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Climate change troubling crustacean's condition

Warmer water causing lobsters to shed hard shell earlier, making disease more likely

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Some seafood processors in Cape Breton say storing excess lobster in ocean water holding pens is becoming too risky. Photograph by: Reuters

Members of the Maritime seafood sector say they're looking at making adjustments in the lobster industry as the Atlantic Ocean continues to heat up.

Fishermen and seafood processors say that in recent years, warmer water temperatures have caused lobsters to start shedding their hard shells earlier - a process known as molting - revealing a more vulnerable soft shell lobster that's susceptible to disease.

"Things are changing, and we may not be able to totally control it, but we're going to have to react to it and start planning for it as we go forward," said Osborne Burke, general manager of Victoria Co-operative Fisheries Ltd. in Neil's Harbour, N.S.

"Changes are going to have to come in our industry from various sectors. Right from the fishermen, to the buyers, to processors and how we handle the product."

Burke said some fishermen and harvesters in Nova Scotia are looking at putting in a request to the Department of

Fisheries and Oceans to have next year's lobster season adjusted slightly to avoid the warm summer months.

The Lobster Council of Canada said it's a concern that's echoed across the Maritime provinces and an option also being considered in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.

"A lot of the challenges that we're seeing right now are based on fundamental environmental changes," Geoff Irvine, executive director of the council, said from Moncton, N.B.

"It's changing, in many ways, the typical seasons, the typical behaviour of the lobsters. That has created some challenges within the current seasons."

Boris Worm, a professor of biology at Dalhousie University in Halifax, said global warming trends suggest Maritime water temperatures will continue to increase, but it varies from region to region.

"It's most likely that this will continue to be a problem and a more important problem in the future," said Worm from Halifax.

"We're not in a stationary environment anymore. Things are changing. It will affect us and now we're seeing the signs and it's important to be aware of that."

But while some lobsters in more southern areas are moving northward as temperatures warm, Worm said Maritime lobsters are here to stay.

"Right now, we're close enough to the northern limit of lobster that they're actually doing quite well with the warm water temperatures. We're seeing a very high abundance of lobsters," said Worm.

Some seafood processors in Cape Breton said storing excess lobster in ocean water holding pens is becoming too risky.

Burke said he lost about 22,600 kilograms of lobster this year. Last year, he lost around 6,800, he said.

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