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Israel trawls commercial fisherman to save declining sea population

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By Zafrir Rinat | Dec. 13, 2014 | 11:20 PM

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The Agriculture Ministry has said it will impose tighter restrictions in 2015 on commercial fishers in Lake Kinneret and the Mediterranean Sea, in an effort to stem the decline in fish populations. The measures, which include reducing the number of fishing permits issued during spawning seasons and making more areas off limits to fishing, come on top of restrictions introduced a number of years ago. The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel welcomed the announcement but said a declaration alone was not enough.

In a letter sent to fishers three weeks ago with information about renewing their licenses for 2015, the ministry said it would be taking additional measures to combat overfishing.

The ministry's fishing department said that in order to allow the replenishment of fishing stocks, it will expand areas in the Mediterranean where fishing is restricted, limit the number of fishing boats and impose catch limits on sport fishers.

Studies citing a decline in the variety of the harvest and the increasing difficulty of fishing in Israel in recent years were cited in the letter.

SPNI officials have met with the fishing department several times in the past two years with the fishing department to argue for heightened efforts to protect fish populations, especially in the Mediterranean.

Environmental groups say most of the damage is done by trawlers, which drag large nets along the sea bed, sweeping up everything in their path.

In a statement, SPNI said the ministry's announcement indicates "good intent but is not binding," adding that it does not specify the duration of the ban on fishing during spawning season, the areas to be closed or, most important, which fishers will be affected. "It is clear that the sector most important to restrict is the net-fishing sector. We expect to see restrictions of at least three months during spawning season, the closing of large areas of rocky shoals and shallow water to net fishing and a daily catch limit of five kilograms for sport fishers. It is especially important that these restrictions be mandatory."