

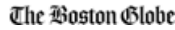


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PETER BAKER AND ROBERT JOHNSTON

# A better fishing system



By Peter Baker and Robert Johnston  
May 18, 2009

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NEW ENGLAND'S fisheries feed our region's cash flow and provide dinner for our tables. But by most measures the current management system of this vital industry has been a failure, and hasn't adequately protected the marine ecosystem nor promoted a profitable fishing industry. Now, with the encouragement of the public during a pending regulatory comment period, the federal government has an opportunity to adopt a more sensible approach to managing these great fisheries.

Every fishing vessel that leaves a New England seaport faces difficult but important choices between conserving the resource - so there will be fish to catch in the future - and earning a decent living. But the current system of managing fishing stocks by regulating a boat's "days at sea" falls short of both goals.

Because existing rules strictly limit the number of days that each vessel can spend at sea, fishermen are encouraged to harvest as many fish as possible, as quickly as possible. Anything that increases fishing time is discouraged because it wastes precious days at sea. Also, boats often catch more fish than they legally can keep, and must discard the dead fish.

At its June 23-25 meeting, the New England Fishery Management Council will vote on a far better system, which would divide the fisheries for species such as cod into "sectors." Self-organized fishermen cooperatives would be given a renewable privilege to catch a set tonnage of each groundfish species per year. Fishermen in each cooperative would decide when and how to catch their allotment and ensure that harvest limits are not exceeded. The National Marine Fisheries Service will accept public comments on the plan, formally called Amendment 16, until June 8.

For a fishery to operate effectively, it's important to know how much fish is caught and how much is discarded during the fishing season. The new plan calls for monitoring both, with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration allocating \$10 million to develop the New England system.

To date, not all fishing boats have committed to joining one of the proposed sectors, so they would still be managed under the old "days at sea" system as part of a "common pool." In order for sectors to succeed, monitoring and "hard" catch limits - that is, without wiggle room - must be implemented for the common pool fishermen, too. Otherwise, their catch excesses could mean fewer fish for other vessels.

A recent report details many of the economic and ecological ways in which

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sectors could improve the New England fisheries. It shows the benefits of cooperative fishery management, including better stewardship of the resource - keeping catch levels within sustainable limits and reducing discards - while also fostering increased profits and fresher, more carefully treated fish.

Such advantages could be realized here in New England. For example, fishing vessels could reduce their effort by roughly 60 percent under sectors, and still catch the same amount of fish, so fishing costs would decrease while revenues would increase. A 2007 study by the Gulf of Maine Research Institute shows that a proposed sector in Port Clyde, Maine, could increase fishing revenues between 44 and 79 percent compared with the current situation.

In fact, two Cape Cod sectors - the Georges Bank Cod Hook Sector and Georges Bank Cod Fixed-Gear Sector - have already shown the same types of benefits. These include fewer fish being discarded, increased revenues per vessel, and increased harvest efficiency. A 2003 estimate by the New England Fisheries Management Council indicates that rebuilding stocks could have a cumulative net benefit of up to \$500 million.

Now it's up to fishery managers to create regulations that will make sectors successful. It's time to get rid of the days-at-sea management system and replace it with an accountable system that protects the marine ecosystem, allows fish stocks to rebuild, and increases revenues. This will once again allow fishermen to make a profit fishing, while also ensuring that future generations will be able to enjoy delicious native fish at dinner.

*Peter Baker directs the Pew Environment Group's campaign to "End Overfishing in New England." Robert Johnston is a resource economist with Clark University and co-author of the report "One Last Chance: The Economic Case for a New Approach to Fisheries Management in New England." ■*

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