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NOAA Sends Catch Shares Applications to West Coast Fishermen

Applicants must return forms by Nov. 1 to be considered for first phase in new program

NOAA's Fisheries Service has mailed applications to almost 240 trawl fishermen and processors on the West Coast to invite them into what will be arguably the most important change in West Coast trawl fisheries management in a generation.

The forms, due Nov. 1, are a crucial step for fishermen to participate in a catch-shares program, in which individual fishermen will be granted access to a specified share of the valuable West Coast bottomfish trawl harvest.

Starting Jan 1, the new catch shares system will replace the conventional practice of setting a fleet-wide quota of how many fish can be caught and then letting fishermen compete with each other to catch as much of that quota as possible before the fishery is closed. The catch shares system, by contrast, divides the total amount of an overall allowable catch or quota each year into shares controlled by individual fishermen. Those annual shares can be caught whenever the fisherman wants, ideally more efficiently, in safer weather and at more profitable marketing times.

"This ambitious and exciting new fisheries program can benefit both fish and fishermen," said Will Stelle, northwest regional administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "The program can lead to economic efficiencies that are difficult to obtain under traditional management, while sustaining healthy fish stocks."

The West Coast trawl fishery, which includes such popular species as sole, sablefish and Pacific whiting, was worth about \$40 million in dockside value last year to fishing communities that span the coast from Bellingham, Wash., to Morro Bay, Calif.

Each application already contains the recipient's historic catch information as compiled by NOAA's Fisheries Service. An applicant must complete and sign the form and return it to the agency by Nov. 1 to be considered for an initial quota share in the program. Applicants can correct any information they think is erroneous. Once NOAA Fisheries issues the catch-share permits later this year, there is an appeal process if applicants feel mistakes have been made. The forms cover a broad range of fishing categories from individual fishermen and at-sea processing vessels to shore-side processors and catcher-processor vessels.

The agency held workshops in coastal fishing communities to familiarize fishermen and processors with the program. The agency told fishermen it was imperative that they return the application forms by the Nov. 1 deadline or they will not receive an initial issuance of a quota or permit for the catch-shares program.

The catch-shares 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.

Fishermen can get help and further information at www.nwr.noaa.gov. Fishermen who believe they are eligible for the program but who haven't received an application form can obtain blank forms from the same web site.

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