

In an effort to protect the dwindling species, regulators last week hosted a series of often emotional meetings with fishermen, environmental advocates, and other federal and state officials about what to do.

The goal is to find a way to protect the whales while limiting the impact on lobstermen, who have hundreds of thousands of fishing lines that extend from their traps on the seafloor to their buoys on the surface of the Gulf of Maine.

Federal officials say they will rely on the discussions as a guide to some of the most consequential decisions they will make about the lobster industry and its impact on the endangered species.

“The problem we are wrestling with is one of the most pressing issues we currently face,” said Mike Pentony, the regional administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. “Unfortunately, the severely endangered status of right whales means that. . . every serious injury and mortality of a right whale in fishing gear is of even greater consequence than when the population was growing.”

Over the coming months, Pentony will decide whether the government should significantly extend a moratorium on lobster fishing in some areas when the whales are present, require lobstermen to adopt ropeless traps, or impose a range of other potentially expensive and burdensome policies.

At last week’s meeting, representatives of the region’s lobstermen — whose catch ranks among the nation’s most valuable fisheries — questioned whether they were being unfairly blamed for whale deaths.

“You fundamentally don’t understand the fishery you’re regulating, and that’s a breach of trust,” Patrice McCarron, executive director of the Maine Lobstermen’s Association, told the officials at one of the opening sessions.

Federal surveys have linked more than 80 percent of right whale deaths to entanglements, and most of others to ship strikes, but McCarron maintained that very few of the deaths had been conclusively tied to lobstermen’s lines. There are now about a million such lines throughout the northeastern United States and Canada, NOAA officials estimate.

She said her members are angry over potential restrictions and criticized the decision-making process as “very broken.”

She and others pointed the blame at Canada, where, in a surprise to scientists, an unprecedented 12 right whales died last year in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Right whales have been moving further north, following their prey, a migration that scientists believe is probably the result of the warming of the Gulf of Maine.

But over the past year the Canadian government has taken significant action to try to protect the whales, including closing areas when the mammals were present, requiring ships to reduce their speed to avoid striking them, and reducing the snow crab fishery season.

There have been no reported right whale deaths in Canada this year. Of the three found dead in the United States, all are suspected of dying of entanglements.

While little information is available about the whale found off Nantucket, there were “indications of entanglement,” said Jennifer Goebel, a spokeswoman for NOAA.

Of the others, one found off Martha's Vineyard had lost its tail, probably the result of an entanglement; the other one, found off Virginia, was entangled in snow crab gear from Canada.

Scientists believe there are only about 430 right whales left, and just about 100 females. Without significant changes to protect them, the species could go extinct as soon as 2040, scientists say.

McCarron and others have said the US and Canadian governments should look more closely at rope requirements.

Despite new efforts in Canada to protect right whales, its government, unlike in the United States, doesn't require their fishermen to use ropes with weak links, which are designed to sever under the pressure of being pulled by a whale, or lines between traps that are required to sink to the seafloor.

"We are extremely concerned that the US lobstermen are going to continue to pay the price for the lack of conservation in Canada," said Beth Casoni, executive director of the Massachusetts Lobstermen's Association.

In an essay over the summer, Casoni said the state's lobstermen are already sacrificing some of their catch to protect right whales. For three months every year, lobstermen have observed closures in Cape Cod Bay from February through April, when right whales feed in the area.

She urged NOAA to consider banning the importation of fish and other fish products from Canada unless they do more to protect the species.

"Although Canada recently adjusted some ship speeds and fishing gear locations to minimize entanglements, those

measures are temporary and will not be enough to protect the right whale,” she wrote.

Canadian officials have defended their policies, saying that until last year, there had been very few sightings of right whales in Canada beyond the Bay of Fundy, which feeds into the Gulf of Maine.

“We have responded very rapidly,” said Adam Burns, director general of fisheries resource management at Fisheries and Oceans Canada in Ottawa.

Some of the actions taken by the Canadian government have been politically painful, as the rolling closures sparked protests among fishermen, he said. The government would also continue to look at other ways to protect the whales, including requirements to change fishing gear.

“These critical measures have had significant economic impacts on coastal communities,” he said. “But I think we all recognize the long-term impact of not taking action is much greater.”

In Providence, officials considered a range of proposals, including banning rope beyond a specific diameter, extending closures, and increasing enforcement.

They also discussed using new technology that eliminates the need for many of the ropes, reducing the need for closures. One version of the technology would enable lobstermen to use a wireless device that would activate inflatable bags attached to the traps.

“There is abundant evidence that the centuries-old solution as to how to retrieve traps from the bottom, namely end lines and surface marker buoys is no longer compatible with a sustainable coexistence with large whales,” said Michael Moore, director of

the Marine Mammal Center at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

Moore urged federal officials to subsidize the industry's transition to ropeless fishing.

“Every dead right whale is an incrementally larger step towards extinction,” he said.

But others worried that the government would delay any solutions by calling for further studies and testing the new technology.

“We don't have time to simply study the problem,” said Gib Brogan, a fisheries policy analyst for Oceana, a Washington D.C.-based advocacy group. “The species needs action now.”