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NOAA approves catch limit increases and other measures to provide greater flexibility to the sustainable Atlantic sea scallop fishery

NOAA has approved a suite of management measures for the Atlantic sea scallop fishery, developed by the New England Fishery Management Council with input from the fishing industry, which will increase fishing opportunities for fishermen. Among the measures being put into place, as a result of effective science-based management, are increased catch limits for the remainder of this fishing year and in 2012.

“These increases are possible because the Atlantic sea scallop resource is healthy and the fishery is operating sustainably,” said Patricia Kurkul, regional administrator, Northeast Region, NOAA Fisheries Service. “In 2010, the fishery had a catch target of 47 million pounds. We were able to raise 2011 catch limits to 51 million pounds and increase them again in 2012 to 54 million pounds.”

Other measures increase operating efficiencies and flexibility for some scallop vessels with an individual fishing quota by increasing trip limits, improving the current quota transfer program, and providing the ability to carryover some unused quota into the next fishing year. However, to reduce the risk of exceeding overall annual catch limits, NOAA disapproved one measure that would have allocated additional pounds of scallops to these vessels if the larger scallop fleet exceeded its annual allocation, but did not ultimately trigger its accountability measure.

Another change makes the current area closures to protect fish habitat consistent between groundfish and scallop regulations, which allows an increase in fishing access for scallop vessels in two of the previously closed areas while protecting vulnerable seabed habitats from the adverse effects of fishing.

Also approved were several measures to enhance opportunities for scallop fishermen and scientists to work cooperatively and partner in research. NOAA is allowing a slightly larger portion of the annual scallop catch to be sold to cover the cost of this research to gather more information on scallop biology and habitat. Scallop vessels involved in research will also be exempt from some fishing regulations. The grant process associated with this cooperative research effort is being streamlined to allow for multi-year awards for federally funded research projects.

In addition to ensuring scallop fishermen are able to harvest their entire allocation of scallops, this action will provide needed protections for rebuilding yellowtail flounder, a bottom dwelling species caught by fishermen along with scallops in some areas. Because scallop vessels catch yellowtail flounder when fishing for scallops, they receive an annual allocation of yellowtail flounder. If the yellowtail catch is exceeded, NOAA will close areas where high catches of yellowtail have historically occurred for a portion of the next fishing year.

To provide protections to threatened and endangered sea turtles, NOAA is limiting scallop fishing effort in portions of the Mid-Atlantic during June through October, when sea turtles and scallop fishing activities typically tend to overlap.

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