

# Changes Coming to Maine Striper Regulations

By Bob Humphrey

The Maine Department of Marine Resources has proposed changes to Maine's striped bass regulations in accordance with recommendations from the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC). Two proposals are currently being considered, one would establish a minimum length of 28 inches. The other would be a fairly tight constriction on the existing slot limit. Neither will be particularly palatable to recreational fishermen, but clearly something must be done to restore dwindling populations. And there are some compelling reasons why preserving a slot limit is the preferable alternative.



## Recreation

Smaller fish occur in greater abundance throughout the geographical range of Maine's striped bass fishery. Therefore, retaining a slot limit would allow anglers a greater opportunity to catch and, if they so choose, keep fish. This is particularly true in northern areas where fish tend to be smaller. While different slots for different regions might seem a logical option to fishermen, it is logistically much simpler to keep regulations consistent throughout the state. Shifting to a 28-inch statewide minimum could unduly affect anglers in northern areas. As many commercial guides have expressed, it could also reduce the incentive for anglers interested in hiring a guide throughout the fishery, thus having an economic impact on their livelihood.

## Bioaccumulation



Several states - particularly those with larger minimum length limits - have issued health advisories recommending anglers not eat striped bass more than once a month due to the presence of PCBs and heavy metals like mercury. Researchers also found that in some rivers, acid rain was dissolving toxic minerals like aluminum into the water to levels that are lethal to newly hatched stripers. Additionally, they found toxicants like pesticides and chlorination effluent from sewage treatment plants had deleterious effects on young stripers and their food sources. The older a fish is, the more toxins it accumulates in its flesh. Thus, older, larger fish present a greater health risk. Whereas, catching and eating smaller fish presents less health risk to anglers.

## Compensatory Mortality

ASMFC is looking for an absolute and immediate reduction in catch. However, this fails to take into account compensatory mortality. In any fish population, a certain proportion of fish will die. Within that there is a harvestable surplus where the harvest deaths are substituted for the deaths that would have occurred naturally, and individuals can be harvested from a population without affecting long-term population stability or average population size. The effect of this compensatory mortality is greatest in younger age classes, i.e. slot fish. There is less compensatory mortality and more additive mortality from removing older, larger fish.

Furthermore, those fish that survive to 28+ inches have a much greater probability of reaching breeding age and status and thus replenishing the population. Moving from a slot to a larger minimum length would actually have a greater long-term negative impact on the resource.

### Do the Right Thing

Maine's current slot limit stands as testament to the DMR's reputation as leaders and innovators rather than followers. Following in lock-step with a general 28-inch minimum may be the most logistically feasible option, but represents an overly simplistic approach that is not in the best interest of Maine's striped bass fishery or the long-term viability of Maine's striped bass population.

Clearly something must be done. These proposals may seem overly conservative, particularly in light of several facts. Maine's resident and migrant striper population and the impact of recreational fishing in the State is relatively small compared to those of states to the south. Broad-brush restrictions would have a relatively greater negative impact on recreational fishing with less real positive impact on the resource. Commercial striper fishing to the south has a much greater impact on the resource, and curtailing that would have greater results. Meanwhile, the by-catch of other commercial fisheries - stripers that are caught accidentally, cannot be sold and are therefore simply shoveled off the deck back into the ocean - is not even accounted for in the equation. Reducing that could have a positive influence equal to that of the ASFMC recommendations.

