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Disease that rots shells threatens Northeast lobster industry

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By paul davis

journal staff writer

SOUTH KINGSTOWN — A disease that rots the shells of lobsters is threatening the Northeast's \$20-million lobster industry, scientists said Wednesday.

The disease, decimating lobsters since the mid-1990s, could mean new regulations for fishermen already struggling with a bad economy, said Mark Gibson, deputy chief of the state Department of Environmental Management's Division of Fish and Wildlife.

"Shell disease escalated in 1997, exploded rapidly, and shows no signs of abating," said Gibson, who spoke at the ninth annual Ronald C. Baird Sea Grant Science Symposium at the University of Rhode Island.

The disease affects about 30 percent of New England's lobster population.

Rhode Island fishermen have been hard hit. In 1999, the lobster industry generated \$30 million and employed 425 fishermen, Gibson said. Four years later, the industry produced \$16.7 million and employed 279. Those numbers continue to fall, he said.

The disease's cause and how it spreads remain a mystery, though scientists gathered at the two-day symposium offered a number of theories.

Epizootic shell disease was first noticed decades ago, when fishermen observed small black spots on lobster shells. The disease does not taint the meat of the lobsters. But it discolors and erodes the shells, making them less marketable. In extreme cases the shells rot away and the weakened lobsters are killed by secondary infection or other threats.

Egg-carrying females are most susceptible to the disease. New bacteria might be the culprit, said some scientists at the conference.

Others argued that the lobster population has been weakened by stress caused by one of several factors, including climate change, pollution, invasive species, habitat loss — even the 1996 North Cape oil spill. Some 828,000 gallons of home heating oil spilled into Block Island Sound after the barge North Cape ran aground on Moonstone Beach.

Hans Laufer, a professor emeritus of molecular and cell biology at the University of Connecticut, said he believes lobsters may contract the disease from alkylphenols, chemicals that are byproducts from industrial sources.



A lobster with disfiguring shell disease, the cause of which is unknown.

Journal Files ANDREW DICKERMAN

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Three years ago, Sen. [Jack Reed](#) helped convince Congress to spend \$3 million to study the disease. The money helped create the New England Lobster Research Initiative, which has worked with state agencies and 35 scientists and graduate students from 16 schools and institutions.

"These are the best of the best," said Kathleen Castro, a URI fisheries researcher who chairs the executive committee of the New England initiative. Attendees came from Germany, Florida and elsewhere to discuss their theories and trade ideas.

While they disagree on the causes of the disease, "everyone agrees on the urgent need" to study it further, Castro said.

The initiative has helped launch a lobster database and developed new ways to study the disease, she said. But the federal money is gone. "These guys are working for free."

Other species have suffered similar fates because of pollution, habitat loss, overfishing and climate change, said Mark Butler, a professor of biological sciences at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va.

In Florida, spiny lobsters and undersea sponges have died because of diseases, he said.

"For many species, the trends are not particular promising," he said. "What the future holds for us is a little uncertain."

That's bad news for New England's lobstermen. Concerned about the low number of lobsters, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission could seek drastic measures to preserve the stock, Gibson said. Local officials are asking for more information, but the commission will probably seek new regulations, he said.

"It's unlikely they will choose to adopt the status quo and let Mother Nature take her course."

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