



9/14/2011

Mr. Paul J. Howard, Executive Director
New England Fishery Management Council
50 Water Street, Mill 2
Newburyport, MA 01950

Dear Mr. Howard,

In the course of the next several weeks the New England Fishery Management Council will be making an important decision on what measures should be taken to protect river herring, a keystone species within our watershed and beyond.

The Mystic River Watershed Association (MyRWA) is a grassroots organization dedicated to the protection and restoration of the Mystic River, its tributaries, and related natural resources throughout the watershed's 22 communities. Declining river herring populations in our watershed and throughout our region has been well documented. While the causes for this are debated, several factors have been cited: dams, pollution and fishing by midwater trawling methods and vessels where river herring are caught in very high numbers as bycatch.

Regarding the first two factors, within our Mystic River Watershed, improvements have and are being made. The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) this June has completed the reconstruction of the dam that separates our Upper and Lower Mystic Lakes. With the addition of a fish ladder to this new dam, Mystic River river herring for the first time in over a century now have renewed access to former upstream spawning grounds. The Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) is presently working with DCR, as well as other governmental and private organizations to begin the construction of a wetland in Cambridge for the treating of stormwater runoff. This wetland will reduce the discharge of pollutants into Alewife Brook an important herring spawning area.

Additionally MyRWA has begun a comprehensive phosphorus study to establish a baseline for this important chemical factor in our watershed. This baseline will provide the means to monitor efforts currently being undertaken by area towns and cities and by State and Federal agencies to reduce excessive phosphorus levels. Reduction of phosphorous levels will increase oxygen levels within our watershed, thereby improving habitat for our alewife, blueback herring and our fish and birds that depend upon them.

The large numbers of river herring taken from the northeast sea as bycatch is a critically important issue that only the NEFMC can address. Several alternatives and options have been presented and will be discussed. Given that the problem of declining river herring is on your present agenda and the subject will not likely be reintroduced for years to come, we hope that you will agree that decisive action to protect river herring is the only reasonable option.

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With all this in mind, we ask that you support within Amendment 5 the following alternatives.

1. The requirement of 100% observer coverage on every midwater trawling vessel as this is the only way to monitor and quantify river herring interactions across their full migratory range.
2. The seasonal closing of areas where large populations of river herring have been observed. Given the present state of our river herring stock, this would be a viable course for a recovery.
3. A restriction of the dumping of unsampled catch, except in circumstances involving mechanical failure or crew safety. This must be accompanied with a policy that assures that these exceptions are not abused.
4. A river herring bycatch cap using the latest data available to provide a strong incentive for vessels to avoid and minimize bycatch.

MyRWA, as well as many other organizations and agencies within our watershed, are actively engaged in dramatically improving existing habitat for spawning alewives and bluebacks. We respectfully request that the NEFMC assist us by taking the decisive action needed to reverse our river herring's calamitous decline.

Sincerely,



EkOngKar Singh Khalsa
Executive Director
Mystic River Watershed Association

cc:

Governor Deval Patrick
Secretary Richard K. Sullivan Jr.
Joan O'Leary