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P R E S S R E L E A S E

PROHIBITION ON THE TAKING OF ALEWIFE AND BLUEBACK HERRING FROM CONNECTICUT WATERS EXTENDED FOR ANOTHER YEAR

The Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) today announced that the prohibition on the taking of alewives and blueback herring from most inland and marine waters of the State of Connecticut has been extended for another year. This action was initially taken in April of 2002, and then extended each successive year. The current action by DEP Deputy Commissioner Susan Frechette extends the prohibition through March 31, 2011.

"All states along the East Coast have seen a dramatic decline in river herring populations since 2002. To combat this decline, the closure of these fisheries must stay in place," said Deputy Commissioner Frechette.

River herring is a term used to collectively refer to alewife and the blueback herring. Both species are anadromous, which means they hatch in freshwater, migrate to the ocean to grow, then return to freshwater to spawn. Historically, millions of river herring returned to Connecticut rivers and streams each year. In 1985, over 630,000 blueback herring were passed over a single dam, the Holyoke Dam, on the Connecticut River. By 2006, only 21 passed the Holyoke Dam, the lowest number in the history of the Holyoke Fishlift. Last year that number had risen only to 39. While the reasons for these historically low levels are not fully understood, DEP biologists believe predation by increasingly abundant striped bass and undocumented catch in the ocean may be important factors.

"River herring comprise a large portion of the diet of many species of freshwater and marine gamefish, osprey, bald eagle, harbor seals, porpoise, egrets, kingfishers, and river otter," said William Hyatt, Chief of DEP's Bureau of Natural Resources, "and it is important to protect river herring runs as a means of protecting all of these other species". DEP wildlife biologists have noted that strong runs of river herring enhance the survival rate of osprey chicks.

Non-migratory alewife populations are also established in several lakes and ponds in Connecticut. However, these landlocked populations are not experiencing similar declines. The DEP prohibition does not include landlocked alewives from Amos Lake, Ball Pond, Beach Pond, Candlewood Lake, Crystal Lake, Highland Lake, Lake Quassapaug, Lake Quonnipaug, Rogers Lake, Squantz Pond, Uncas Pond, and Lake Waramaug. Alewives in these lakes may still be taken by angling and scoop net as established in state statute and regulation.

Hyatt indicated that the prohibition is expected to stay in place until monitoring by the DEP indicates that the population has recovered to the point where it could safely support some level of harvest. “Protecting populations of wild fish is one of our top priorities,” Hyatt said, “and monitoring conducted during 2009 indicated that the river herring stocks remain very low with no signs of an imminent recovery. The fishery closure will provide critical protection to small spawning runs until such time as the regional trend is reversed,” noted Hyatt.

The DEP will continue its other efforts to enhance river herring stocks by transplanting adult herring from streams with healthy runs into streams where runs have been eliminated or greatly depleted, removing obsolete dams and building fishways that allow fish to migrate past remaining dams. Currently, the DEP is working with the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, the University of Connecticut, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to implement a monitoring project on the Connecticut River in an effort to learn more about river herring in the state’s largest river.

During the past year, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission adopted an amendment to its Fishery Management Plan for river herring that requires all coastal states to improve their monitoring of river herring runs and take positive conservation actions. The New England Fishery Management Council is also considering changes to the Atlantic herring fishery in federal waters to reduce the accidental harvest of river herring in the ocean.

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