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**New England fishing season to open with higher catch limits
and more access for small-vessel fishermen**

When the new fishing year kicks off on May 1, groundfish fishermen will have more opportunity to fish in Northeast waters, small-vessel owners will get a boost through permit banks, and stocks will continue on the path to rebuilding.

“Fishing is vital to our coastal communities, their economies, and the men and women who work on the water to bring healthy seafood to our tables,” U.S Commerce Secretary Gary Locke said. “Starting May 1, we will raise catch limits for 12 important groundfish stocks.”

“The increase in catch limits is a result of the rebuilding process underway and is one of many steps we are taking to grow economic opportunity in diverse, working waterfronts that support fishing jobs in the Northeast,” said Jane Lubchenco, Ph.D., under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA Administrator.

This year’s higher catch limits will affect 12 groundfish stocks. These stocks include: Georges Bank cod, Gulf of Maine cod, Georges Bank yellowtail flounder, Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic yellowtail flounder, Cape Cod/Gulf of Maine yellowtail flounder, American plaice, witch flounder, Georges Bank winter flounder, Southern New England winter flounder, redfish, white hake, halibut.

Beginning last year, much of the Northeast fishery moved voluntarily to a sector management system, which gives fishermen a specific allotment of fish to catch when they choose and in more areas. The system allows fishermen to more effectively target healthy fish stocks such as haddock. In previous years, the entire fishery was governed through a days-at-sea plan, where fishermen could only fish a set number of days and in certain areas. Now, fishermen have the option of participating in the sectors or the days-at-sea program.

Beginning May 1, 19 sectors, including two new sectors, will be operational. Approximately 10 percent more fishermen, representing 836 permits, signed up for sectors this year compared to fishing year 2010. The current number of fishermen signed on to sectors for fishing year 2011 represents approximately 99 percent of the fishing history associated with the Northeast multispecies fishery.

Catch limit increases for 11 of the stocks are due to successful rebuilding efforts, while the Georges Bank yellowtail flounder increase comes as a result of rebuilding and negotiations with Canada thanks to Congressional modifications to existing U.S. law. As a result of those negotiations, U.S. fishermen will receive an additional 2.5 million pounds, a 44 percent increase in catch allocation than the level previously agreed to for 2011.

“The preliminary information from this past fishing year shows promising signs; however even with the higher catch limits in this new fishing year we understand these are still difficult times for many in the industry,” said Eric Schwaab, assistant NOAA administrator for NOAA’s Fisheries Service. “At NOAA, we continue to be committed to helping all fishermen during this period of transition.”

In addition to higher catch limits, other measures will go into effect on May 1:

- NOAA approved four new permit bank sectors that provide small-scale fishermen from coastal communities with a source of more affordable catch allocation or fishing days. The first permit bank sector will be operational at the beginning of the fishing year.
- NOAA approved a two-year delay, until 2013, in the requirement for the fishing industry to cover the costs of dockside monitoring. The delay will reduce operating costs for the industry while it adjusts to the new management system. The Administration's 2012 budget requests funding to cover both dockside and at-sea monitoring costs.
- NOAA approved 16 requests to exempt fishermen from regulations regarding the days-at-sea management plan if they participate in sectors.
- Due to concerns expressed by fishermen and researchers, a small area in the southern Gulf of Maine will be closed to groundfishing from April through June. The short-term closure, timed during spawning season, is intended to boost the recovery of the Gulf of Maine cod stock.
- Fishermen who practice a traditional form of fishing by using a hand-held line to catch groundfish will be allowed to fish closer to shore in areas previously closed to them, and will be exempted from the requirement to pay for dockside monitoring.

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