

Mr. Charles Baker, Governor
Massachusetts State House
Office of the Governor
Room 280
Boston, MA 02133

September 2, 2015

Dear Governor Baker:

I am writing to you with a sincere plea for some action on the plight of Striped Bass. This important sport fish has had a tragic history, come back strong, and is again in peril. This is not just an issue for people who love to go saltwater fishing, which alone is a very large group. It should concern almost everyone who lives, works or plays along the coastline of Massachusetts.

Striped Bass are undeniably the premier saltwater sport fish in New England, if not the entire mid-Atlantic coast. They were overfished to near extinction through the early 1980's, leading fisheries managers in many states to declare a complete moratorium during the later part of that decade. Fortunately, these extreme tactics were successful in bringing back a healthy population of striped bass. But, the resurgence has been short-lived, and they are again in peril. Although this is due in part to environmental issues, over-harvesting is again the major factor. More important, it is the only factor we can quickly address. History could well be repeated if commercial fishing is not completely eliminated and recreational limits are not drastically reduced. This is especially true here in Massachusetts, the mid-point of the striper migratory path, where thousands of residents and other folks come to visit annually in pursuit of these fine gamefish, and where we willingly allow a bogus "commercial fishing" program to dictate the crumbling future of this valuable and beloved resource.

A short story will hopefully illustrate my position.

Having my worst striper-fishing season in over 20 years, I was encouraged in mid-August to hear that a large school of stripers had come through the Cape Cod Canal. A few days later, on Monday August 17th, I took a friend out in my boat to enjoy a day of catch-and-release striper fishing. As we motored toward the Sandwich Beach area just after 8 AM, we were greeted with a jaw-dropping sight - at least 75 boats piled up in just a few acres of ocean, a few hundred yards from shore. I later learned that there had been perhaps twice as many earlier, and that this was a designated "commercial fishing" day. It is no surprise that we caught nothing that day. Later, after pulling out the boat, we overheard one of the "commercial fishermen" boast that he had killed 370 pounds of bass that night. He had a very nice recreational-style boat and, like most of the anglers we observed, appeared to be just another guy out for a day's fishing. The difference is that he had a MA "commercial fishing" license, and could legally kill as many as 15 fish (all over 34 inches) each "commercial" day. In reality, the Massachusetts "commercial fishing" program creates a readily available way for many recreational fishermen to take their friends out, bring home some meat, and bolster their boat fund after paying for gas and bait. For the rest of us who enjoy fishing simply for its sport and recreational value, this program has been a disaster. The fish killed that day could have provided thousands of hours of enjoyable fishing for the citizens of Massachusetts. They could have spawned countless young stripers to replenish dwindling stocks for many years to come, multiplying the benefits over and over. A large school of valuable fish was decimated by relatively few fishermen in a single night. Sadly, this scene plays out repeatedly each "commercial fishing" season. More sadly, Massachusetts continues to allow a practice that several neighboring states have wisely abolished.

The frustration I feel is not solely due to what I witnessed that day in August. For years, the recreational fishing community has been telling everyone that striper stocks are dwindling. The Coastal Conservation Association and Stripers Forever have been working tirelessly to influence those who are empowered to create change. Fishing magazines are running editorials and scientific articles attesting to

this situation and calling for action. With all this outcry, the Atlantic states fisheries managers finally acted last year. However, after a lame round of public meetings and a vote that lacked any truly constructive option, the changes they enacted were an anemic nod to the problem.

There is no dispute that striper stocks are declining, and that nearly every fish over the "commercial" 34-inch minimum is a potential breeding female. Given those facts, it is unconscionable that we continue to operate a commercial program that literally targets the very fish we must protect in order to sustain and grow this vital fishery. Even if a substantial demand existed, the overall economic value of stripers as a food source is minute. On the other hand, thousands of recreational fishermen and women love to pursue these fish and will support a diverse array of businesses that cater to their needs – but only if there are fish to be caught. This includes vacation rentals, motels, inns, restaurants, tackle shops, guide services, boat dealers, etc. Unfortunately, the rapid decline in this fishery is having a very obvious and negative effect on many businesses, and therefore on our local economy. I have seen the changes on Cape Cod, where I do most of my fishing. I'm sure other fishing destinations are similarly affected. In the past few years, I have watched my favorite tackle shops close and the number of fishing guides on the water dwindle. The latest casualty, "Fishing the Cape", was arguably the premier fly-fishing shop on Cape Cod, and was featured in a striper fishing episode on ESPN. I know of at least three others. The sad truth is that many people in the recreational fishing business are losing their jobs.

I urge you to review this situation and help promote common-sense regulation, with the objective of achieving the full recreational and economic value of a strong striped bass fishery. If someone doesn't take the initiative and create positive changes soon, I fear that the sport so many of us love will be in terrible jeopardy once again.

Sincerely,



Roy Swartz

cc:

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