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Fewer fish spills reported after Louisiana pushes pogy boats from coast



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In 2022, a menhaden fishing ship and its net boats spilled about a million fish off the Louisiana coast, leaving the floating mass to rot in the summer sun. A few months later, another spill blanketed Louisiana beaches with an estimated 850,000 dead fish.

The two incidents pushed the state's leaders to enact the first significant restrictions on the Gulf of Mexico's largest but least-regulated fishery. Starting this year, catchers of menhaden, a foot-long fish with a host of industrial uses, must stay a half mile from much of the Louisiana coast and a mile from three ecologically sensitive areas.

The aim is to reduce the number of net tears in shallow water and ease tensions with recreational fishing and conservation groups who say the menhaden industry is damaging habitat, wasting fish that other species depend on for food and killing threatened fish that are often snagged in nets as bycatch.

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As the first season with the half-mile buffer zone winds down this week, backers of the new rules are celebrating a dramatic reduction in fish spills. Just over 350,000 fish have been lost this year, a significant drop from the 1.3 million fish the industry has averaged each year over the past decade, according to an analysis by the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, a group that has lobbied for tougher menhaden fishing rules.

"This data indicates that the efforts to move the industrial (menhaden) boats into deeper waters to protect nearshore, shallow habitat is paying off," said Chris Macaluso, the partnership's marine fisheries director.

But the menhaden industry says better nets rather than bigger buffers have played a far bigger role in reducing spills. The two foreign-owned companies that dominate the U.S. commercial menhaden fishery have replaced most of their rip-prone nylon nets with ones made of stronger materials, said Francois Kuttel, president of Westbank, the fishing arm of Daybrook Fisheries.

"It's ten times stronger than steel and very light, but also very expensive," he said, estimating it cost his company about \$500,000 for 12 new nets. "Having fewer spills has nothing to do with buffer zones. It has everything to do with the investments we've made."

Ocean Harvesters, the company that fishes for Omega Protein, also credited new

nets for fewer spills.

"The combination of these new nets, and a renewed commitment from captains to be more mindful of net tears at sea, has been the primary factor behind the decrease in incidents, with only two occurring in 2024," said Ben Landry, a spokesman for Ocean Harvesters and Omega Protein.

Also called pogey and fatback, menhaden form a foundational part of the Gulf's food web, providing calorie-rich food for dolphins, sharks, pelicans and dozens of other marine animals.

Between 600 million and 900 million menhaden are caught in the Gulf each year, making it by far the region's largest fishery. Louisiana's better-known catches — shrimp, crab, crawfish and oysters — don't amount to a third of the menhaden caught in state waters.

Much of the menhaden catch is ground up at large processing plants and then mixed into fertilizers, pig feed, cat food, fish oil pills and other uses. Bony and loaded with oil, menhaden are rarely eaten by people.

The menhaden industry opposed Louisiana's new buffers, warning that having to fish farther from the coast would make catching menhaden harder and more costly. So far, the industry says the predictions have come true.

"This is having a significant financial impact," Kuttel said. "The company will lose money this year."

He declined to cite specific numbers but said some fishing captains who work on commission have had their earnings reduced by as much as 30%.

Menhaden fishing operations involve spotter airplanes that locate the fish, which form large schools within a mile or two from the shore. "Motherships" with 1 million fish-capacities deploy smaller boats that encircle the schools in long nets called purse seines.

At least 44 large-scale spills have happened in Louisiana waters between 2020 and 2023, with the tally rising from two in 2020 to 18 last year, according to Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries records.

Net tears caused about half the spills over the four years. Mechanical failures and overloaded nets were also listed as common causes in LDWF incident reports.

The industry has blamed the incidents on sharks biting through nets to eat menhaden and crews miscalculating the weight and volume of some net loads.

While the Gulf's menhaden population appears relatively stable, conservation and recreational fishing groups are concerned that the industry is taking food from predator species like dolphins, speckled trout, and redfish, which have suffered population declines in recent years. The groups also worry that nets and fishing vessels are raking across sensitive seafloor habitats.

All other Gulf states either prohibit menhaden fishing or have such strict rules that the industry now focuses entirely on the Louisiana coast, which sets no catch limits and has only recently begun limiting near-shore fishing, first with a quarter-mile buffer and then this year's half-mile buffer. Virginia is the only other state where large-scale menhaden fishing is still active.

Almost all commercially caught menhaden are processed by two companies — Daybrook, which is owned by Oceana Group of South Africa, and Omega Protein, a subsidiary of Cooke Inc. of Canada. The parent companies have ownership links,

staffing overlaps and exclusive purchase agreements with the companies that handle the fishing operations.

The Gulf menhaden industry supports 2,000 jobs and generates about \$25 million in state and local tax revenue each year, according to a Westbank spokesperson.

Recreational fishing has even more of an economic impact, say the buffer's proponents. Anglers who fish the state's coastal waters support three times as many jobs and produce double the annual tax revenue, according to data from LDWF.

Fishing groups say anglers have noticed an uptick in menhaden, mullet and other forage fish in the buffer zone this year. That, they hope, will lead to better fishing for sought-after catches like trout and redfish.

"Louisianans are fed up with our resources being wasted and shorelines being fouled" from menhaden spills, said David Cresson, CEO of the Coastal Conservation Association of Louisiana. "It's refreshing to see this progress."

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