

Island Ad-Vantages

‘Wicked problem’ attracts diverse group of problem solvers

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BY PAUL ANDERSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MAINE CENTER FOR COASTAL FISHERIES

There is nothing like a “wicked problem” to bring a diverse group of people together. The current challenge of how our lobster fishery might interact with the endangered north Atlantic right whale certainly qualifies as a “wicked problem”. It is one of those things that can’t be solved with one simple decision or action. There are lots of moving parts and we need to be as smart as possible and look for the right tools to approach this problem, before we pick up a hammer and assume we’re only dealing with nails.

This past Sunday Stonington lobsterman Julie Eaton hosted a rally on the commercial fishing pier to call attention to the importance of lobstering to Maine’s coastal communities and economy. Speakers highlighted that the newest proposal of right whale regulations to reduce risk of entanglement in lobster fishing gear doesn’t just alter fishing operations, but threatens the fabric of our coastal communities. Participants reminded federal regulators that calls to radically change how the lobster industry fishes better be based on good science and strong evidence. The rally attracted much attention including the highest level of Maine government from both the Executive and Legislative branches. They came to listen, learn and interact with industry members.

With much of Maine’s political horsepower in Stonington on Sunday, Representative Genevieve McDonald, a Stonington lobsterman and member of the Maine Legislature, and MCF Chief Scientist Dr. Carla Guenther planned a science briefing with UMaine

Professor Dr. Jeff Runge since he also happened to be in the area speaking in Blue Hill. Congressman Jared Golden, who has been tracking this and other fishing-related issues, expressed interest in hearing of Dr. Runge and colleague's recently cited research that demonstrates shifts in abundance of the right whale's preferred food in the eastern Gulf of Maine over the past decade. Several other leaders were interested in learning more about this research and the Maine Center for Coastal Fisheries hosted a discussion Sunday morning prior to the rally. Governor Mills, Senator Collins, Representative Pingree, and a representative from Senator Angus King's office made their way to Stonington to join Representative Golden to help address this "wicked problem". We were also joined by Representative McDonald's colleagues in the state legislature: Representatives Tuell and Blume and Senators Moore and Luchini. Leadership from Maine Department of Marine Resources, Maine Lobster Union, Maine Lobsterman's Association, and Maine Lobster Marketing Collaborative rounded out what was a truly impressive assembly of leaders who came together to listen, learn and share ideas.

Dr. Runge explained how changes in oceanographic circulation outside of the Gulf of Maine are resulting in significant deep water temperature shifts inside the Gulf of Maine. This warming is affecting the very base of the food chain by reducing the abundance of copepod, *Calanus finmarchicus*, in the eastern Gulf of Maine significantly. The north Atlantic right whale feeds preferentially on this fatty copepod, and its fecundity- or ability to successfully breed- depends on a summer diet rich in *Calanus*. The determination of risk of impact on these endangered whales considers the availability of their food, foraging, and migratory behavior, but changes in any of these factors generates uncertainty. Uncertainty that further complicates this 'wicked problem'.

Dr. Runge and his colleagues continue to monitor the Gulf of Maine in an attempt to resolve this uncertainty. This work has been awarded funds to synthesize ocean observing data throughout the eastern US and Canadian waters to generate a predictive model of *Calanus* and hence, right whale population distribution.

There is great value in bringing these people and perspectives together to listen and learn. Hopefully it creates better questions, and maybe even better solutions to these "wicked problems".

Paul Anderson is Executive Director at the Maine Center for Coastal Fisheries in Stonington.

Their mission is to secure a sustainable future for fisheries and fishing communities in Eastern Maine and beyond.