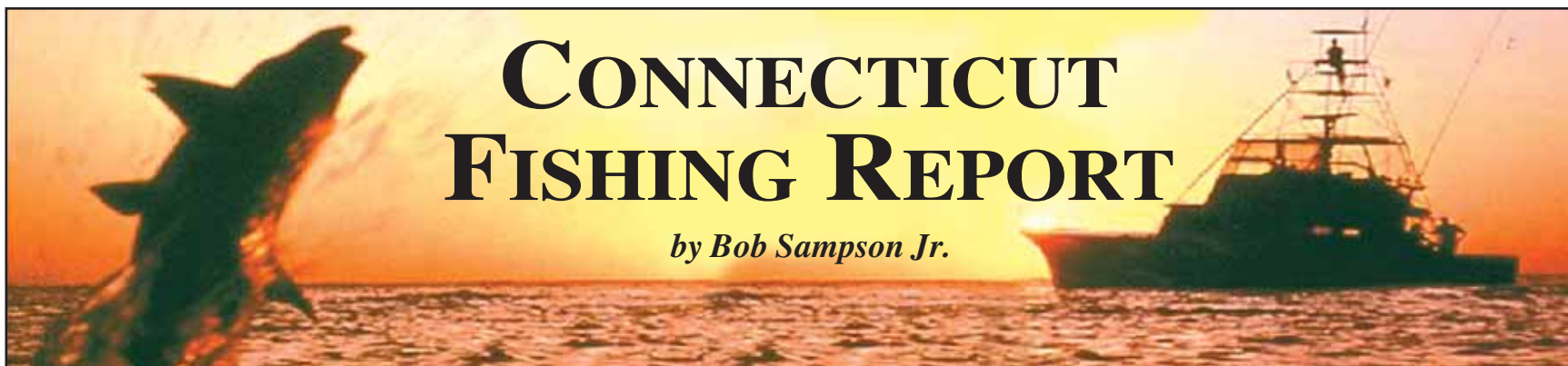


CONNECTICUT FISHING REPORT

by Bob Sampson Jr.



February is the time of year when regulations and management strategies are being conjured up by state and federal fisheries managers. A major one that has been on the horizon for a few years, the Federal Registry, took effect on the first day of the new year. It's been blasted, bemoaned and shunned since the 1970s when the idea of marine recreational licensing was initially put forth by state and federal managers. Progressive thinking states such as California and Florida instituted marine recreational licenses around that time and have benefited greatly not only from the income but the political clout it bestowed on the saltwater sport fishermen in both states.

I thought it was a good idea at that time and took a great deal of heat over it for years. There are a couple of very good reasons for supporting the license concept for so long, besides any money it generates for marine fisheries conservation and management.

First and foremost, by being counted, marine sport fishermen immediately become a political force. This is a positive factor when state natural resource biologists are arguing in behalf of fish and or fishermen because they support their point of view with a verifiable number of potential voters, rather than an estimate.

Having a direct conduit via a registration of some kind allows biologists to contact sport fishermen efficiently and directly via phone, mail or the Internet, a factor that should help improve the turn-around-time for the generation of vital statistics needed so important management decisions can be based on current, not year or two old data.

No one has to tell scup or fluke fishermen here in the Northeast that the existing recreational fisheries statistics gathering system is neither timely nor precise. We are all living in the middle of the kind of mess that statistics and recommendations generated from stale data, combined with politics, can create.

The feds have been taking heat over this issue for years, hence their desire to create a viable "register" of active marine recreational fishermen who can be contacted directly in order to obtain more timely and accurate information. The old system was a random telephone calling system that was very inefficient and slow and was used to ex-



Pat Abate, owner of River's End Tackle, Old Saybrook holds up a fluke he caught incidentally on a weighted Slug-Go last summer while striper fishing off the mouth of the Connecticut River. Fluke are a very popular fish that tackle shop owners need to have expanded on the region's fishing menu in order for many, particularly the small shop owners, to stay in business.

pand creel survey information that was collected fact to face on jetties, beaches and launch areas along the coast.

The primary point of the federal registry, which is in the form of a marine sport fishing license in both Connecticut and New York, is to generate more accurate and precise data that will be processed more rapidly in order to help improve on the decision-making process that takes place every year in order to keep pace with requirements of the various fisheries management plans that have been implemented over the past couple of decades.

