menhaden on striped bass, or rockfish, is

one of the biggest worries, as the fish is treasured by recreational anglers and a valuable commercial catch in the Chesapeake.

Menhaden once made up more than 70 percent of their diet, but now account for about 7 percent. Many stripers caught in the Chesapeake are showing signs of malnutrition, and state biologists estimate that 60 percent have caught a bacterial infection, mycobacteriosis, which causes lesions and wasting in the fish.

Research has suggested the lack of food and illness may be linked.

"Things like lesions can be a function of nutrition," said James Uphoff, a biologist with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Whether the bacterial infection many rockfish have kills them also depends to some degree on whether they can get enough to eat to maintain their strength.

Other species are affected as well, says Goldsborough, the bay foundation biologist.

"With insufficient menhaden ... striped bass are feeding on crabs," he said.

Birds also are missing menhaden, observers say. Biologist Spitzer used to see "tremendous flocks" of loons on the Choptank River and in Eastern Bay feeding on menhaden, but not for the past two decades.

Menhaden haven't had a great spawn in the Maryland waters of the Chesapeake for years, data show. While wind and waves appear to have more influence over how many menhaden eggs hatch than does fishing pressure, biologists say reducing the harvest can provide a greater cushion should weather conditions be especially unfavorable one year.

Maryland watermen fear they'll see their financial margin pinched by whatever harvest cutback results from the November meeting. For crabbers, for instance, the only other bait they can use is razor clams, but they cost \$35 per bushel, compared with \$10 per 50-pound box of menhaden, according to Powley.

Russell Dize, a Tilghman waterman who's also a member of the Atlantic States commission, worries that even if the harvest is reduced menhaden won't bounce back and fishermen in the bay and along the coast will be left with a permanent cutback.

But he said he doesn't see any other choice. Having reviewed the scientists' reports, Dize said, "If they say there is a problem, I believe there's a problem. ... It's going to hurt some people. I don't like that, but we've got to act."

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