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Industry fishes for new rules

Much-maligned limits on days at sea, which critics say did little good for fish or fishermen, are likely to be replaced next year.

By JOHN RICHARDSON, Staff Writer

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Doug Jones/Staff Photographer

Tim Butland weighs a hake trucked down last week from Port Clyde to the Portland Fish Exchange. With declining fish populations, Maine fishermen have dealt with various regulations to limit their catches, but a new approach may provide real relief next year.

The new commercial fishing season that began May 1 amounts to more – or less – of the same. After 15 years of reductions in how often fishermen are allowed to work, the latest rules leave a typical boat with just 39 fishing days during the next 12 months.

This season, however, may be the last of its kind. New England's 400-year-old commercial fishery is on the verge of reinventing itself in hopes that a new way of doing business can save the industry while rebuilding populations of cod, haddock, flounder and other groundfish.

The management philosophy that has relied on keeping fishing boats away from the fish is likely to be replaced by a more direct approach. If approved as expected when fishery managers gather next month in Portland, groups of fishermen – called sectors – will each be given an annual share of the region's overall catch quota, which they can fish for whenever they want.

It's a huge shift, especially for a fiercely independent industry. And there are intense mixed feelings about the future.

"Fishermen are fishermen because they are independent people," said Bert Jongerden, manager of the Portland Fish Exchange. "It's a big step and if it falls flat on its face, it's going to be tough."

Most everyone involved in the business now agrees the current days-at-sea system, which began in 1994, has fallen short. The effective limit for many Maine boats was almost reduced to 20 fishing days this year before the 39-day compromise was announced. Yet some fish populations still are not on track to be rebuilt by 2014, the deadline set in federal law.

The current system also encourages waste – forcing fishermen to discard catches of unintended species, for example – as well as risky decisions about when to keep fishing instead of steaming home, according to both fishermen and economists.

"It doesn't control harvest very effectively (and) it really puts the screws on the fishermen," said Robert J. Johnston, a resource economist at Clark University. "We can continue with the way things are going in New England and we know where that's gotten us ... or we can follow a future that offers more sustainable and profitable fishing."

The proposed new system holds more promise for both fish and fishermen, said Johnston, co-author of a new Pew Environmental Group report titled "One Last Chance: The Economic Case for a New Approach to Fisheries Management in New England."

The new management is intended to overcome the incentive for fishermen to catch as much as they can as fast as they can by giving fishermen ownership of – and responsibility for – a share of the fish in the ocean.

Under an 841-page set of proposed rules known as Amendment 16, fishermen will be able to opt out of the days-at-sea rules by joining a sector – typically a group of 20 or 30 boats that might share a region or fishing style.

Each sector will get a percentage of the overall annual catch limit for each individual fish species. Sectors that go over their limits would face penalties, such as early shutdowns and reduced limits in future years.



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Doug Jones/Staff Photographer

At the Portland Fish Exchange, Tim Butland, Cody Small, Dan Murphy and Jim Hancock, left to right, sort flounder that were shipped down from Port Clyde.

AMENDMENT 16, STARTS 2010

FISHERMEN can opt out of the days-at-sea rules by joining a sector – a group of boats sharing a region or fishing style.

EACH SECTOR will be allowed to take a percentage of the overall annual catch limit for each individual fish species.

HOW ANNUAL CATCHES will be divided up is one of many details that must still be worked out.

DATES AND DEADLINES

NEW ENGLAND'S fishing industry and fishery managers are considering a historic change from the current conservation restrictions to a new approach that gives groups of fishermen shares of the annual catch.

THE PROPOSAL, called Amendment 16, can be seen at the New England Fishery Management Council Web site (www.nefmc.org).

MAY 28: Public hearing on Amendment 16, from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the Holiday Inn by the Bay in Portland.

JUNE 8: Written comments on the plan are due at the National Marine Fisheries Service Northeast Regional Office, 55 Great Republic Drive, Gloucester, Mass. 01930.

JUNE 23 TO 25: New England Fishery Management Council meets in Portland to debate and vote on the final plan. The meeting will take place at the Holiday Inn by the Bay.

MAY 1, 2010: If approved, the new management system takes effect.

Boats also would have to pay for on-board observers and dockside monitors to make sure they stay within the limits, although the proposed federal budget includes some funding to help.

Just how the annual catch limits will be divided up – whether by catch histories alone or a combination of factors – and how intensive and costly the monitoring will be are among the details that have to be worked out next month.

Scientists and conservation advocates say sector management will free fishermen to catch fish when prices are best and to sell fish they now must throw back, two ways they will increase their incomes more than enough to pay for new monitoring requirements.

"That's definitely happened in other fisheries that have gone to the catch-share approach," said...

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