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Frank Mainville

Milliken Blocks Net Restrictions

Gov. Milliken is threatening to block a long-sought four-state agreement aimed at saving the last of seven species of Lake Michigan chubs — the bloater — from extinction by commercial fishermen.

Milliken says implementation of hard-won Commercial Fishing Rules by the Department of Natural Resources must "go hand-in-hand with compensation" and that "planning to accommodate all the displaced fishermen should be accelerated."

"OTHERWISE," SAYS Milliken, "Michigan will have to withdraw from the four-state agreement" — even though he concedes that Lake Michigan chubs are endangered.

Reaffirming his position of "compensation or no implementation" in a letter to Walt Stoddard of Fairgrove, president of the Michigan Fish Producers Association, Milliken says he has again included $1.5 million in the budget for netters.

Legislators appropriated the $1.5 million to buy out commercial fishermen caught up in the new rule ban on large-mesh gill nets and quota system last year but failed to pass legislation enabling the DNR to pay affected fishermen.

COMMERCIAL FISHERMEN'S own lift records show that the bloater catch declined 42 per cent last year from 1973 to a 15-year-low of 1.23 million pounds while the catch-per-unit-of effort declined 23 per cent. In 1970, 4,028,000 pounds were caught.

Meanwhile, Indiana has closed chub netting, Illinois has set an "assessment" quota of 30,000 pounds, Wisconsin plans a research quota of 120,000 pounds under permit and Michigan a 160,000-pound permit research fishery, which biologists admit may be too high.

Milliken is also insisting that the deadline for review of progress towards conservation from large-mesh gill nets, blamed for taking lake trout as well as whitefish, be moved up from May 30 to June 30.

AND, BEFORE the DNR denies extension of gill net privileges to any affected fisherman, Milliken says he will review each individual case — preempting DNR authority.

"I realize that Commercial Fishing Rules restricting the use of gill nets adopted by the Natural Resources Commission last year could have a significant economic impact on certain commercial fishermen," he points out.

"At the same time I firmly believe the ban on large-mesh gill nets is vital to full restoration and utilization of the fish in the Great Lakes. Michigan intends to phase out large-mesh gill nets and reduce chub fishing to a very minimal level."

BUT HE says any netter denied an extension to fish gill nets by the DNR after June 30 will be given a chance to explain extenuating circumstances through the hearing process, previously used by some netters to continue unlawful netting indefinitely.

Commercial fishermen claim they are having difficulty obtaining financing for estimated $50,000 conversions from gill net to impoundment gear — new boats and trap-nets — because of the uncertainty whether they will be allowed to net.

However, the chub iss is also a public health question which Milliken and the Departments of Agriculture and Public Health have chosen to ignore — except to stop a DNR giveaway of salmon several years ago.

LAST YEAR Lake Michigan chubs still carried 5.46 parts-per-million of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) — in excess of U.S. Food and Drug Administration guidelines which Attorney General Frank Kelley has told the state it must enforce.

And the lake trout which netters would like to be allowed to take carried 18.93 ppm of PCBs and 9.96 ppm of DDT in 1973, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Coho carried 12.17 PCBs in 1973, although they were down to just under the limit — 4.48 ppm — for DDT.

Milliken's authority to delve into actual management of the natural resources is questionable — he has twice admitted that the selection of a director is the sole prerogative of the Natural Resources Commission.

BUT IN a unique support of a dying industry, he is putting the department, commission and Legislature on notice that the Commercial Fishing Rules won't be implemented until the netters have been paid off or given other species.

The bloater is the last species of chub left for netters to take from Lake Michigan. Is its obituary, too, going to be written for political reasons? //

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