

OpEditorial (sent to *Providence Journal*)

An Historic Opportunity for Rhode Island's Leaders To Influence National Fisheries Policy, Protect Local Jobs

Rhode Island's leaders have a rare opportunity to affect the outcome of a national issue that has a significant economic impact on Rhode Island. On November 13, the Atlantic Menhaden Management Board of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) will consider proposals to change the way menhaden – often called the most important fish in the sea - are managed. Rhode Island is represented on the ASMFC by three commissioners who can exert significant influence over management policy, to increase the abundance of menhaden. More fish means more jobs for Rhode Islanders. The question is: will our leaders take advantage of this opportunity?

What are menhaden, and how do they create Rhode Island jobs? Menhaden are small forage fish that migrate to Rhode Island waters each spring. Known locally as pogies or bunkers, menhaden are the preferred food of striped bass, the mainstay of our recreational fishery. Each year some 300,000 anglers travel to Rhode Island to fish for stripers, spending more than \$300 million on related expenses (NOAA data). Any charter captain or recreational angler will tell you: more menhaden equals more stripers and bigger, healthier fish. More stripers equal more jobs—in marinas, restaurants, hotels, bait & tackle shops, and on charter boats.

Menhaden are also important to the health of the Bay and the abundance of osprey, bluefish, and such ground fish as cod and flounder. As filter feeders, they consume large volumes of plankton, simultaneously converting plankton into protein for other marine life and reducing excess nutrients in the water column. Fewer nutrients mean fewer algae blooms and fish kills. Menhaden are themselves an important food source for many species of fish, as well as lobsters, crabs, birds, whales and dolphins. From a fisheries perspective, the scientific evidence is incontrovertible: menhaden abundance is closely correlated with the health and abundance of numerous species of fish of far greater value to commercial and recreational fishermen than the value received from the direct harvest of menhaden.

What's the opportunity before our leaders? On November 13, the ASMFC will decide which of several management options it will adopt in setting a coast-wide commercial catch quota. Among the options being considered are guidelines that reflect menhaden's extraordinary importance as prey for more valuable recreational and commercial species of fish, birds, and marine mammals. At a recent ASMFC public hearing, more than 40 people turned out, including Rhode Island's ASMFC commissioners. All but two individuals urged Rhode Island's commissioners to support a new, more protective approach being considered by the ASMFC (specifically, Reference Point Option E of Amendment 3).

So what's the problem? While Narragansett Bay was once an important spawning ground for menhaden, an industrialized commercial fishing industry significantly depleted the stock over many decades. Until recently, the commercial menhaden fishery was unregulated, to the nearly-exclusive benefit of one company, Omega Protein Corporation, located in Virginia. Not coincidentally, Virginia is the only state on the eastern seaboard that still allows commercial harvest for the purpose of reducing menhaden into fish meal and oil, Omega Protein's business. Today, Omega Protein accounts for 85 percent of all menhaden caught commercially on the East Coast. The company holds enormous influence in the Virginia legislature and over Virginia's representatives on the ASMFC, and is lobbying hard to prevent the ASMFC from adopting more protective measures for menhaden.

Will Rhode Island lead? Two of Rhode Island's three commissioners serve at the behest of Governor Raimondo. State Senator Susan Sosnowski is the third commissioner. We urge the Governor and Senator to do what is right for Rhode Island and publicly declare their support for Option E of Amendment 3. It is time for Rhode Island's commissioners to speak with one voice and assert leadership on an issue of profound importance to the health of Rhode Island fisheries and the thousands of Rhode Island jobs that depend on recreational fishing. Cleaner water, healthy marine mammals, and soaring osprey are the icing on the cake.

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