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The Future of America's First Fishery

Improving Management of the New England Groundfishery

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Introduction and summary

Before Christopher Columbus’s grandparents were born, early European explorers from the Vikings to the Basques had already discovered an untold wealth of fish in the corner of the northwest Atlantic now known as the Gulf of Maine. Here the proximity of seemingly limitless stocks of cod that could be readily salted, dried, and transported back across the ocean helped establish communities that laid the groundwork for our modern-day society.

Today there is no more iconic profession in eastern New England than fishing. From the “Ocean State” of Rhode Island, to the Sacred Cod that has hung in the Massachusetts House of Representatives chamber since 1784, to the lobster that epitomizes coastal Maine, fish are integral to New England’s culture and economy.

Today this fishery—which was once so robust, legend says, that fishermen could haul in a healthy catch just by dropping a weighted basket over the side of a skiff—is struggling to recover from decades of overfishing.

Coastal communities throughout New England rely on fishing as a fundamental source of employment, revenue, and cultural identity. And interest in this fishery expands beyond the shores from Eastport, Maine, to Point Judith, Rhode Island. As consumers become ever more educated about their seafood—trying to balance factors such as local sourcing, environmental impacts of different fishing gear, mercury and heavy metal content, and overall sustainability—reestablishing one of the world’s most productive fisheries is of interest to more people than ever before.

This report begins by summarizing management of the northeast multispecies fishery, which is more commonly known as the New England groundfishery and whose participants are referred to as groundfishermen.¹ (These terms will be used throughout this report.) The fishery is comprised of 15 bottom-dwelling species of fish such as haddock, flounders, and the iconic cod, which in some cases are further divided into distinct populations known as “stocks.”² Atlantic cod, for example, is managed as Gulf of Maine cod, Georges Bank cod, and Georges Bank cod east.

The document details a sea change that occurred when the groundfishery shifted to a management system known as sector management, or simply “sectors,” at the beginning of the 2010 fishing year.³ It then provides an overview of looming challenges facing the fishery including the state of fisheries science, how to monitor and oversee the fishery in a cost-effective manner, and how to prevent socioeconomic upheaval in traditional fishing communities during the transition to a new management system intended to end the recent history of overfishing in the region.

The report concludes with recommendations for improving both the management of the fishery and the relationships among fishery stakeholders, which are critical to the fishery’s future.

Today’s management in the groundfishery: Sectors

Sector management, implemented at the start of the 2010 fishing year, is arguably the most drastic change the fishery has undergone since passage of the nation’s first overarching fisheries management law, the Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976. At its core, sector management is a form of a so-called “catch share” system. In such systems, regulators set a limit on the overall amount of fish the industry is allowed to catch for the year, which is then partitioned among participating fishermen so each receives a percentage of the total.

Catch share systems in general, and sector management in particular, are highly controversial. Supporters of catch share management point out that by assuring each fisherman that he will have access to a secure percentage of fish annually, the system gives fishermen a long-term stake in the health of the resource. Leaving more fish in the water today will directly benefit the fishermen tomorrow. The idea is that this takes away the perverse incentive to catch every fish as quickly as possible before someone else does.

Yet many fishermen, particularly those who feel initial allocations are not fairly assigned, oppose catch shares on the belief that the systems often lead to consolidation as fishermen accumulate fishing quotas in fewer hands to take advantage of economies of scale. They contend this reduces the number of boats on the water, costing jobs, and threatening communities.

Sector management has just completed its second year of operation. This report will provide a brief overview of year one and compare it to operations under the

previous management system. It will also address common criticisms of sector management and delve into fundamental challenges facing the industry including the increased cost of monitoring operations and a sudden unexpected downturn in the scientific assessment of the health of a key fish stock: Gulf of Maine cod.

A key element of this review will be defining—in admittedly broad, sweeping terms—the positions of various stakeholder groups, including fishermen (both those who support and oppose the system), regulators, politicians, scientists, and environmental groups. By understanding the perspectives of all user groups, we can help to illuminate a path forward, clear the hurdles of the past, and find our way to a mutually beneficial future.

Sector management represents the best hope for the future of this historic fishery. The system has its limitations, and improvements are undoubtedly necessary. Yet there is near-universal distaste for a return to the old system of management—a system where fishing was controlled by limiting the number of days per year fishermen were allowed to fish—and no other viable alternative has emerged, even from those who suggest sector management will result in hyperconsolidation of the fishery into a few hands, financially supported either by corporate entities or environmental groups and foundations.

Ultimately, sector management represents the best hope for the future of this historic fishery.

Troubled relationships in the fishery need to be fixed

The relationships among fishery regulators, scientists, industry members, and environmental groups are more contentious in New England than in any other region of the country. Every one of the groups involved has played a role in the deterioration of these relationships, which in turn has led to the lack of trust among stakeholders in the region.

Beginning in the late 1980s, regulators imposed increasingly strict limits on this historic fishery designed to allow depleted fish populations to recover. Congress bolstered these efforts by enhancing the conservation requirements in law.

Fishermen and their political allies often resisted these efforts, disparaging the science that suggested catch reductions were necessary.

Scientists struggled with imperfect data and the uncertainty of attempting to quantify and understand a resource consisting of a dozen different species that are mostly invisible, highly mobile, and spread across tens of thousands of square miles.

Environmentalists, worried that fish stocks were approaching a tipping point beyond which they might never recover, pushed back against industry efforts to weaken restrictions.

And regulators became ensnared in an escalating maelstrom of conflicting arguments, legal mandates, and increasingly convoluted regulations born of attempts to broker a compromise that could appease a disparate set of stakeholders.

As we attempt to rebuild depleted fish populations, these human relationships now labor in a toxic soup that has poisoned dialogue, expunged trust, and made rational progress all but impossible to achieve. The fundamental source of future success in the groundfishery must start with improved relationships among stakeholder groups. No management structure stands a chance without some degree of buy-in and cooperation of all participants.

Recommendations for improving stakeholder relationships and management

These recommendations will be explained in greater detail in the report, but here are the steps necessary to improve relationships and management strategies for the groundfishery. These will ensure the system can continue to build on the improvements made in its first two years, particularly in light of budget constraints and belt-tightening taking place across the federal government as well as new challenges that have emerged involving scientific review of fisheries and how to collect data that will be integral to the future success. These recommendations will also help overhaul the relationships among the disparate stakeholder groups so rational dialogue can once more take the place of bombastic rhetoric.

- New personnel hired to fill leadership positions within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration—the government agency with jurisdiction over our nation’s fisheries—in the northeast region must prioritize changing the perception of the agency among fishermen and other stakeholders.
- Every stakeholder group, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, scientists, fishermen, politicians, and environmental nongovernmental organizations, must take steps to improve communication and make a greater effort to understand the perspective of those who disagree with them.

- All fishery stakeholders must collaborate to improve fishery data collection and analysis to provide more accurate assessments of fish populations and reduce uncertainty that may artificially reduce total allowable catches.
- The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Northeast Fisheries Science Center must work with fishermen and external organizations to reduce the cost of fishery monitoring, including by developing methods to implement electronic monitoring systems as a replacement or supplement for human fishery observers.
- The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the New England fishery management council must take steps to analyze the validity of consolidation concerns in the sector management system and address them as necessary, including through exploration and development of permit banks to ensure a geographically diverse group of fishermen retain access to the fishery.

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