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National

Daunting Calculus for Maine Shrimpers as Entire Season Is Lost

By JESS BIDGOOD

PORT CLYDE, Me. — Shrimping in the Gulf of Maine was so bad last season that Randy Cushman, a longtime fisherman, wondered if there was any point in going out at all.

"I can honestly say it was the worst catch that I've ever seen in my career," said Mr. Cushman, 51, who has captained a boat for more than 30 years. "I was calling people and saying, 'Let's shut this fishery down, this is stupid.'"

Regulators recently did just that, closing the 2014 Gulf of Maine shrimping season — which, in a normal year, might have run from December through the spring — to give the supply time to recover. The unusual step has brought some hope to Mr. Cushman and to other fishermen and processors whose livelihoods depend in part on the shrimp's making a comeback, even as they wonder how to weather this season, and perhaps longer, without it. But others say closing the season completely will deal too heavy a blow to the tiny, specialized market, eroding another part of New England's imperiled fishing economy.

The shrimp in question are called Northern shrimp or, more locally, Maine shrimp. They are the southernmost appearance of a species, *Pandalus borealis*, that can also be found in Canadian and Icelandic waters, but the ones caught here in the Gulf of Maine tend to be at the bigger end of the species. They



CRAIG DILGER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Glen Libby checked the temperature of a batch of crabs, which he is counting on to help his seafood processing company through a shrimless winter.

are usually caught in the winter, when females come close to shore to lay their eggs in cold water. They are smaller and typically sweeter than warm-water or farmed shrimp, with delicate, edible shells, and are popular in European and Scandinavian markets, although New England chefs use them, too.

"They're something that I love to have," said Michael Leviton, the chef at Area Four and Lumière, two Boston-

area restaurants, who said he would use local fish in lieu of the shrimp this year. "My favorite thing to do with them is to basically pan-fry them whole, head and shell on."

The fishery is among the last in Maine to be open-access, meaning licenses are not limited as they are elsewhere. As a result, some fishermen say, the supply is vulnerable to overfishing when prices are high. It had a peak in

the late 1960s and the '70s before the supply collapsed and regulators imposed the last complete closing, in 1978. In 2011, regulators estimate, about 350 boats — mostly in Maine, with some in Massachusetts and New Hampshire — caught \$10.6 million worth of shrimp; last season, about 200 boats caught an estimated \$1.2 million worth.

In 2013 researchers towing nets to assess the size of the stock counted an average of 27 shrimp per tow, compared with a historical average of 1,400 per tow.

"The 2013 survey was the worst ever," said Maggie Hunter, a scientist at Maine's Marine Resources Department and a member of the technical committee that advised the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, which regulates Northern shrimp, to close the fishery for the season.

Ms. Hunter and other scientists ascribe the precipitous decline to a combination of overfishing and, more important, higher ocean temperatures over the past few years, which seem to threaten the survival of newly hatched shrimp. "One mechanism that has been proposed is that if it's warm, the shrimp's eggs mature too fast and they hatch too early," Ms. Hunter said.

Marshall Alexander, 67, a longtime shrimper who lives in Biddeford, Me., has grudgingly piled his gear.

"It affects me dearly, O.K.," Mr. Alex-

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Shrimpers In Maine Lose Season To Shortage

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ander said. He added that he would have to take long, cold trips offshore this season, which he would usually prefer to do in the summer, in search of ground fish — cod, haddock and others that live near the ocean floor — because he cannot shrimp close to shore. “At my age, I don’t enjoy the beating I used to take when I was younger,” he said.

Mr. Alexander is among a group of fishermen and processors who acknowledge that stocks are in trouble but have pushed regulators to allow so-called no-harm fishing of older shrimp that have already hatched their last round of eggs for the year, in order to keep parts of the market supplied and the infrastructure functioning. They argue that this could prevent a price crash should Euro-



pean markets have moved on by the time the fishery reopens, but scientists say it would not be possible to exclusively target shrimp that can no longer lay eggs. “The shelf space we had in Waitrose in the U.K. or the market in Norway is gone with Maine shrimp,” said Spencer Fuller, a shrimp manager at the Portland-based seafood distributor Cozy Harbor, who called the cuts “dra-

conian, not necessary.” But another subset of fishermen and processors view the decision to close the season as an overdue investment in the future of the species.

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“We have to try to make some contribution to help the stock.”

Shortly after the closing was announced, Mr. Libby had just two bags of shrimp — last season’s, found hidden in a freezer behind some monkfish. As he watched two employees pick crab, he said he hoped crab legs, scallops and fish could see his business through the winter.

“That’s our shrimp substitute,”

he said gamely.

Across town, Mr. Cushman, who is also part of Mr. Libby’s processing business, was less optimistic. “It kills me — it breaks my heart,” he said. “You need them shrimp in order to keep that business alive.”

One of Mr. Cushman’s brothers handed him a paycheck: With shrimp in so much trouble, Mr. Cushman is working as his stern man. It used to be that ground fishing could help him through a bad shrimping season, but because of deep cuts, that is no longer the case.

“We have two fisheries that are failing now,” Mr. Cushman said, looking over the Port Clyde harbor and counting, to his surprise, just a handful of boats capable of catching ground fish and shrimp.

“We keep losing boats out of this harbor every year, and I keep forgetting about it,” he said. “This is why you see guys like me disappearing.”