

# H.B773: An Act Establishing a Fisheries Conservation Grant Program



Massachusetts currently [boasts](#) the second-highest number of seafood-industry-supported jobs in the country after California and remains one of the top states for commercial seafood landings and sales. In fact, New Bedford's port has had the highest value of seafood catch of any port in the nation [for the past 21 consecutive years](#). As Massachusetts aims to grow its flourishing seafood industry further, more fishers will take to state waters to meet consumer demands for lobsters, bluefin tuna, shellfish, and more. This increased use of the ocean will assuredly grow our blue economy, but continuing to use unsustainable fishing practices puts marine species that call these waters home—like the North Atlantic right whale—at risk.

## Threats Entanglement Poses to Marine Species

Traditional fishing gear uses vertical ropes and can entangle non-target species like sea turtles and whales, resulting in trauma and even death. Once entangled, these animals face severe injuries, difficulties feeding, and energy loss as a result of dragging heavy gear. [Research](#) published by the New England Aquarium in 2022 found that entanglements are the leading cause of serious injury and death for critically endangered North Atlantic right whales and that [86 percent](#) of identified right whales have been entangled one or more times in fishing gear.

Fishers, conservationists, and researchers are working together to develop “on-demand” fishing gear as a solution that can protect marine species while supporting the state’s flourishing fishing industry. To effectively scale this technology, the state must eliminate some of the cost burden associated with the research, development, and deployment of the gear.

## On-Demand Gear Offers an Alternative

On-demand fishing gear is an important tool that can help protect marine wildlife and allow the fishing industry to thrive. When deploying on-demand technology, fishers can remove static vertical buoy lines in the water while still using their current gear.

### TYPES OF ON-DEMAND GEAR

**Pop-up buoy:** Instead of running traditional vertical lines from the water’s surface to the bottom, the line is coiled in a cage. The fishing vessel will send a signal to the buoy and as the buoy or cage top releases, the fishing line will uncoil to the surface, enabling retrieval.

**Inflatable lift bags:** The vertical line is also coiled inside of the cage connected to a string of traps at the ocean’s bottom. As the fishing vessel sends a signal to the cage, the lift bag inflates and fishers can retrieve the cage and pots connected to it.

**Buoyant spool:** Vertical line is wrapped around a buoyant spool connected to a weight at the bottom of the ocean. As the fishing vessel sends a signal below the surface, the line will unwind from the bottom. The spool then rises to the surface where fishers can retrieve it and the gear.

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It does not remove the use of rope in fishing gear completely but instead minimizes the amount of rope used, thereby reducing entanglement risks for marine species. Currently, this gear can cost upwards of \$8,000 per unit, rendering it inaccessible to [most fisheries](#).

**An Act Establishing a Fisheries Conservation Grant Program (H.B773)**, filed by Representative Josh Cutler and Representative Patrick Joseph Kearney, seeks to address this issue by creating a new Division of Marine Fisheries grant program to provide funding assistance for the research, development, and acquisition of commercial fishing gear aimed at reducing the lethal and sub-lethal impacts of fishing gear on protected species. The bill restricts this funding to permitted state and federal fisheries, institutions of higher learning, and research organizations. By eliminating a portion of the cost burden associated with the transition to on-demand gear, Massachusetts can better assist ongoing efforts to save species like the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale and help ensure the responsible growth of the state's blue economy.



Figure 1: Image by [NOAA Fisheries](#)