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NOAA Announces New Northeast Groundfish Management Measures

NOAA today announced new measures intended to end overfishing and continue the rebuilding of Northeast groundfish such as cod and flounder. The approved measures, which will be effective May 1, establish new catch limits and also include a major change in how the fishery will be managed.

These strong and innovative management measures were developed by the New England Fishery Management Council, with NOAA support.

For the first time, there will be a cap on the amount of all groundfish of any species that are permitted to be caught. In addition, there will be measures to mitigate if the catch limits are exceeded. These measures provide some of the strongest safeguards to date for recovering groundfish stocks, the majority of which are overfished, and are required to meet the mandates of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. With these measures in place, overfishing will end and the groundfish stocks should begin to rebuild.

In addition to the new caps, these measures will fundamentally change the way this fishery will be managed. Fishing vessels may now fish with others as a group, or "sector." Sectors, which are voluntary for fishing vessels, are formed each year and given a portion of the total available groundfish catch based on the combined fishing history of their member vessels. About half of the vessels, representing about 98 percent of the groundfish landings in recent years, that were eligible to join a sector have done so. If they don't opt into a sector, fishermen will continue to fish, but must comply with strict limits on the number of fishing days, trip limits for some species, and seasonal and area closures.

Fishermen who participate in a fishing sector have more control over where and how they want to fish in order to target healthy fish stocks and avoid the stocks in the worst condition. Sector vessels are exempt from many area and gear restrictions, but must agree to stop fishing once the sector catches its allotment of fish. Both sector- and non-sector vessels can also increase that allotment by leasing and trading shares of catch or fishing days.

Over the past several weeks, NOAA Administrator Dr. Jane Lubchenco, NOAA Assistant Administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service Eric Schwaab, and other senior NOAA officials have met with fishermen and community leaders from around the Northeast regarding the changes coming to the groundfish industry. Together with regional congressional leaders and other elected officials, they have committed to work to take advantage of scientifically sound flexibility within the law, adaptive opportunities, and economic assistance to help fishermen and fishing communities adjust to these changes.

"Going forward we will make a concerted effort to monitor the effects of the new measures and to make improvements as quickly as possible," said Schwaab. He noted that there is new information on the condition of skate stocks, an alternative fishery for many participants in the groundfish fishery, and that there will be new information on the condition of pollock stocks this summer. "If these stocks are improving—and we do not know that yet—we will work to put that information into action, which could mean an increase in the allowable catch for both stocks without damaging rebuilding," he said.

Also this week, Schwaab sent a letter to the New England Fishery Management Council, pledging his support in continuing to work closely with the Council in making adjustments to

catch limits or allowable fishing practices as stock assessment work, new gear research and other applied science provide additional information.

“Fishermen are understandably apprehensive about the changes, not only because they mean significant catch cuts, but also because for many it means doing business in a completely new way,” said Patricia Kurkul, NOAA’s northeast fisheries regional administrator. “Taking these actions is critical to the long-term health of the fish and the fishing businesses that rely on them. We have seen some hard-won and positive improvements in stocks in recent years, and we believe these measures help ensure the future health of the fish and the fishery.”

Also included in today’s announcement is NOAA’s commitment to work with the council on issues related to groundfish fleet consolidation and on a pilot program for a gillnet haddock fishery using specialized gear to limit unwanted catch of other species.

However, to protect the most vulnerable stocks, no commercial groundfish vessel will be allowed to land windowpane flounder, ocean pout, wolffish, or southern New England winter flounder. There are also some new requirements to limit the recreational fishery impact on overfished and recovering stocks, including Gulf of Maine cod, and expanded reporting and monitoring programs to better track the commercial fishery catch.

During FY2009 and FY2010, NOAA and Congress have committed approximately \$47.2 million to the northeast groundfish fishery to support start-up of sectors and other provisions of this action, to conduct at-sea research with the industry focused on developing more selective gear for this fishery, and to develop permit banks that may provide additional fishing opportunities to small-scale participants in the groundfish fishery .

Some of the measures announced today are intended to provide more ways for businesses to use their allocations of days or shares. It will now be easier for vessels that do not participate in sectors to transfer or lease days-at-sea, and trading of annual catch entitlements among sectors is also allowed. Also, a qualified vessel will now be allowed to hold a groundfish and scallop limited access permit, which could result in higher profitability and lower costs compared to operating two separate vessels.

NOAA is currently discussing with the National Academy of Sciences the possibility of an analysis of the rebuilding times for overfished stocks. The current law requires these timeframes to be as quick as possible, but no more than 10 years unless the biology of the stock, environmental conditions or international management measures to which the U.S. is a party dictate otherwise.

Schwaab also said that NOAA is committed to finding more ways for the groundfish fishery to target stocks that can withstand more harvest. Continued cooperative research with the industry is a key part of this effort. In the past two years, NOAA’s Northeast Cooperative Research Program has funded \$13 million in such projects, including \$2.5 million in awards recently announced for eight projects involving more than two dozen partners and a study fleet of more than 25 trawl vessels.

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