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US state responds to menhaden spills by proposing new commercial harvest buffer zone

Louisiana's Wildlife and Fisheries Commission has declared its 'notice of intent' to establish a coastal buffer zone for the commercial harvest of menhaden at least one mile off the state's entire coast

By Jason Huffman | Oct. 11, 2023 16:02 BST

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📷 Ocean Harvesters catches menhaden in the Gulf of Mexico using purse seine vessels. Image is from a company video.

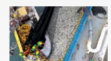
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The Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission (WFC) has responded to a recent series of menhaden spills by fishing companies associated with Omega Protein and Daybrook Fisheries by proposing a new buffer zone to prevent commercial fishing close to the US state's coast.

As earlier reported by [Undercurrent News](#), the two big menhaden producers are blamed for three spills, between Sept. 11 and 14, that are estimated to have caused a combined 850,000 menhaden to wash up on the Southwest Coast of Louisiana, near Cameron Parish.

Among the dead menhaden, also called pogies, were hundreds of redfish, a species also known as red drum that is prized by recreational fishers but often snagged as bycatch in massive menhaden nets, sources told *Undercurrent*. Redfish numbers are so low that commercial fishing is not permitted.

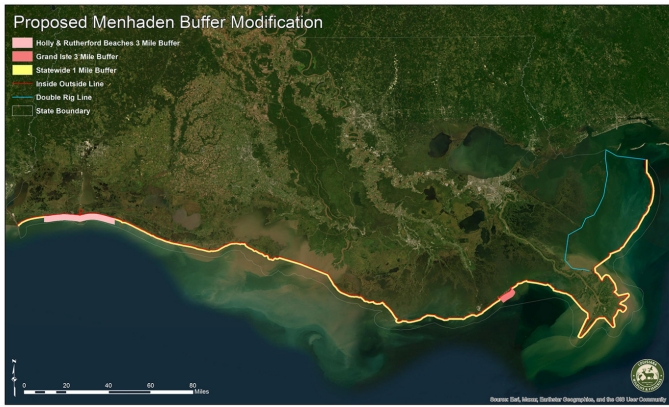
The recent spills were strikingly similar to an incident in the same area at around the same date last year. During the second week of September 2022, an Ocean Harvesters vessel -- associated with Omega Protein -- was overwhelmed



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by an unexpectedly big catch and had to cut its large net, dumping nearly 1 million menhaden, most of them dead, near Holly Beach.



The commercial menhaden harvest buffer zone proposed by the US state of Louisiana's Wildlife and Fisheries Commission.

On Oct. 5, WFC declared its "notice of intent" (NOI) to establish a coastal buffer zone for the commercial harvest of menhaden one mile off the entire Louisiana coastline and three miles from the area between Holly Beach and Rutherford Beach in western Louisiana. This action would extend the existing quarter-mile buffer, established this season, and the existing three-mile buffer at Grand Isle, Louisiana, would remain in place, the commission explained.

The WFC said it would hear a presentation about the economic impacts of the rule before making it final in early 2024. Also, the NOI is open for public comment and must still be reviewed by the state's House and Senate Natural Resources Committee.

The NOI also details more stringent penalties and reporting requirements. Following future spills, harvesters would be required to report the: date and time of the release; the species of fish released; the disposition of the fish released; the name of the vessel which released the fish; an estimation of the number of fish released; photos and/or video of the release; coordinates of the release; and the causative factors of the release.

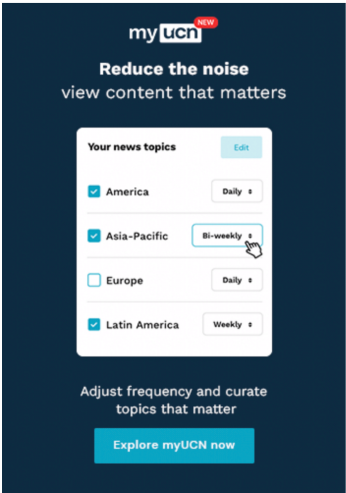
The menhaden fishery is by far Louisiana's largest, generating between 900 million and 1.1 billion pounds of landings for Omega and Daybrook. Omega is owned by Canada-based Cooke while Daybrook, which works with Westbank Fisheries, is owned by South Africa's Oceana Group.

But gulf menhaden, also known as pogies, provide a critical food source for iconic Louisiana species like redfish and speckled trout.



Gulf of Mexico menhaden (Brevoortia patronus). Photograph courtesy of the University of Mississippi.

"This represents a significant step forward in the conservation and management of Louisiana's fisheries," said Chris Macaluso, director of the Center for Marine Fisheries for the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, in a statement issued Tuesday (Oct. 10) about the WFC proposal. "The Louisiana [WFC] thankfully has recognized that the concerns of anglers and conservation advocates are valid, and that Louisiana's nearshore habitats need protection from foreign-owned, industrial pogie fishing boats. This is a big win for redfish.



speckled trout, mackerel, dolphins, brown pelicans, and a host of other fish and wildlife, and a win for those who appreciate and enjoy Louisiana's coast."

In comments sent to *Undercurrent* on Wednesday (Oct. 11) regarding the proposed new buffer zone, Ocean Harvesters and Westbank Fishing said they are "extremely concerned" with the decision by the WFC. They said it would cause a "real and lasting economic harm and threaten the long-term viability" of the commercial fleets.

"We believe that this decision is not supported by any scientific evidence and will be economically harmful to the menhaden fishery and Louisiana's fishing communities," they said. "We believe Louisiana's waters should be shared by all user groups. The new coastwide buffer zone is not necessary for menhaden management. Rather, it's the result of a long-debated, often political, user conflict that's already been considered and defeated by the Louisiana legislature and this commission. Simply put, these new buffer zones prioritize recreational anglers over commercial fishermen."

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