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## Editorials


### Proposed groundfish rules offer fresh start

But regulators should use care to make sure they are fairly applied and effective.

June 22, 2009

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In the debates over commercial groundfish rules that have confounded regulators, fishermen and conservationists, there has been one constant theme. Days at sea: Nobody really likes them.

The attempt to reduce over-fishing by limiting the number of days that each fishing boat can go out every year has forced decisions by financially strapped fishermen that have had perverse and negative effects on restoring the fishery.

Forced to maximize the days when they are allowed to go out, a fisherman might take in more than his daily allowable catch one day, throw the excess overboard, and steam out again the next.

Conservationists don't like it because it simply is not working. Some groundfish stocks are not rebounding to healthy levels in New England. The time has come to try something new.

And that's exactly what's happening. This week the New England Fisheries Management Council will be meeting in Portland to vote on proposed changes to the management plan for the fishery that would replace days at sea in most cases with a quota system managed by regional cooperatives or sectors.

As with any system of complicated regulation, there are a number of small details that will have a huge impact on success or failure. When deciding those issues, the council should make decisions that create incentives for fishermen to join sectors and give them the tools that they need to succeed.

That means setting hard catch limits that would apply to boats within and outside sectors equally, and paying for monitoring regardless of how a boat is regulated. As popular as the idea of sectors is, there will still be some fishermen who will be regulated under the old system. There are some who believe that fishing should stay an individual business and will resist joining in an agreement that would make them responsible for the activities of others. Some fishermen may not be able to find a sector to join.

These boats will remain in what will be known as the common pool, and be regulated under current rules. The two systems will not work together unless limits are consistently applied.

Fishermen in a sector will be working under a seasonal quota that they share. When the group reaches the limit, everyone stops fishing.

But problems could occur if fishermen operating under days-at-sea rules are not held to that limit. They could continue to use the current wasteful practice of throwing away fish one day and fishing the next, preventing a rebound of the fish stocks. That could result in a lower quota for the sector the next year, despite their adherence to the rules.

The better approach is to apply the same limits to all the boats in a region, whether they are in a sector or not.

And to make sure that the best science is used to set quotas, it's important that the regulators monitor how much fish is caught as well as kept. The proposed rules now only call for monitoring of the sectors, but not of the common pool.

That doesn't make sense. The point of the rule is to restore fish populations and the information is just as important, regardless of which regulatory scheme was involved.

New England fisherman have a chance for a new start. The regulators should give it the best chance for success.

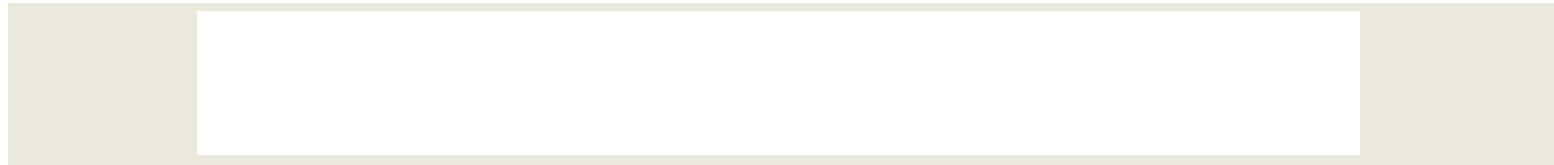
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