

Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection

April 2, 2012

Prohibition on the Taking of Alewife and Blueback Herring from Connecticut Waters Extended for Another Year

The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) 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 has been extended each successive year after DEEP monitoring showed no improvement in population size during the past year. The current action by DEEP Commissioner Daniel C. Esty extends the prohibition through March 31, 2013.

"East Coast states have all experienced dramatic declines in river herring populations. Since Connecticut took the first step to close river herring fisheries to protect the stocks, other states have followed. The best available data from this past year indicates that the closure of these fisheries must remain in place," said Commissioner Esty.

River herring is a term used to collectively refer to alewife and 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 the Holyoke Dam on the Connecticut River. By 2006, only 21 passed the Holyoke Dam (Massachusetts), the lowest number in the history of the Holyoke Fishlift. Last year that number had crept up to 138. While river herring are not typically consumed by humans, they are important food to many species of freshwater and marine gamefish, as well as osprey, bald eagle, harbor seals, porpoise, egrets, kingfishers and river otter.

"The exact cause of the decline in river herring runs is still unknown," said William Hyatt, Chief of DEP's Bureau of Natural Resources, "but it is clear the major problem exists in the estuaries and ocean, where it affects river herring from all East Coast states. There is no indication that there is a problem with Connecticut rivers and streams."

"Protecting populations of wild fish is one of our top priorities," Hyatt said, "we are encouraged that the attention of others has been drawn to the conservation and recovery of river herring stocks in the ocean, where fish from all states intermix." Hyatt indicated that the prohibition is expected to stay in place until monitoring by the DEEP indicates that the population has recovered to the point where it could safely support some level of harvest.

Recent developments in the effort to conserve river herring in the past year include the petitioning of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) by a conservation group to list both species of river herring under the federal Endangered Species Act. The NMFS is currently considering that petition. In addition, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission has begun reviewing mandatory plans from all East Coast states demonstrating that their river herring fisheries are sustainable. If the plans cannot do so, the states will be required to close its river herring fisheries, as Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island have already done. Finally, on March 12 of this year, a U.S. District Court ruled that the NMFS has failed to take required actions to minimize the bycatch (accidental capture) of river herring in the Atlantic herring fishery off of New England and ordered it to make appropriate decisions without undue delay.

Non-migratory alewife populations are established in several lakes and ponds in Connecticut. The DEEP 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.

The DEEP continues 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. A new fishway at the Wallace Dam in Wallingford is scheduled to open in April and will open over 8 miles of habitat for river herring in the Quinnipiac River.