

# Butterfish bonanza



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**Anna Kent**, of Seafreeze, of North Kingstown, holds a carton of locally caught butterfish. Fishermen want restrictions lifted.

## Fishermen say abundance could create jobs, profits

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Maybe you heard the collective groan.

Rhode Island squid fishermen, who dominate the nation's squid business, suddenly were temporarily out of business.

The reason: somewhere, someone accidentally caught a butterfish.

The 6-ounce fish, caught last month in a school of squid, topped the quarterly quota and triggered a fishing-industry shutdown. It lasted two weeks, until May 1.

"We probably lost a million dollars," says Geir Monsen, vice president of Seafreeze, a large seafood-freezing facility in North Kingstown.

These are the "bycatch blues." One fish species caught while seeking another is called bycatch. When the population of that unwanted species is believed to be low, the government sets — and enforces — a low quota.



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**Squid**, which occupy the same waters as butterfish, are the mainstay of ports. Nets dropped for squid catch a lot of butterfish.

**Butterfish from Ecuador, top, and local butterfish, bottom.** Seafreeze, of North Kingstown, catches what little butterfish it is allowed, and also imports butterfish from other countries, which is ironic since butterfish is so plentiful in local waters.



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## FISH

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### They are everywhere

That's the case, and the controversy, with butterfish.

"Butterfish are everywhere," said Chris Roebuck, owner of Salt Pond Fisheries in Point Judith. "We're trying to stay away from them."

But drop a net for squid, which occupy the same water, Roebuck said, and you get butterfish — lots of butterfish.

"I could fill my boat with 100,000 pounds in a day," Roebuck said. "And that's not an exaggeration."

The current butterfish annual quota, for the entire fishing industry, is about 10 times that much.

Butterfish, fishermen say, are so plentiful that not only should their bycatch quota be increased, but they should be intentionally caught once again on a commercial scale.

**To this, most people probably say, "Butterfish?"**

Yes, butterfish, which built the state's fishing business.

"Butterfish was the economic foundation for a lot of Point Judith," Mosen said. "A lot of the infrastructure and boats were paid by butterfish."

Even Rhode Islanders who aren't in the fishing industry, Mosen said, should care about butterfish, a small, high-fat, short-lived fish Americans don't tend to eat, but Japanese love. He offers two reasons: money and jobs.

Here's a third: food. Butterfish is buttery.

"It's certainly a great marketing name," said Peg Petruny-Parker, executive director of the Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation in North Kingstown.

"Who wouldn't want to eat a fish named butterfish?"

Consider the potential.

The current butterfish annual quota is about 1 million pounds, which Mosen says is "nothing." He said the quota could be 100 million pounds.

"That would be \$200 million in sales," Mosen said. "That would be thousands, if not tens of thousands, of jobs."

**So why is the quota so much lower?**

The federal government believes butterfish have been overfished, and it set the quota to prevent that from continuing. But there lies the problem, the proverbial challenge of counting fish in the sea.

It's hard to do. And in the case of butterfish, it's very hard.

"The science and the resources aren't there right now," said Jason Didden,

butterfish-management plan coordinator for the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council.

The council oversees East Coast fishing, and reports to the National Marine Fisheries Service, which sets federal fishing quotas. Last year, the fisheries council recommended the fisheries service double its butterfish quota.

"But the council's risk policy did not permit the increase," said Aja Szumylo, a fishery policy analyst at the fisheries service. "Our only option was to reduce the quota back to the status quo."

The problem with raising the butterfish quota, Didden said, is it's based on "uncertain science." Fish-population assessments are based in part on commercial catch, and essentially there is none for butterfish.

"It's a vicious circle," Mosen said.

The government assessment is also based on spring and fall trawls of the ocean. The process, Szumylo said, is extensive.

But Roebuck, the Salt Pond Fisheries owner, said fishermen who trawl year-round have "a better handle on the population."

Butterfish are pelagic, swimming at different depths within a column of water.

"There could be a million butterfish in the water the government is towing" a net through, Roebuck said. "But

if they're not at the right depth, they're not going to catch them."

**The process for setting next year's butterfish quota began last Monday in Baltimore.** The fisheries council conducted its annual advisory hearing, gathering information from the fishing industry.

Mosen attended last year, when council officials "completely ignored what I said." So this year, he mailed his remarks, making a case for reestablishing butterfish fishing.

In Rhode Island in 1984, the butterfish haul totaled 23.3 million pounds, about 85 percent of the country's butterfish catch.

In the mid-1980s, it provided fodder for fish oil and fertilizer for Americans, food from the Japanese and big business for Rhode Island fishermen. It accounted for 90 percent of the Seafreeze business.

Now, Mosen said, it's 1 percent.

"Butterfish is not a business," he said.

Butterfish, Roebuck said, is a torment.

"Millions of butterfish are dying of old age and going to the crabs, when they could be harvested and sold to the Japanese," Roebuck said. "But our government won't let us land them."