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NOAA increases northeast skate quota for fishermen by 17 million pounds

New science shows increase in skate population

NOAA has taken emergency action to increase the amount of skate that fishermen can land this year from 31 million to 48 million pounds, based on new scientific information showing an increase in the overall skate population. The 56-percent quota increase takes effect immediately, and remains in effect through the end of the current fishing season which ends on April 30, 2012.

"We recognize that these are difficult economic times for many fishermen and are working hard to increase fishing opportunity wherever possible," said Eric Schwaab, assistant NOAA administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "The quota increase will boost revenues for many fishermen and related fishing businesses, while maintaining our responsibility to important conservation objectives."

At its June meeting, the New England Fishery Management Council reviewed updated 2008-2010 trawl survey data from the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, which shows significant improvements in the overall skate population. They also looked at NOAA-funded research on the survival of discarded skates, conducted by the New England Aquarium and University of New England, which found that fewer skates die after they are thrown overboard than previously assumed. Based this, the council asked NOAA to implement emergency measures to increase the skate quota.

The bulk of the skate catch occurs incidentally in the groundfish, monkfish and scallop fisheries. Skate wings are typically kept and sold as food. Skates are also harvested for bait for the American lobster fishery.

The quota for the skate wing fishery, which receives 66.5 percent of the annual allocation, will increase from 20 million pounds to 32 million pounds for the current fishing year ending in April 2012. The skate bait fishery, which is allocated the remaining 33.5 percent, will see a 6 million pound increase in their original allocation.

Increasing the quota and maintaining skate possession limits at current levels should extend fishing opportunities throughout the entire fishing year, and allow fishermen to retain more skates when both price and demand for skate wings are better later in the season.

Possession limits are unchanged. Seven species of skate are managed as part of the skate complex including barndoor, thorny, smooth, winter, little, clearnose and rosette. However, possession of barndoor, thorny, and smooth skates remains prohibited because stocks are still rebuilding from previously depleted levels.

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