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NOAA Proposes Interim Northeast Groundfish Rules

NOAA is proposing measures to govern Northeast groundfish fisheries beginning May 1, 2009, the start of the new fishing year. The measures strive to reduce overfishing, continue rebuilding of groundfish stocks, and provide more options for fishing businesses trying to mitigate the economic effects of the measures while the New England Fishery Management Council finalizes a major revision to the fishery management plan.

The content of the interim rule is based, to the extent practicable, on measures recommended to NOAA by the council. NOAA expand the recommendations to ensure protection for the stocks most in need, such as yellowtail flounder and winter flounder in southern New England, and northern windowpane flounder. The measures of the interim rule will be in place until the council completes and NOAA implements new measures for Northeast groundfish fishery management, tentatively expected by May 1, 2010.

Measures proposed for the commercial groundfish fishery include expansion of the area of the Gulf of Maine where each day fished is counted as two days, and a prohibition on keeping ocean pout, northern windowpane and southern New England winter flounder. Groundfish vessels using gillnet and trawl gear would also be restricted from fishing in an area of southern New England waters to further protect depleted winter flounder. The reduction in days-at-sea already scheduled to go into place May 1, 2009, would also be retained.

For the recreational groundfish fishery, proposed measures include a party/charter boat trip limit of 10 cod per angler, prohibition on retention of southern New England winter flounder, and extension of the current Gulf of Maine cod closure by two weeks for both private recreational and party/charter vessels.

Several measures are being proposed under the interim action to take advantage of healthier stocks and provide vessels with more business options. The existing program that allows commercial fishermen to fish for haddock in waters on the eastern portion of Georges Bank would be continued. The limit on the amount of white hake that can be retained per day would be increased. The minimum legal size for haddock would be decreased. Some measures would be revised to provide more flexibility in transferring or leasing most limited access permits.

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