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NOAA Endorses Innovative Management of Pacific Coast Groundfish

NOAA's Fisheries Service today approved a Pacific Fishery Management Council proposal that for the first time will make a major shift in how certain West Coast fish harvests are managed, one that can benefit both fish and fishermen and lead to economic efficiencies that are difficult to obtain under traditional management schemes.

The new approach, known as a catch-shares system, will do away with the conventional practice of setting a fleet-wide, numerical quota of how many fish can sustainably be caught and then letting fishermen compete with each other to catch as much of that quota as possible before the fishery is closed or the quota is reduced. The new system has the support of the trawl fishing industry and was developed by the Pacific Fishery Management Council, which works with the agency in producing fishery management plans for the West Coast

Fishery managers have argued for decades that the traditional, fleet-wide approach creates incentives for fishermen to fish as hard and as fast as possible, in spite of dangerous weather, grueling hours and strained equipment, because any fish left in the water can be harvested by other fishermen. Moreover, under the current system of management, trip limits can change during the year, making it harder for fishermen to plan their business.

Catch shares, by contrast, is a straightforward concept of dividing the total amount of an overall allowable catch or quota in a fishery into shares controlled by individual fishermen. Those shares can be caught whenever the fisherman wants, ideally more efficiently and at more profitable marketing times. The current proposal would be a first step in this new management approach.

"Catch shares can stop the race for fishermen to get out on the water and catch as many fish as fast as they can until a quota is reached," said Will Stelle, Jr., NOAA Fisheries Service Northwest regional administrator. "Under a catch-share system, fishermen can better plan their season, reduce overfishing and bycatch, and fish during safer weather.

"And, if a fisherman wants to attend his daughter's wedding, he can do so," Stelle added. "He doesn't have to worry that his competition will take his fish. That's no small consolation for one of the hardest-working segments of the American economy."

NOAA will make two formal changes to an existing management plan that governs West Coast trawl groundfish harvests. The goal, Stelle said, is to increase individual fishermen's accountability, fully harvest the quota the trawl fishermen are granted, increase the economic and biological stability in the fishery, and sustain fishing jobs and fishing communities.

The two changes -- known as Amendments 20 and 21 -- to the existing Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan will formally apply catch shares as a method of managing the fishery. The Pacific groundfish trawl fishery, which includes such popular species as sole, sablefish and Pacific whiting, was worth about \$40 million dollars last year to fishing communities from Bellingham, Wash., to Morro Bay, Calif.

Amendment 20, known as the "trawl rationalization program," will establish individual fishing quotas for the shore-based fleet and for fishing cooperatives representing the at-sea

trawl fleets. The program is aimed at increasing fishermen's incomes, reducing environmental impacts and making individuals accountable for their catch and bycatch.

Amendment 21 works in parallel by allocating the catch of groundfish between trawl fishermen and other, non-trawl sectors of the fishery. These allocations would improve management under the rationalization program by streamlining its administration, providing stability to the fishery and reducing halibut bycatch.

If a final rule is approved by the Secretary of Commerce later this summer, the catch-shares program will go into effect at the beginning of 2011.

See the Web at <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Groundfish-Halibut/Groundfish-Fishery-Management/Trawl-Program/index.cfm> for more information on the West Coast trawl catch share program.

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