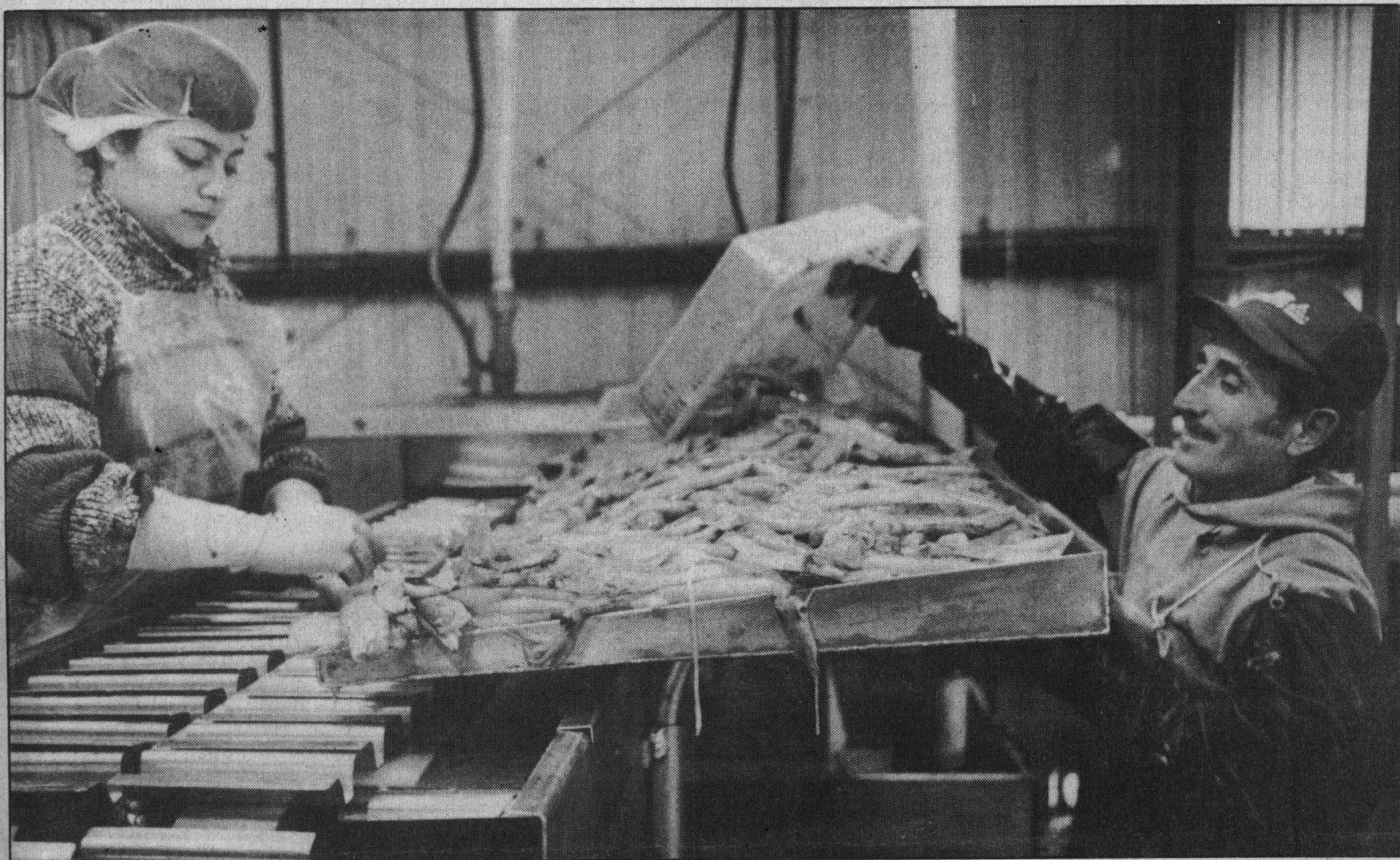


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Squidding method spawns debate



Mike McCollum

Although it started slow, the Squid Machine Corp. in Pajaro had one of its busiest seasons.

