

Brooklin lobsterman David Tarr, who serves on the state Lobster Advisory Council, predicts his catch will be down about 20 percent this season unless he can pull off a “great finish.” The light catch, coupled with a boat price that was 10 percent off for most of the summer, adds up to a substantial loss, he said. But the 48-year-old fisherman isn’t exactly surprised.

“We have been over the average for many years, so I’m not really shocked by it,” Tarr said. “It makes it harder, for sure.”

SLOWDOWN AFTER SERIES OF RECORD YEARS

Maine has enjoyed a run of record-setting lobster harvests over the past few years. According to data from 2016, the most recent figures available, Maine fishermen landed more than 130 million pounds of lobster valued at \$533.1 million, [breaking records for annual catch](#) and industry value. Lobster is the most valuable, and through last year at least, the fastest-growing of all the state’s commercial fisheries.

Lobstermen will remain busy through November, depending on which region they fish, so it’s too early to tell whether the perceived decline will be reflected in the official 2017 harvest numbers that the state releases in February.

Even so, the Maine Lobstermen’s Association called it a “painfully slow start” and said the [slow pace of landings](#) and the prices that were well below last year’s had left lobstermen feeling angry, disappointed and worried.

“Fortunately, we still have a lot of good fishing months left this year,” association director Patrice McCarron wrote in her September report.

John Drouin of Cutler, a veteran lobsterman who chairs the state’s easternmost lobster fishing council, said if not for a three-week stretch in August, the season would have been his worst in almost four decades of lobstering.

But still, Drouin described his own 2017 catch as “poor, poor, poor.” As head of the local lobster council, Drouin has heard of fishermen who have failed to land enough lobsters on a single haul to cover the day’s operating costs.

That occasionally happens in early spring, when fishermen are eager to get out on the water before the lobsters have actually returned to their traditional spots, but that is really bad news in September, traditionally the peak lobstering month.

“At this point, I have a minimum-wage job,” Drouin said. “What with the cost of bait and fuel, never mind boat payments and the other household payments, it’s a struggle. ... I have not talked with anyone who is doing good.”

The price is as troubling as the low catch, Drouin said. The local boat price now is running 75 cents below last year’s October price. Drouin worries that a late-fall recovery in landings could send prices into a free fall.

In its September director’s report, the Down East Lobstermen’s Association acknowledged this year’s catch is down, but said it was comparable to 2015, which came in at a five-year low in catch volume but set a record-breaking value of \$616.5 million.

“This just seems to be one of those years that is a little more traditional than the past year or two,” director Sheila Dassatt wrote.

The Stonington Lobster Co-op, located in the heart of Maine’s lobster capital, said its catch is down about 25 percent.

POSSIBLE CAUSES: COLD SPRING, COSTLY BAIT

Until the Fishermen’s Forum, when the state Department of Marine Resources announces its final tally of lobster landed in Maine, fishermen are left to ponder the anecdotal evidence of a slow season – the chatter overhead on the boat

radio, at the dock or even in the pew in church on Sundays. Most can agree on a few culprits to blame for the anemic haul.

Some blame the cold spring, which they say delayed hard-shell lobsters from returning inshore to molt. Others say the scarcity and resulting high price of herring, the industry's favorite bait fish, prompted some lobstermen to delay their spring fishing, which contributed to a poor spring lobster harvest. In July, the traditional start of the soft-shell fishing season, lobstermen said they were already behind.

They predicted the catch would rebound over the summer, when a late molt would hopefully produce a bonanza of soft-shell lobsters in time for the Maine tourist season and generate hauls that were lucrative enough for fishermen to justify the high bait prices. The catch did pick up, but so far, the volume of catch for most has not been enough to make up for the lost time in the spring.

Scientists have warned fishery officials about the danger of becoming too dependent on lobster – a scenario they call “the gilded trap.” They note a decade-long decline in the number of larval-stage lobsters recorded in the Gulf of Maine. Other surveys that monitor juvenile lobsters have not seen a decline, however, curbing fears of a sharp drop in the fishery's near future and prompting more scientific study.

FISHERY'S OVERALL HEALTH APPEARS TO BE GOOD

Jason Joyce, an eighth-generation lobstermen who fishes out of Swan's Island, blames the weather – the cold temperatures on the front end of the season that delayed the molt, and the stormy waters on the back end that have made it difficult for fishermen to keep bait in their traps. He said fishermen are still hoping for a strong fall run, but he admits 2017 may not be a banner year for sheer volume.

However, even if the annual harvest is down, Joyce said he finds evidence of the fishery's overall health every day he is out on the ocean.

“The resource is strong, with lots of small lobsters coming up in the traps and loads of healthy egg-bearing females,” Joyce said. “The new (soft-shells) we are catching now have a shell which has hardened up very well. This permits dealers to ship over greater distances with increased survivability, making it a fantastic year to expand markets.”

In the past, the lobster industry has taken advantage of seasonal challenges to expand the industry's reach. In 2012, for example, unusually warm water temperatures brought about an early molt in the Gulf of Maine, overlapping with the end of the Canadian lobstering season and causing a glut of lobsters in the market. That sent prices plummeting.

But Maine lobster dealers used the low price of the product to attract new customers, [especially in Asia](#), which has helped increase overall demand and kept prices high despite the ever-increasing amount of lobsters landed. But most dealers only ship live hard-shell lobsters into Asia, because new shells are generally considered too fragile to survive the 48-hour journey.

Joyce believes the firmer new shells being landed in Maine now could make it to the lucrative live Asian lobster market.

“We really have an outstanding product right now,” Joyce said. “Consumers are getting a treat if they are able to score a new-shell this fall.”