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Lobster fisherman Lanny Dellinger of the F/V Megan & Kelsey holds a small lobster. Courtesy of the Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation

March 24, 2016 09:34AM
By CYNTHIA DRUMMOND Sun Staff Writer

POINT JUDITH — Mark Sweitzer has a degree in chemistry, but he began fishing for lobster back in the 1970s and is still at it today. Sweitzer fishes out of the Port of Galilee on the F/V Erika Knight.

“I like being outside,” he said. “I always thought about going back to school for geology or forestry or something like that, that would enable me to be outside. I love being outside and I love being around the ocean, so that was a big part of it, and I like having my own business.”

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Rhode Island's lobster fishery may never see another boom time like the period in the '80s and '90s when there were plenty of lobsters and lots of money to be made. There are fewer lobsters and fewer lobster fishermen today, but explanations for the stock fluctuation vary widely.

These days, the lobster boom is in Maine. In 2015, the value of the catch exceeded $600 million, an all-time high and a $33 million increase over 2014. Lobsters do not do well in bottom water temperatures above 69 Fahrenheit, and the population shift has prompted speculation that warming waters, a consequence of climate change, have prompted lobsters to leave southern New England for the colder waters of the Gulf of Maine and George's Bank.

But the dynamics of the lobster population are more complex than lobsters simply escaping warm waters. Kathleen Castro, a University of Rhode Island researcher who has extensively studied lobsters, contends there is no northward migration.

"Our Rhode Island lobsters are not going to Maine," she said. "Perhaps some of the Gulf of Maine lobsters are moving north within the Gulf of Maine. Our lobsters might be simply staying offshore."

Jason McNamee, chief of marine fisheries at the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, said the reasons for the lower inshore lobster stocks could not be attributed to a single factor.

"I think people are making a simple, linear connection — one is causing the other — and I guess I would suggest a couple of things," he said. "There has been a shift in the population, at least where the majority of the population is, there has been a shift northward to the Gulf of Maine. There's not necessarily been a direct link that it is in fact warming temperatures that caused that, but that is an assumption that a lot of people make."

Differing opinions

Scientists, fisheries managers and lobstermen disagree on whether the southern New England stock is in trouble, or just fluctuating naturally.

McNamee said he believes, however, that the lobster stock is struggling.

"I will certainly say that the population of lobsters in southern New England is not doing well. Stock status is poor," he said.

When lobsters release their eggs, the eggs float on the surface of the water for a few days before sinking to the bottom in a process known as settlement. Stock assessments often include settlement numbers, which Sweitzer said were conducted in warm water close to shore and inevitably show fewer baby lobsters because they do not stay in warm water.

"So they do these settlement studies and they say 'they're no lobsters around'," he said. "I can go back eight years, and some of the guys up in Jamestown were doing their studies and saying 'by the time you guys get to 2014, you're going to be catching nothing, because the settlement indices are at zero'… It doesn't mean they're not lobsters 10 miles out, 20 miles out, 30 miles out. What they're doing is throwing the baby out with the bathwater with a lot of these studies."

The Commercial Fisheries Research Foundation was founded by the fishing industry to support research on new fishing technologies and encourage sustainable fisheries in southern New England. The nonprofit private foundation is based in North Kingstown.

Executive Director Anna Malek Mercer, who works with fishermen on collaborative research projects, said there was a divide between lobster stock assessments and what the lobstermen were actually seeing on the water.

"From the industry's perspective, there is a bit of disconnect between what the most recent stock assessments for lobsters are saying about the resource, and what the guys see when they pull up their traps," she said. "In the last couple of years, many of the lobster fishermen here in Rhode Island have actually seen an increase in their catch — certainly not on the scale of the 1990s, which is when we had the peak year in southern New England — but the lobster population, I don't think, is in as dire straits as portrayed in the stock assessment, and particularly, some of the recent news articles about it."

Inshore and offshore

Rhode Island has two lobster fisheries: inshore and offshore. The inshore fishery is usually within 15 miles from shore in less than 200 feet of water.

“Those are all inshore day boats,” Mercer said. “They are single operator, one deckhand goes out to help. The boats are between 25 and 40 feet, so relatively small.”

The offshore fishery is about 200 miles offshore on the shelf break, where the ocean bottom slopes from the flat Continental Shelf down to the sea floor.

“That’s very deep,” Mercer said. “That’s about 700 to 1,000 feet, sometimes a bit more. Those vessels typically have a captain and at least three crew and they are usually 60 to 100 feet long.”

Inshore and offshore lobster fisheries use similar gear, but in different configurations. Inshore lobster trawls usually consist of 10 to 20 traps, and offshore trawls use 30 to 40 traps, which are larger. All lobster traps have openings, known as vents, to allow undersized lobsters to escape.

“They do have different sized vents for inshore and offshore,” Mercer said. “That’s because typically the lobsters offshore and on George’s Bank are much larger.”

Access to the lobster fishery is extremely limited. No new permits are being issued, so lobstermen can only enter the fishery if they buy someone else’s permit. The objective of the policy is to consolidate the fleet and reduce the number of traps, which are referred to as effort.

“The lobster fishery is managed by effort and by minimum and maximum sizes, as well as a variety of other conservation measures such as no taking of egg-bearing females or v-notched females, which is a lobster with a notch in its tail, meaning that it is a female that had eggs on it previously,” Mercer said.

Figures from the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management show that the number of lobstermen has declined steadily over the past several years. In 2011, there were 197, in 2013, 156, and just 120 in 2015.

The fishery is jointly managed by the states and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, an interstate agency. The commission has announced that in 2016, there will be a 25 percent trap reduction for all of southern New England, meaning that lobstermen will have to remove and store a quarter of their traps. In addition, they will be required to reduce their traps by 5 percent each year for the next five years, bringing the total reduction of effort to 50 percent.

“They want to be very active in their management,” Sweitzer said. “Well, they can’t control the ocean temperatures, they can’t control ocean acidification, which is probably a more important issue, so what they can control is the number of us doing it, or whether we do it at all or how many pots we do it with.”

Mercer said there is a lot of frustration these days in the Rhode Island lobster fishing fleet.

“Having the number of traps they’re able to fish reduced, and they’re now talking about changes in the minimum size and maximum size for harvest,” she said. “So there’s a lot of different stressors that are facing lobster fishermen. It’s one more worry for them.”

Castro said the days of full-time lobster fishing might be coming to an end.

“They’re still making a living,” Castro said. “I don’t know what that living will look like. Perhaps the right way to frame this is back in the ’70s, lobstering was part time. It was never a full-time thing. And now it may be getting to the same point, where it’s not a full-time fishery anymore.”

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