Fish, shellfish inspection bills would affect La.

By JOAN MCKINNEY
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WASHINGTON — Seven bills on federal inspection of fish and shellfish are pending in Congress, and as such, are on the way to possibly having a sweeping effect on Louisianans and coastal states. The program would be at least loosely modeled on the poultry and beef inspection programs designed to replace a spotty inspection program now reaching about 11 percent of seafood processors, all of whom are subject to being monitored.

At a U.S. Senate Agriculture Committee hearing Tuesday, a consumer activist and a fisheries spokesman differed about whether the program is needed — and, if it is needed, who should run it, and who should pay for it.

From the U.S. Agriculture Department, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Commerce Department, Bush administration spokesmen said the administration is studying the bills and has no position. But, if a new fish and shellfish inspection program is created, the industry should pay "fees" to administer it, said James W. Brennan, general counsel of the Department of Commerce's National Oceans and Atmospheric Administration.

Brennan and FDA chief, Dr. Frank E. Young, also argued for something less than full-scale and mandatory government inspections of vessels and seafood processing.

They endorsed having FDA set safety standards, and creating an inspection program which concentrates on "critical points" in the harvesting and processing of seafood. The Commerce Department spokesperson then would expand on its existing inspections program — operated with voluntary industry participation — a program which inspected 500 million pounds of fish last year.

USDA's "vessel-at-a-time" approach at fixed-base and in-process inspection points, Brennan said.

The testimony for "user fees" and for FDA-Commerce Department control was in direct opposition to the chief and FDA-set safety standards.

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FDA's Young questioned how much more inspection is needed. The public may have a "growing perception" of seafood safety, but the perception is largely wrong and should be corrected by education, not legislation, Young said. He cited 1.7 million cases of chicken-borne illnesses a year, compared to 110,000 seafood-related illness cases.

Young and the Commerce Department officials said the fish industry is not well regulated, if people would cook shellfish properly and never eat it raw. The best regulatory program for seafood is still the state-run water quality programs and inspection of contaminated waters and shellfish areas closed, Brennan said.

Young pleaded with the committee not to divert scarce public health funding, to which Mitchell and FDA-Commerce Department officials agreed. Mitchell said he supported a seafood inspection program which was introduced by U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont, a mandatory inspection program, at least in part to take advantage of USDA's inspection staff — 10 times larger than FDA's.

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Fish

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rich fish stocks. Under heavy pressure from U.S. fishermen, haddock on Georges Bank have declined by 76 percent since 1977, cod by 53 percent and yellowtail by 41 percent, according to figures prepared by the Northeast Fisheries Center in Woods Hole, Mass.

This time, there are no foreigners to blame.

"It's quite ironic that the groundfish resource in general is in a much lower state now than it was when there was this haddock that had spawned in 1975 and 1978 - dollars in lost revenue to New England fishermen. Recovery will require years of rigorous management."

The decline has meant billions of dollars in lost revenue to New England fishermen, processors and related industries, said William G. Gordon, who was New England regional director of the National Marine Fisheries Service in the first years after the Magnuson Act. The deviation of the groundfish, under a regulatory system intended to promote conservation and effective fisheries management, was the focus of a four-month inquiry by The Hartford Courant. Figuring prominently in the inquiry was the New England Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional panels established under the Magnuson Act. The inquiry found that:

- None of the council's three groundfish management plans has succeeded in restoring the groundfish stocks or in reversing the decline that began in the early 1980s. The practice or design, however, spurned measures to limit the growth of the fleet or its fishing power.

- At critical junctures, the council failed to heed warnings from marine scientists about intensive fishing - even though the Magnuson Act requires that fishery catch be "based upon the best scientific information available." Notably, the Northeast Fisheries Center, the regional research arm of the National Marine Fisheries Service, reported in 1979 and 1980 that haddock stocks on Georges Bank were depleted in the mid-1980s, if fishing pressure were maintained. By 1983, haddock could be fished for nine months; they were once taken 11 months. Haddock abundance in 1979 and 1978 - populations vital to stabilizing the stocks - were fished out.

- Though the council is central to understanding the devastation of the groundfish stocks, other factors have contributed to their decline. Notable among them has been the strong market for groundfish in the mid- to late 1980s. Though quantities of groundfish landed at New England ports fell steadily from 1983, fishermen continued to receive lucrative prices for them. Because the diminished supplies were still able to support a lucrative fishery, pressure on the groundfish was unrelied.

- The pattern of landings-down, value-up was reversed last year, however. The value of the catch was 25 percent more fresh and frozen fish than they did 12 years ago, in large part because of reports describing seafood's health benefits. Demand increasing must be met by foreign suppliers. In 1987, the Northwest imported a record $2.4 billion in edible fish products. Canada was the principal source.

Appeals for changes in fisheries management have intensified.

Joseph M. Brencelone, executive director of the Cape Ann Vessel Owners Association, which represents 69 fishing vessels, said in a recent interview, "There is no question that we are in a crisis." But New England fishermen are at sea substantially longer than they were 10 years ago and catch fewer commercially important fish. Last year, fishermen spent nearly 65 percent more days fishing than in 1978, but their catch was 25 percent smaller.

New England waters also have become sweeter and more desirable species, such as skates and the predatory spiny dogfish. They are so abundant they probably will have to be fished heavily before groundfish stocks can be restored.

Meanwhile, Americans are eating 25 percent more fresh and frozen fish than was available.

Manuel J. Travers, left, and Thomas Quick measure the mesh in a net to make sure it complies with offshore fishing regulations in Georges Bay, near Cape Cod in Massachusetts.

Overfishing can over future of

By W. JOSEPH CAMPBELL
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South and east of Cape Cod lies a fan-shaped extension of the continental shelf, an underwater responsive of ridges and canyons called Georges Bank. It is one of the most fertile fishing grounds in the world.

On Georges Bank, the warm waters spinning off the Gulf Stream clash with chill currents from the north in a swirling rush that is a source of the bank's riches. For generations, New England fishermen have challenged the winds and shoal waters of Georges to take haddock, Atlantic cod, yellowtail flounder and a host of other fish.

Foreign fleets come, too, most aggressively in the 1960s. Factory vessels from the Soviet Union, Poland, Spain and

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