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Maine State Senator Dennis Damon and Rep. Leila Percy, co-chairs of the Legislature's Marine Resources Committee, listen Wednesday in Augusta as Dr. Diane Cowan of The Lobster Conservancy in Friendship gives the committee a quick lesson in lobster biology. The committee voted 10-0 Wednesday to not recommend a bill that would allow fishermen who catch lobster in dragger nets to land those lobsters in Maine. (Bangor Daily News/Bill Trotter) [Buy this photo](#)

Panel kills bill to allow fishermen to land dragged lobsters in Maine

By [Bill Trotter](#)

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AUGUSTA - Something needs to be done to help the ailing groundfish industry in Maine, the Legislature's marine resources committee indicated Wednesday, but it will not come at the expense of the state's healthy lobster fishery.

The committee took quick action to kill the bill, LD 170, with a 10-0 vote that it should not be recommended to the full Legislature.

A dozen or so fishermen attended Wednesday's work session, far less than the hundreds who attended a public hearing on the same bill last week.

Legislators on the committee needed little convincing Wednesday and did not dwell on whether they should vote for the bill. Instead, they discussed how they might look into ways by which the state can help support the groundfish industry without allowing dragged-up lobsters to be brought ashore.

Sen. Dennis Damon, D-Trenton, said that the proposal has highlighted the danger the groundfish industry faces of vanishing from Maine. He suggested more should be done to follow the recommendations of the state's groundfish task force, which examined the issue three years ago.

"I don't think it's too extreme to say it's bordering on collapse," Damon said. "If that wasn't clear before, it must be clear now."

The bill was proposed by Rep. Anne Haskell, D-Portland, and was strongly supported by members and clients of the Portland Fish Exchange, which has seen its volume decrease sharply in recent years as more groundfish boats take their catches to Massachusetts. The bill would have allowed groundfishing boats to bring in 100 lobsters a day or 500 in a week.

Groundfishermen argued that they have an economic incentive to take their catch to Massachusetts, where it is legal to land dragged lobsters and which has no maximum limit on lobster size. They said that even if they cannot land large lobsters in Maine, legalizing lobster bycatch in Maine would help keep groundfish boats and fish processing businesses from moving out of state.

Lobstermen, however, were adamant that the law not change. The groundfish industry is in poor shape because it has been badly mismanaged, they said. Allowing draggers to bring lobsters to Maine could have serious consequences for the ongoing healthy management of the lobster fishery, they argued.

Haskell said after Wednesday's vote that she is glad she has been able to alert her fellow legislators to the dire state of groundfishing in Maine.

"No one ever likes to see their bill killed," she said. "I believe the process worked. I feel it was definitely worth the effort."

Islesford lobsterman Jack Merrill said after the session that he came prepared to provide a host of economic facts to the committee.

Dragged lobsters tend to be damaged lobsters, he said, and as a result they get a cheaper price from dealers. If groundfish dragger boats were allowed to bring as many as 100 lobsters ashore a day, the additional catch could lower the average statewide per-pound price for everybody else, he said. With 66 million pounds of lobster caught in Maine last year, Merrill said, a 10-cent drop in the average statewide price would mean a loss of \$6.6 million to the industry.

The committee also voted 10-0 to establish a subcommittee of five of its members to look into what progress has been made in implementing the groundfish task force's recommendations.

Patrice McCarron, executive director of the Maine Lobstermen's Association, said Wednesday that she was pleased with the committee's votes and that the MLA also is supportive of other efforts to help the groundfish industry. She said the task force spent eight months looking into ways to help keep the state's groundfish industry afloat.

What is key is preserving working waterfront access, she said, so that groundfishing businesses will have the ability to re-establish themselves after groundfish stocks recover. Protecting this access also is key to preserving the lobster industry, she said.

"There are things that are going to come and go, but if we have access to the waterfront those businesses can come back," McCarron said. "That's the natural cycle. It's going to happen."

Dr. Diane Cowan of The Lobster Conservancy in Friendship gave the committee a brief lesson in lobster biology Wednesday, using two live lobsters as props.

Cowan said that catching large lobsters by any means should be banned everywhere, not just in Maine, because the large females that breed offshore lay a lot more eggs, they lay larger eggs, and they travel more as they reproduce, which helps diversify the fishery's gene pool. One five-pound lobster can lay as many eggs" about 35,000 of them at once" as 14 one-pound lobsters, she said.

"It doesn't pass the science test," Cowan said of catching large lobsters, which have been known to grow as large as 40 pounds. "If it doesn't pass the science test, it doesn't pass the long-term economic test."