

Jeff Nichols, spokesman for Maine Department of Marine Fisheries, said Tuesday that the interstate fisheries commission has set an annual herring catch limit of 66.79 million pounds for the inner half of the gulf, known officially as Area 1A. Of that amount, 72.8 percent — or 48.6 million pounds — can be harvested between June 1 and Sept. 30.

The change does not increase the amount of herring that can be caught during that four-month period. It allows some boats to:

- Fish 5 days a week, instead of 4.
- Bring more herring ashore in any given week.
- Transfer larger amounts of herring to carrier vessels at sea.

When the cumulative June-September harvest for the area reaches 44.73 million pounds, herring fishing in the inner gulf will be halted until Oct. 1. At that point, herring fishermen will get the green light to catch another 18 million pounds as lobster fishing mostly winds down by the end of the calendar year.

“As we get further into the summer, we get into the height of the lobster season,” Nichols said. The move is aimed at making sure Maine’s lobster fishing fleet, which harvested nearly \$434 million pounds of lobster in 2017, has access to “its preferred type of bait,” he added.

Patrice McCarron, executive director of Maine Lobstermen’s Association, said Tuesday that such adjustments are “standard fare” each summer, to help optimize the catch rate for herring during prime lobster fishing season. She said she expects the availability of Atlantic herring this year to be a repeat of 2017, when the annual catch limit was 244 million pounds but only 110 million pounds were harvested along the East Coast.

McCarron said the weekly catch limit increase is not expected to affect the availability of herring in 2019, when a new stock assessment and a new herring fishery management plan could result in [a significantly lower annual catch limit](#) for the species. Federal regulators are expected to make a decision this fall on the 2019 catch quota for Atlantic herring.

Reduced catch limits on herring has resulted in lobster fishermen using [a variety of fishing baits](#) as they are available throughout the year, according to McCarron. Fresh herring is the most effective bait, with menhaden and then frozen herring following on the preference list.

Rolling spawning closures for herring in the Gulf of Maine in the late summer and early fall also complicate the availability of bait, she said. The periodic closures, seasonal limits and overall reduced availability of herring make it a challenge for both regulators and fishermen to ensure a consistent supply of fresh herring, she said.

“There’s no perfect formula,” McCarron said.

The gradual decline in Atlantic herring catches has affected more than just the lobster industry’s bait supply. In 2010, after several years of repeatedly reduced catch limits, [the Stinson Seafood cannery in Gouldsboro](#) — the last remaining sardine cannery in the United States — closed down, with Bumble Bee Foods fully shifting all its sardine processing capacity to Canada.