

DMR imposed those regulations on an emergency basis before the scheduled May 1 start of the 2018 season. Valid for 90 days, the emergency rule pushed the start of the season back 10 days, from May 1 to May 11, and ended the season on June 20 instead of June 30. The proposal under consideration last week would make those changes permanent.

Halibut are one of several groundfish species such as cod, haddock and yellowtail flounder that are subject to annual catch limitations established by the New England Fishery Management Council. For halibut, the council sets an overall landings quota and allocates a portion of that to fisheries in state waters — inside the three-mile limit.

The aggregate total annual allowable catch of halibut for state- and federally-permitted harvesters is currently 104 metric tons (229,281 pounds). Of that, the annual catch limit for harvesters fishing in state waters during the 2018 fishing season is 21.8 metric tons (just under 48,061 pounds).

Although the council regulates fisheries along the entire Northeastern Seaboard, as a practical matter the state catch limit applies only to Maine because it is the only state in the region with a commercial halibut fishery.

“We want to make sure the state waters quota is caught,” DMR Deputy Commissioner Meredith Mendelson said last week as she explained to an audience of just two fishermen why DMR was changing the fishing rules. The sparse turnout was, perhaps, a reflection of the considerable comment the department received when it announced its emergency rulemaking earlier in the spring.

Data compiled by DMR shows that, after a sharp drop in 2010, halibut landings in the state of Maine have climbed at a relatively steady pace.

In 2009, Maine halibut landings were nearly 81,000 pounds but in 2010 landings dropped to just 33,000, primarily as a result of a regulatory change.

Since then, landings have climbed steadily to just under 109,000 pounds in 2016. Based on still preliminary data, 2017 landings were about 73,000 pounds.

The problem for Maine fishermen, most of whom fish only in state waters while some have permits that allow them to fish for lobsters or groundfish in federal waters, is that while Maine landings were increasing, so were landings around New England as a result of a strong federal waters fishery.

In 2015, according to NOAA Fisheries, halibut landings throughout New England reached almost 216,000 pounds — worth about \$1.4 million. Of that, more than half the total — about 123,000 pounds — was landed outside Maine.

According to DMR biologist Mike Kersula, the scientific models on which the NEFMC relies when it establishes annual catch limits are badly broken. Part of the confusion comes from the fact that there have been no “high-quality” surveys of the halibut stock. Another is that there is considerable disagreement over whether halibut found in U.S. and Canadian waters are all part of the same stock or whether they are separate.

Last year, the NEFMC used a stock assessment based on a series of “indices,” including landings and survey results, to set the annual catch limit. Although the indices were up, Kersula said, the council didn’t increase the catch limit.

For the council, busy with managing much more commercially valuable fisheries — cod, haddock, herring among them — that was a quick and easy way to grow the halibut stock.

“Halibut is a low-priority species because we know so little about it,” Mendelson said.

The problem for Maine harvesters, though, is that with static catch limits and increasing landings from federal waters around New England, Maine’s share of the total annual catch limit decreased and the state has to reduce its catch by 30 percent from 2017 levels.

That justification didn’t sit well with either of the two fishermen who attended the hearing in Ellsworth last Thursday.

“What do we need to see to get an increase” in the catch limit, asked Stonington fisherman Ricky Trundy. “We’re shut out of scallops. If there’s a glitch in lobsters,” and many fishermen are concerned about the possibility of a drop in lobster landings, “two or three fish (halibut) a day is a good little supplement.”

Currently, Maine fishermen without a federal groundfish permit may land up to 25 halibut at least 41 inches in length in the course of the season. Each of those fish must be marked with a tag issued to the harvester by DMR. The same rule applies to fishermen with a federal permit except that they are limited to landing just one halibut per trip, regardless of whether they are fishing in federal or state waters.

All harvesters who fish with Maine halibut tags must report the halibut they catch, whether landed or not, to DMR on a monthly basis whether the fish came from state or federal waters.

Both Trundy and another fisherman said that, in the past, the reports didn't give DMR an "accurate assessment" of the number of halibut caught because only halibut of legal size were tagged and reported.

Kersula said DMR was working to conduct better surveys and would start longline surveys every other year starting in 2019. The problem for fishermen, though, is that "the feds need at least a decade of data before they'll even look at it."

Interested members of the public have until the close of business on June 18 to file written comments on the proposed permanent rule with DMR.