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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
February 28, 2011

NOAA Proposes Measures to Increase Groundfish and Scallop Fishing Opportunities

NOAA today proposed new measures for the 2011 groundfishing year that give fishermen greater opportunity to fish in Northeast waters, assist small vessel owners, and continue important stock rebuilding.

The rule, called Framework 45, is based on recommendations by the New England Fishery Management Council and is open for comment March 3.

“As we prepare to enter a new fishing year, NOAA is working with the council and the fishing industry to increase fishing on healthy stocks and address economic challenges faced by fishing communities,” said Eric Schwaab, assistant NOAA administrator for NOAA’s Fisheries Service. “At the same time, we are continuing programs to rebuild groundfish stocks for the long-term benefits they provide.”

Two key measures being proposed include extending the rebuilding period for Georges Bank yellowtail flounder, by two years to 2016, and a 2.5 million pound yellowtail flounder catch limit increase for U.S. fishermen. The increase, which was recommended by U.S. and Canadian fishery managers earlier this month, would represent a 44 percent increase over what was initially agreed to for this jointly managed stock for the 2011 fishing year, and an 18 percent increase over 2010 levels.

Catch limits for 2011 were set last year for 20 groundfish stocks. The measures announced today propose changes to limits for five stocks. If all the changes are approved, catch limits will increase over the 2010 limits for 12 stocks, decrease for 3 stocks and stay the same for the remaining 5. Some of the largest increases would be for Southern New England/Mid-Atlantic yellowtail flounder, witch flounder and Southern New England winter flounder.

Another measure in Framework 45 will help small boat fishermen who practice a traditional form of fishing using a hand-held line to catch small amounts of groundfish. These fishermen would be allowed to fish in areas closer to shore when they are seasonally closed to most other groundfishing vessels. This would help these fishermen whose smaller vessels cannot move into waters farther from shore to catch groundfish.

Scallop fishermen would also benefit from a proposed measure that would lift a ban on some scallop vessels operating in part of the Great South Channel on Georges Bank during the spring. The ban was originally intended to protect spawning yellowtail flounder. This protection is now provided by strong limits on how much yellowtail flounder can be caught by sea scallop vessels.

To assist with the transition to sector fisheries management in the area, the measures proposed today include a council recommended temporary delay in the shifting of the costs of catch monitoring, which is currently paid by NOAA, to fishing vessels. Under the proposal, industry would have two more years to prepare for covering these costs, beginning in 2013.

Another provision would close an area in the southern Gulf of Maine off to groundfishing in April and June to protect spawning cod. Commercial and recreational fishermen, the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries and scientists from the University of New Hampshire recommended the closure to boost the recovery of the Gulf of Maine cod stock.

Comments must be received by March 18, 2011. Electronic public comments can be submitted via the Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>; or faxed to (978) 281-9135, Attn: Douglas Christel or submitted by mail to Patricia A. Kurkul, Regional Administrator, National Marine Fisheries Service, 55 Great Republic Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930. Mark the outside of the envelope, "Comments on the Proposed Rule for NE Multispecies Framework Adjustment 45."

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