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The Striper And PCB's

It has been a long time since the striped bass could be described as a game fish with any degree of accuracy. Last year the Fulton Fish Market in New York handled 3,450,000 pounds of striped bass; this is about 80 per cent of the total East Coast landings of bass. Now a new Federal ruling has been proposed which would deal a severe blow to the commercial fishing industry in general and the striped bass fishery in particular.

The proposed regulation appeared in the April 1 edition of the Federal Register, but it is doubtful many people saw it. The notice said that the Federal Food and Drug Administration is proposing to reduce the tolerances of PCB's (polychlorinated biphenyls) in several classes of foods.

In fish and shellfish the tolerances would be reduced from 5 parts per million to 2 parts per million.

PCB's are chemical compounds used in the manufacture of electrical equipment, hydraulic fluids and printing inks and paints. They are believed to contribute to cancer and reproductive failure in lab animals. In humans, PCB's can cause skin discoloration, swelling of the eyes, liver disease, retarded infant growth and fetal death.

The FDA has been studying PCB's for some time. New York State has banned the sale of stripers and several other species caught in the Hudson River, where a heavy concentration of PCB's is found. Furthermore, the state has recommended that a person eat no more than one striped bass from the Hudson a week and that pregnant women and children under 12 not eat them at all.

The FDA feels a tolerance of 2 ppm would provide adequate protection for all but those population groups that consume above average amounts of fresh-water fish from contaminated waters and would eliminate a very minor percentage of marine fish and less than 25 per cent of fresh water fish from commercial markets.

The FDA estimates that for marine or salt-water fish, lowering the current temporary tolerance to 2 ppm would mean a loss of $1 million in landed value which would increase about seven times after processing for a total of $7 million.

The loss would be even greater for fresh-water fish: about $7 million landed value or $49 million processed.

The FDA believes the economic loss for marine fish would be at about the same if the level were reduced to 3 ppm, but that the dollar loss for fresh-water fish would be about 40 per cent that estimated for a 2 ppm tolerance.

The FDA concludes that while a tolerance higher than 2 ppm would be economically more desirable, it would add to the risk for the so-called average consumer and those who regularly consume fresh-water fish.

The FDA feels that with scientific studies being made of PCB contamination it is reasonable to expect new data may justify a further reduction in the tolerances.

While the new regulation, if adopted, will seriously hurt the interstate sales of stripers and bluefish, unless the State adopts its own regulations commercial striper fishermen could still sell their catch within a state. The effect an interstate ban would have on the sales habits of the public is another question.

The situation could become like that of swordfish. The FDA has banned it nationally, because of its mercury content, but it is still allowed in Massachusetts where it commands, and gets a very high price in the retail market.

Richard Davis at the Federal Food and Drug Administration told us last week he thought the proposal could be put into effect as early as mid-June. The last date to receive comments on the proposed regulation was May 31. A public hearing would be held only if evidence was presented which justified it, he said.

"The problem," he said, "is that some fish may be over the 2 ppm." And one of the species that is over, in theory, he explained, is the striped bass. "Therefore if it's over the 2 ppm in significant quantity . . it would become an illegal fish."

If the regulation does become law, he said, it would affect only those fish sold interstate or caught beyond the three-mile limit if this could be proven.

Meanwhile, the state is also taking a close look at PCB's.

Dr. David Kinlock, assistant commissioner of Public Health, said last week sampling of fish in Massachusetts waters started last fall.

He said the sampling has been done by the Division of Marine Fisheries and the Department of Environmental Quality Engineering. Tests are being done at three laboratories.

"The suspicion is that the striped bass and the bluefish are going to be hot because of where they've been," Dr. Kinlock said.

Where they might have been is off New Bedford where tests showed bottom fish and at least two lobsters were contaminated with PCB's.

As a result of these initial findings samples were drawn from round the state and these are what are being examined now, Dr. Kinlock said.

The source of the PCB's is known, but "fish swim which complicates the matter." The concern, he said, is whether or not it would be safe to have the fish on the market.

The state's Division of Marine Fisheries is keeping an eye on the situation because it doesn't want to see any action which would have an unwarranted harmful effect on the fisheries.

(Continued On Next Page)

Randy Fairbanks, assistant to the Director of Marine Fisheries, said the division doesn't want people poisoned, but it is interested in the welfare of the fisheries.

If the sampling suggests a real problem in Massachusetts the State may have to establish its own regulations. "Our main concern," Mr Fairbanks said, "is that the new standards be applied in a reasonable, practical manner."

The immediate task he felt is to get a solid data base established. "We're trying to develop some of our own data and hopefully it's going to indicate that the fish are all right."

"The situation as the samples evolve will determine the future action," he said.

One problem with both stripers and bluefish is their wandering habits. Both fish migrate up and down the East Coast.

Many people believe Chesapeake Bay is the prime source of stripers along the Northeast Atlantic coast and that the Hudson-spawned stripers are mainly concentrated from western Long Island Sound to New Jersey. There is some disagreement though, with many observers feeling Hudston River stripers are an important fish east of New York.

