Preparing for what we hope will never come

About a month ago the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASFMC), the interstate organization responsible for coordinated management of inshore fishery resources shared by states on the U.S. Atlantic coast, passed an Addendum to their Lobster Management Plan to prepare for the lobster downturn we hope will never come.

We all know that nothing stays the same—what goes up, usually, must come down. Maine’s lobster abundance grew practically overnight, as state landings experienced an unprecedented tripling over a single decade from 2000-2010. We have built a whole new coastal economy and fishery culture around what has become a new normal, and it leaves fishery managers, fishermen, and lobster biologists wondering what might happen if the lobster population were to decline as quickly as it grew.

Maine’s lobster resource is monitored at several life stages, settlement (age 1-2), sublegal (age 3-5), legal (age 5-8), and oversize (age 8-80 ish) using various surveys and gear types in addition to sea sampling commercial catch aboard lobster vessels going about their haul. A 23% decrease in sublegal lobsters has already been observed—causing concern and sparking discussions about how much of a decline the fishery might remain resilient to. After visiting the seven state lobster zones, Department of Marine Resources Commissioner, Pat Keliher, was armed with the threshold lobstermen across the state were thinking threaded the needle of being cautious, but not overly conservative, to trigger implementing an increase in the minimum legal harvestable size of lobster. After some discussion the Lobster Management Team of the ASMFC agreed on a 35% trigger to implement a 1/16th of an inch increase to provide small female and male lobsters another year of successful reproduction before being caught and sold for dinner. After two years the minimum measure will increase another 1/16th of an inch. The good news is, we may not see a 35% decline in the next decade, but we will be ready with a plan in case we do.

Do you have a question about our fisheries? Send it to info@coastalfisheries.org or call 207.367.2708. Learn more about MCCF by visiting us at www.coastalfisheries.org.