

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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EMERGENCY STUDIES PLANNED ON DECLINE OF ATLANTIC COAST STRIPED BASS

Fishery scientists from two Federal agencies, in cooperation with State fishery agencies and private citizens, have started a major program to investigate the decline of Atlantic Coast striped bass.

Biologists from the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), State agencies, and sport and commercial fishermen believe that the popular sport and food fish (also known as "stripers" and "rockfish") may be facing a grave crisis. Although striped bass populations naturally tend to fluctuate from abundance to scarcity, fishery experts are worried because it appears that the fish have not had a good reproductive year since 1970. Coastal striped bass stocks from Maine to North Carolina began declining in 1974 and reached a 21-year low by 1978.

Preliminary evidence indicates that the striped bass' life habits may be bringing it into conflict with some man-made trouble. Striped bass spend most of their lives in Atlantic coastal waters. But when they are ready to spawn, they ascend rivers and bays--areas that are often heavily polluted. Scientists think the pollutants may be taking a heavy toll of striped bass eggs and larvae. Heavy fishing pressure, dams that obstruct migrating fish, industrial development, or an extended sequence of natural events, such as changes in ocean currents or food availability, may also be contributing to the fish's decline.

Now the Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service have joined forces to obtain urgently needed information about the status of striped bass populations. On February 6, the two agencies signed a joint agreement to begin emergency studies of the striped bass. The agreement implements an amendment to the Anadromous Fish Conservation Act, passed by Congress in November 1979, which authorized the appropriation of \$1 million for striped bass studies for FY 1980; up to \$1.75 million for FY 1981; and up to \$2 million for FY 1982.

Under the agreement, NOAA will conduct studies on the size and distribution of striped bass populations, including studies to determine the amount and geographical location of annual spawning. Fish and Wildlife Service will take the lead in determining the factors responsible for the striped bass' decline, including the extent and causes of mortality at each stage in the life cycle, and the effects of pollution on eggs and larval fish. The two agencies will also survey the economic importance of recreational and commercial striped bass fisheries. A study team of fishery scientists and economists from the Fish and Wildlife Service, NOAA, and Environmental Protection Agency has been established and is already developing an action plan detailing how the studies will be carried out.

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Public input to the emergency striped bass program will be provided by a citizens advisory panel. The panel's members will include representatives from both recreational and commercial interests and will be drawn mainly from existing striped bass advisory committees.

In addition, a Planning and Coordination Committee with representatives from both Federal and non-Federal agencies has been set up to direct the study team and coordinate the activities of the two agencies. The committee consists of representatives from the Fish and Wildlife Service, NOAA, Environmental Protection Agency, Emergency Striped Bass Study Citizens Advisory Panel, Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, the Striped Bass sub-Board of the State-Federal Fisheries Management Program, and the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

Field work is scheduled to begin this spring with studies of the 1980 striped bass spawning run. Results of this and future studies should provide fishery biologists with the information needed to develop a sound management plan for Atlantic Coast striped bass.

The natural range of the striped bass runs along the Atlantic Coast from southern Canada to Florida, and some populations also occur along parts of the Gulf Coast. In the late 1800's, striped bass were transplanted to the San Francisco Bay area and quickly spread, becoming well established along the West Coast from California to Puget Sound. Like Atlantic Coast stocks, both the West Coast and Gulf Coast striped bass populations have suffered declines in recent years. Striped bass can tolerate fresh as well as salt water, and the Fish and Wildlife Service and State agencies have been very successful in introducing hatchery-raised striped bass into inland waters. Unlike their anadromous cousins, these striped bass stocks remain "landlocked" for life.

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