

Lure of black market drives big increase in fish poaching

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JEROME REILLY

A HUGE black market in coarse fish like perch and bream, which are dinner-time favourites in Eastern Europe, has led to a huge increase in illegal fishing and poaching on Irish rivers and lakes.

But while coarse fish are being targetted by Eastern Europeans — with a spate of court cases and tackle seizures by fisheries officers — there is also a major problem of salmon poaching, mostly committed by Irish criminals.

A number of cases are due to come before the courts in the next few months, and earlier this month, two Lithuanian brothers, Roman and Vytautas Maslauskas, received

finest totalling €500 at Killaloe District Court and had their driving licences disqualified after they were convicted for illegal fishing of perch on Lough Derg in an action taken by Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI).

The agency is involved in a round of consultation before changes in the law aimed at improving safeguards and detection rates and increasing fines and penalties. Current penalties are not big enough to deter illegal fishing, according to legitimate anglers.

The two Lithuanians were fishing from a boat and had hi-tech gear including an electronic fish finder. When they were stopped, there was 32 perch on board, and two vehi-

cles to be used to transport the catch were seized.

Judge John Durkan told the accused that Ireland's inland fisheries were among the most valuable in Europe and needed to be protected. "Those who abuse them must face serious consequences."

A major survey to calculate the value of angling to the tourist industry is under way but it's clear the business is worth millions every year.

In Donegal, salmon poaching remains a problem, sometimes accompanied by threats and intimidation of fisheries staff. The wife of a man convicted of net fishing on the Clonmany river made a slitting gesture across her throat to a fisheries officer as she left

the court with her husband. She was subsequently convicted of an offence and fined €350.

In the Cavan area last year, there were 23 separate seizures of fishing equipment and dinghies as well as illegally caught fish including pike, eel, bream and tench. All 23 cases involved individuals with names clearly identifiable as Eastern European.

Minister Fergus O'Dowd, IFI CEO Dr Ciaran Byrne and Denis Maher, Principal Officer in the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, have met with interested parties in a public consultation exercise recently. The public consultation is ongoing until June 28.