By SUSANNA HECKMAN
STAFF WRITER

The squid season is winding down in the Monterey Bay, but a decades-old controversy about a squid-fishing method was kept alive by this year's "iffy" season.

Bob Leos, a marine biologist with the state Department of Fish and Game, said this year's squid season got off to an "absolutely disastrous" start.

That caused some in the fishing industry to worry about the size of the squid population here and to call for a ban on squidding with lights, a practice that some people suspect may interfere with squid spawning.

Squid are drawn to lights like moths, so they can be easily netted at night. But fishing for them with lights was illegal from the late 1950s until 1988, at least in part because the fishing industry itself lobbied for the ban.

Not only did some fishers object to lights because of the concern for the animal's spawning, but also because smaller operations had to compete with the larger lights of the larger, better-financed boats.

In 1988, however, when the light ban was lifted, a few local fishing boats began using lights, and by 1989, Leos said, practically everyone who was fishing for squid in the Monterey Bay was using large banks of lights.

Usually squid begin to show up in the Monterey Bay in April and May, but this year, there

were virtually none until June, normally one of the peak months. Even when they did arrive in June, only a few tons were landed, Leos said.

The fishing industry became alarmed, as squid is the top "crop" to come out of the Monterey Bay. In 1990, fishing boats landed more than 17 million pounds of squid; the next-highest volume was for mackerel, at less than 6 million pounds, followed by anchovy at less than 5 million pounds.

In terms of value, squid is also in the top three. Salmon was the most valuable Monterey Bay fish harvested in 1990, bringing in a total of \$3.1 million. Rock fish brought in \$1.8 million, and squid \$1.4 million.

This summer's season, while unusually slow to start, eventually did pick up and now falls into the category of an average season, Leos said.

"The squid finally came in, and we had a very big year," said Joe Aliotti, of Aliotti Wholesale Fish Packing Co. in Watsonville's cannery district.

Aliotti's was able to employ a full crew of about 40 people processing the squid and other fish that came in, he said. The squid isn't selling too well during the recession, he said, and inventories are growing, which may have an effect on the total market.

In the short term, though, other Watsonville fish processors also had good news to report.

"Everybody was working overtime, working every day, working Saturdays (processing squid)," Joe Cappuccio, president of Del Mar Seafoods Inc., said. "We're tired, but happy."

Del Mar, with a fairly constant work force of 130, had an agreement to share the take from a boat with Squid Machine Inc., in Pajaro. That one boat landed nearly half the total squid catch of the season, Cappuccio said. He also had agreements with three other boats, and processed mackerel and cod as well.

"We got lucky," he said. "We had one of the best seasons ever."

But because of the odd squid season, some fishermen began pressing Assemblyman Sam Farr, D-Carmel, to try to re-establish the ban on squidding with lights in the Monterey Bay. There was suspicion that the light-fishing begun two years ago was now seriously cutting down on the species' population.

Farr called a public meeting Oct. 9 to discuss the issue, and based on a vote of those in attendance, agreed to set the wheels in motion.

After that meeting, things changed, Farr's aid Lee Hulquist said, and the fishing industry didn't appear to be in agreement at all. Farr now thinks there is no legislative answer to the light question. Instead, he believes that the Fish and Game Commission should be given the authority to decide,

Hulquist said.

Leos said scientists like himself in the Department of Fish and Game would like to do further studies on squid and the effect of lights on them, but there is no money for such a study, and fishers balked at the idea of paying higher landing taxes to support one.

Leos said, however, he isn't too concerned about the squid population here, because records stretching back 50 years show that dramatic fluctuations are normal.

"Squid are extremely sensitive to their environment," he said.

This year, for example, they seemed to have migrated north toward Half Moon Bay, perhaps because the water in the Monterey Bay was unusually cold, then suddenly became a little too warm for them. Once fishermen caught on, Leos said, they all migrated north, too, and the catch was normal.

"It wasn't so much a shortage as where they were," he said.

Mackerel landings were also off this year compared to some previous years, but Leos said the comparison may be affected by the "boom years" for the warmth-loving mackerel — the El Niño years of the early 1980s.

Some fishing boats head to Southern California at this time of the year, and others begin looking to the lucrative herring season near San Francisco during the winter, Leos said.