Attention salmon anglers: It's catch-and-release, no exceptions

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The federal government has announced new conservation measures to preserve the wild Atlantic salmon. Every fish caught this angling season will have to be released.
Photo: Tom Moffatt, Atlantic Salmon Federation

FREDERICTON • With the wild Atlantic salmon swimming ever closer to extinction, the federal government is putting in place new conservation measures requiring anglers to release every fish they catch.

Federal Fisheries Minister Gail Shea announced Tuesday that the 2015 recreational salmon fishing season beginning later this month in the Maritimes will be catch-and-release only.

At the same time, Shea is expanding the striped bass sport fishery, hoping that anglers will switch their attention to that fish which is believed to be a predatory threat to salmon smolt in the estuaries. The striped bass season runs from May 1 to Oct. 31.

Shea announced that the bass fishing season will be extended by a week for the retention of fish and by 31 days for catch-and-release, in both the 2015 and in 2016 seasons throughout the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence.

She said in a statement that she understands the importance of recreational fisheries to the Atlantic Canadian economy and realizes steps have to be taken to protect the dwindling numbers of wild Atlantic salmon.

The recreational angling industry generates about $40 million annually for the New Brunswick economy.

"We have heard the concerns expressed by stakeholders and remain committed to finding the right balance between increased fishing opportunities, ensuring the sustainability of this species as well as balanced ecosystems," Shea said.

Sue Scott of the Atlantic Salmon Federation in Saint Andrews said the conservation measures are welcome and needed after three years of plummeting returns by wild Atlantic salmon to their native eastern Canadian rivers.

"It's a good first step," Scott said in an interview. "We are pleased with the quick response of Fisheries and Oceans as it pertains to anglers.

"It really isn't good news that this has to happen. It is very sad this has to happen. It just shows how far our wild Atlantic salmon numbers have fallen."

Scott said that none of the assessed salmon rivers met "minimum conservation limits" last year.

"That is why such restrictive measures are required," she said.

She said that about 3,900 salmon grilse were killed by anglers in 2013, the last year for which numbers are available. The salmon federation has been warning for months that every salmon is needed to help sustain the species.

Salmon stocks in the Miramichi River have been in constant decline over the past two decades. Annual salmon returns that numbered 82,000 20 years ago fell to about 12,000 in 2014.

Salmon pools that normally had 300 to 400 fish in them had only 50 or 60 last year.

The Miramichi accounts for more than 20 per cent of the production of Atlantic salmon in North America.

The Fisheries Department said the catch-and-release measure for salmon already is in place in Prince Edward Island and on some parts of the Miramichi river system and will be extended to all scheduled waters of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia where salmon angling is permitted.

Additionally, anglers will be required to use artificial flies with a single barbless hook during the salmon angling season.

On March 9, Shea launched the ministerial advisory committee on Atlantic salmon. The mandate of the committee is to focus on conservation and enforcement measures; predation; strategy to address international, unsustainable fishing; and areas for advancing science.

The committee has so far held meetings in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and will produce a report at the end of the consultation period. However, considering the urgent need to make management decisions for the 2015 angling season, Shea asked the group to produce interim recommendations.

"These conservation measures ... will allow anglers to practise their sport while enabling an increased number of salmon to reach spawning grounds," she said.

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