Test samplings have come up with varying results. Tests of 107 Hudson stripers showed an average of 8 ppm; 65 Long Island Sound bass averaged 3.45 ppm. Long Island Sound bluefish (51 of them) averaged 2.57 ppm.

Bluefin tuna from Long Island Sound averaged 2.75 ppm and weakfish 1.21 but cod, porgies, fluke, flounder, blackfish and mackerel were below 1 ppm.

Connecticut tested 19 striped bass last year. Ony five were above 2 ppm and only one of these above 5 ppm. Older fish have a greater chance to accumulate PCB's.

The Monsanto Chemical Company of St. Louis is the only manufacturer of PCB's in the US. Monsanto is voluntarily ending all production of PCB's in October. Imported PCB's will still be used, but processing and distribution of both imported and domestic compounds will be banned after Jan 1, 1979. The problem is, PCB's retain their toxicity in the environment for 15 to 25 years.

Just what all this means to the striped bass fishery on Cape Cod is anyone's guess. Some fishermen depend upon stripers for part of their living, switching from one kind of fishing to another, depending on the season. Other fishermen fish to pick up some extra cash, pay for a vacation, or to augment their salaries from regular jobs. Quite a few striper fishermen come from off Cape Cod. All these would be undoubtedly hurt by the proposed Federal action.

The extent of this damage will vary with the individual's dependency on the striped bass fishery and what the State and Federal people finally put together.

Some people will undoubtedly cheer any reduction of fishing pressure on the striper as a good thing.

Nelson Bryant, writing in **The New York Times**, observes "It is somewhat ironic, but the anadromous striped bass, which some people feel is in danger of being overfished, may benefit from the new regulation if it becomes law."

Henry Moore's Charter Notes

Cape Cod Bay striped bass fishing on a spectacular run of big fish broke wide open two weeks ahead of scedule for half a dozen craft of the Orleans Rock Harbor charter boat fleet which were ready for the unexpected invasion before the Memorial Day holiday weekend, says Spokesman Henry S. Moore.

The charter reservation and information booth on the Rock Harbor dock will open on Saturday, June 18, by which time all 12 boats of the fleet will be in daily operation.

This year's fleet includes two spanking new 35-footers — Capt Dick Clark's new **Flying Mist**, which Dick will operate in addition to last year's boat of the same name which will be skippered this year by Danny Chase as the **Flying Mist II**, and Capt Dick Woodland's new **Madame B.** Both of them got in on this week's pre-season blitz.

Capt Jack Catlin and a group of associates have bought Eric Sorensen's 42-foot **Betsy M.**, biggest boat in the Rock Harbor fleet, and Jack will skipper her this season, re-christened as the **Sea Jay**. Otherwise the Rock Harbor roster is unchanged from last year, except for Capt Elmer Costa's **Columbia**. She resumes regular charter service under the captaincy of Elmer's son Marty, now a full-fledged engineer graduate of the Maritime Academy.

Don Walwer's **Terry II**, skippered by son Mike, cracked the bass blitz open on the 21st with six fish ranging from 15 to 40 pounds. They followed up with 16 more in the 23 to 40-lb range on two trips and hit the jackpot on the 24th with 13 fish totalling 380 pounds for John Murphy, owner of the Orleans Land Ho restaurant and Red Derenthal, his bartender.

Dick Clark's new **Flying Mist** and the old **Flying Mist II** finished in about a dead heat for the week's high line honors for a single eight-hour trip. The new Mist came in with 17 bass weighing 30 to 44½ lb top and the old Mist docked 18 in the 15 to 40-lb range. **Flying Mist II** also picked up the first bluefish of the season — a 15-pounder.

Capt Stu Finlay's **Empress** took a pack of West Yarmouth Cub Scouts out for a short joy ride that turned up bass of 36 and 38½ pounds which the youngsters took turns in landing. The Columbia and Sea Jay also took bass in the 15 to 30-pound range during the week.

Wire line swimming plugs and rigs were the principal takers with all skippers reporting about as many fish lost on smashed gear or fumbled strikes as boated.



When the sun sews shimmery silver sequins onto the surface of Wellfleet Harbor it is very nice to be a boy with a fishing rod and an ocean of fish to catch.

Fishing Decreases

The National Marine Fisheries Service reports a dramatic decrease in the number of foreign fishing vessels off our coasts since the implementation of the 200 mile fishing limit. Preliminary reports show that 180 fishing and support vessels were sighted off our shores in March, a 40 per cent reduction from the 435 vessels sighted in March of 1976.

The foreign vessels were sighted only off the coasts of New England and Alaska. Before the law went into effect on March 1, foreign fishing vessels were found off all US coasts.

The ships were from five nations as compared with 12 nations a year ago. Japan, with 87, had the largest number of vessels, the Soviet Union was second with 70 and Spain was third with 21 vessels.

Foreign fishermen are now required to have permits specifying the locations, times and species of fish they may catch.

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