



New Rules Reduce Overfishing, But With Some Concessions To Fishermen

by Alan Pollock

CHATHAM — In what some are calling an appropriate compromise, federal fisheries regulators have announced rules that seek to rebuild depleted fish stocks while providing some concessions to cash-strapped fishermen.

Last week, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) unveiled interim rules governing the groundfish fishery which reduce fishing pressure on the stocks while continuing the switch to a newer, sector-based management approach.

The new rules take effect May 1, and aim to get the industry closer to ending overfishing by 2010, as required by federal law. The package of rules is designed to balance healthy fishing communities and sustainable fisheries, NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco said in a press release.

“It builds a solid bridge to a larger, long-term solution for managing the fishery through catch shares, which will help restore the ecosystem and the economic health of the fishing communities. The system will give fishermen more of a stake in how the fishery is managed, Lubchenco said.

Currently, regulations seek to curb overfishing by regulating the number of days fishermen are allowed to fish, a system critics say has failed both the fishermen and the fish stocks. A previous version of the rules, announced in January, drew fire from industry representatives and conservationists alike for relying too heavily on days-at-sea restrictions.

The rules approved last week decrease the total allowable catch for cod, and enlarge the fishing area around the Great South Channel where each fishing day is counted as two days in an effort to further protect winter flounder. The rules prohibit fishermen from keeping that species, along with northern windowpane flounder and ocean pout. Witch flounder landings are reduced to 1,000 pounds per day-at-sea, or 5,000 pounds per trip.

“These rules will make it harder for me to earn a living on the water, at least in the short term,” Chatham fisherman John Our said.

But the rules allow fishermen to target healthy stocks like Georges Bank haddock, and expand the area where hook-and-line fishermen have special access to haddock, provided that they agree to bring more federal observers on their trips. The minimum legal size for haddock was also decreased by one inch, allowing more keepers.

The rules also give fishermen more flexibility by allowing the roll-over of unused bycatch allocations during the first three quarters of the fishing year; they also make it easier for groundfish permits and leased days-at-sea to be transferred.

Peter Taylor, the board president of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, said he is pleased with the compromise.

"Everyone knew that the interim rule was going to hurt. But it seems that after listening to the response from fishermen and the public, the new leadership at NOAA has published a final interim rule that's a huge improvement over what they had originally proposed," he said.

Nonetheless, fisheries regulators admit that the interim rules are likely to cause more than 15 percent drop in Massachusetts commercial fishing revenues, or nearly \$10 million. That impact is about half as severe as experts say it would have been under the rules proposed in January.

The regulations mark a significant step toward sector management, in which a portion of the total allowable catch of a species is allocated to a particular gear type. Members of that sector are given the flexibility to manage that catch as they see fit, with increased accountability. Building on the success of the hook fishermen, gillnetters succeeded in winning their own sector, and now more than a dozen other fishing groups are proposing their own sectors. In the meantime, other commercial fishermen will keep operating under the days-at-sea rules.

"These fishermen will be in a common pool, and it is imperative that hard catch limits be put in place for them in 2010, as well as for sectors," said Peter Baker, manager of the Pew Environment Group's New England Fisheries campaign. Baker said the final interim rules are evidence that NOAA is committed to working with the New England Fishery Management Council, which seeks to implement the sector system at the start of the 2010 fishing season, one year from now.

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