Fishing's Decline Looms; Will Fish Eaters Notice?

JAY LINDSAY,Associated Press

GLOUCESTER, Mass. (AP) — His city's best fishing days are long past it, but lifelong Gloucester resident Ron Gilson still sees what once was when he drives past what remains.

There's the waterfront lot, littered with discarded fishing nets and lobster pots, where vessels in the famed fishing fleet once docked. The clatter and grit of a top maritime machine shop downtown has been replaced by a banquet hall. On the state fish pier, where Gilson briefly parks, the sounds of year-round work have given way to the quiet whirr of his idling Prius.

To the 79-year-old, the decline of the industry has stolen jobs, community spirit and opportunity. And it's not over, Gilson said.

"This is the lowest point," he declared on a February day. "Tomorrow will be lower."

In May, New England's fishermen will again see a cut to the number of fish they can catch, this time so deeply that the historic industry's existence is threatened from Rhode Island to Maine. But as hard as the cuts are likely to hit fishing communities, local seafood eaters may not notice at all. In the region's markets, grocery stores and restaurants, imported fish dominate, and the cuts make that less likely to change.

The cuts will shrink the catch limit 77 percent for cod in the Gulf of Maine and 61 percent for cod in Georges Bank, off southeastern Massachusetts. That's the worst of a series of reductions to the catch of bottom-dwelling groundfish, such as haddock and flounder, that many fear could be fatal to the industry.

"They're going to wipe it out!" said Gilson. "The only thing that's going to be the same is the ocean you're looking at."

For fish consumers, a sharp drop in the local groundfish catch may jar a select group of diners who seek fish caught that day. But the cut's effects may not ripple further than that.

Just 9 percent of the seafood eaten in the United States is domestically caught, the federal government estimates. In New England, locally caught cod was just a slightly larger fraction of all cod eaten, 12 percent, according to fisheries economist Jenny Sun of the Portland, Maine-based Gulf of Maine Research Institute. And she estimates that could drop to 4 percent after the coming cuts.

Much of the imported cod is caught and frozen in Norway and cut in China, and there's plenty of it, Sun said. If the local cod catch dips to near nothing, fish processors "could easily fill in with imports," Sun said.

In fact, the biggest issue for one Maine seafood processing executive has been the perception that the New England industry's troubles mean he won't have fish.

But prices will likely change little after the cuts because substitutes are plentiful, said Chris Fream, senior sales executive at North Atlantic Inc., a processor in

Portland, Maine.

"The sky certainly isn't falling because a) we knew it was coming and b) we've prepared for it and there's other species that are around," he said.

The remaining fishermen have limited options. The Northeast's groundfish fleet had 420 boats in 2011, a drop of 150 in just two years, and many of those who continue to fish do so because they have no choice.

Scituate fisherman Frank Mirarchi noted wryly that, at 69, he has few employment options. The fishermen he cooperates with, pooling quota and resources, have discussed taking even more boats out of the water and trying to hang in with whatever they can catch.

"This is not a long-term strategy," Mirarchi said. "Something needs to happen before 2014 or we all go down the tubes."

The crew on Gloucester fisherman Richard Burgess's two boats is family, and he said he hasn't considered selling out of the business.

"I put them out on the street, where are they going to get a goddamn job?" he said. "And these are men who have devoted their lives to feeding the country fresh fish. And now the country is stabbing us in the heart."

Groundfish accounts for 50 percent of the business for Richie Canastra, co-owner at the Whaling City Seafood Display Auction in New Bedford. He can still depend on the port's robust scallop catch, but he said he's already laid off four of 30 workers and anticipates another 10 layoffs when the cuts kick in in May.

There's talk of government aid for fishermen, after the fishery was declared an economic disaster last year. But the best hope for many in the industry seems to be a correction in the science that fishermen view as deeply flawed. There's also a belief that natural fluctuations have made fish scarce this year, and those same fluctuations can bring them back.

Canastra recalls the story about a 1928 Massachusetts license plate that featured a symbol of codfish that appears to be swimming away from the plate's abbreviation for the state. The cod catch suddenly dropped that year, prompting superstitious fishermen to demand the plate be changed to show the fish swimming toward the state name.

It was, and the cod came back to Massachusetts. It can again, Canastra said.

"My point is, there are cycles," he said.

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