The old system was designed to obtain broad-based regional catch trends, but was used to make decisions on a much narrower, statewide or even countywide basis in some of the larger coastal states over the years - kind of like using a butter knife for brain surgery, one reason for some of problems in our marine fisheries regulations that anglers are governed by today. It's a huge mess, with fluke, scup and now black sea bass often in the forefront of it here in the Northeast.

Despite the continued tightening of fluke regulations reaching the choking point for sport fishermen, the system was calling for further reductions in fluke harvest during 2010. There is so little to trim now that hacking weeks or months off season lengths, whittling down catch limits and increasing minimum lengths to the point that they are doing more damage than good and imple-

menting further restrictions will essentially kill what's left of this popular and important sport fishery. In these difficult financial times, further tightening of fluke regulations have already and will continue to force (at least some of the marginal) anglers out of the game. As a result many small tackle and bait shops will be forced out of business if they have to endure more hits to their "bottom line". As these words were being written Dave Simpson, head of Marine fisheries for the Connecticut DEP and his staff of capable biologists were working on Connecticut's regulatory proposals for fluke fishing during 2010.

To make matters worse for small businesses, Connecticut sportsmen were further assaulted by an unexpected doubling of license and permit fees on October 1, 2009. A panic-struck state legislature passed this irresponsible, stopgap measure in order to help

close a huge budget shortfall, a move that was both self-serving and very poorly conceived! Coupled with constantly shrinking opportunities for fishermen, particularly in the marine environment, there is a very real danger of losing the next generation of sportsmen here in Connecticut. At the very least there will be a predictable decrease in license sales and hence revenue from those sales this year and for many years into the future. In the past, reasonable increases in license fees of about 15% have caused 15 to 25% drops in license sales for a few subsequent years and the loss of dollars that is never recovered, especially if a perspective license buyer is lost permanently over that increase in licensing costs.

A doubling of fees has the potential to do permanent, irreparable damage to both fisheries and wildlife conservation programs in Connecticut. As an example, I personally fish actively in both fresh and saltwater throughout the Northeast and southern Canada every year. I hunt deer, turkey and small game in Connecticut and occasionally travel out of state for these pursuits as well. During 2009 my personal resident in-state licenses and permits cost me \$162.80 and that doesn't include the new marine license cost or special stamps that are bought on the side. So next year I'm looking at \$350 to \$400 to fish and hunt in my home state and that's before I buy a single lure or a box of ammo.

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Some people, for financial reasons or perhaps as a matter of principal, will simply begin poaching and take their chances with the law. Others will simply stop fishing and or hunting and in the process take their kids along with them, hence a lost generation or more of potential license-buying sportsmen is gone, which will have dire consequences on the generation of license sales and revenue long into the future. For this reason, fisheries managers at the highest levels and, above all, legislators who make the decisions that affect the behavior of the people who support fisheries and wildlife management programs through taxes, licenses and donations, must make some concessions.

Our fisheries resources must be the primary concern, first and foremost. As our lost

friend Captain Don Cameron, formerly the owner of Captain Don's Tackle, Charlestown, RI used to say, "Do it like Alaska" (where he spent many years); "manage fish for the fish's sake, not the people's benefit."

Bottom line is that every survey in the book has proven that the recreational fisheries industry generates more money, jobs and trickle-down income as a whole than the commercial side of this balancing act. Recreational fishermen have, through the Wallop Breaux Fund (Originally the D/J Act for the restoration of fisheries of the 1950s), generated hundreds of millions of dollars that have essentially paid the bill for fisheries management and restoration efforts in both fresh and saltwater since the 1950s.

The license fees and taxes commercial fishermen have contributed is a pittance in

comparison. Their numbers are miniscule in comparison to the recreational angling population, yet they wield greater political clout among politicians. As noted above, that, in part, is because we recreational anglers have not stood up, paid a few bucks to be counted in order to become a greater political force than we've been in the past.

Connecticut sportsmen can go to the CSA (Connecticut Sportsman's Alliance) web site at ctsportsmen.com to stay apprised of upcoming efforts to urge Connecticut legislators to roll back that unrealistic license fees increase they implemented last fall. Follow prompts to look up your local representatives and write non-confrontational, factual letters or send e-mails so marine recreational fishermen can become a greater political force, one that must be reckoned with in the future.

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