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## My view: Catch-based sectors: Common ground for NOAA and area fishermen



**My View**  
Jim Balsiger

When I met with Gloucester Mayor Carolyn Kirk earlier this year, she asked if it was possible for NOAA and the northeast fishing industry to ever find what she called "common ground."

Vito Giacalone, a representative of the fishing industry with the Northeast Seafood Coalition, answered the mayor's question for me that day: Sector management was our common ground.

His view was reinforced on April 6 when NOAA released the interim groundfish rule, emphasizing how important it would be for the New England Fishery Management Council to put in place a robust, well-monitored, inclusive sector-management system by the start of the 2010 fishing season.

In recent years, groundfishermen from Cape Cod have developed the first two sectors, for Georges Bank cod, made up of small groups of fishermen who operate day boats. One sector is for fixed gear and the other for hook. They worked with NOAA's Fisheries Service to receive a percentage of the total allowable catch for the Georges Bank cod stock based on their historical catch. The sectors agree to catch no more than their "catch share." Each sector then decides how to divide up the share among its members.

One of several advantages of this system is that if fishermen catch a large part of their share one day and very little the next, they don't have to throw fish overboard to meet catch limits based on trips or days at sea. The catch share also gives fishermen a powerful incentive to conserve the cod stock. A percentage of a stock or catch share in a thriving fishery is far more valuable than one in a depleted fishery.

When I spoke recently with Eric Hesse, a fisherman since 1984 and a member of the Georges Bank hook sector, he said the sector has allowed him and other members to plan their businesses in a way they never could under the days-at-sea system. "We have a quota we can count on," Hesse said. "Getting out from under the 'days at sea' and trip limits, we feel is good for the stocks and good for fishing."

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The Northeast is not alone in moving toward catch-share programs. Twelve catch-share programs are used to manage fisheries across the country, accounting for 20 percent of the total value of U.S. fisheries and more are being developed. The programs include individual transferable quotas, as well as sectors and cooperatives. Recent research shows that catch-share programs have a better track record than other management systems for rebuilding and sustaining fish stocks. This translates into more stable fishing jobs and fishing communities.

However, catch share programs are not a silver bullet. They don't suddenly increase the number of fish in the ocean. Sectors must include monitoring and reporting to ensure that those involved take only their share and that the stock is being fished sustainably for the long term.

The New England Fishery Management Council is considering adding 17 proposed sectors from Rhode Island to Maine that could include a majority of the region's groundfish boats. For sectors to succeed, it's important that as many fishermen as possible work within this voluntary system. In my discussions with fishermen about sectors, they express concerns about allocations, whether fishermen who are accustomed to competing will cooperate within sectors, and how fishermen will handle added costs for monitoring and reporting. NOAA has recognized these added costs by recently pledging some \$16 million to assist with development of monitoring for sectors as well as cooperative research on groundfish stocks.

NOAA and the New England Fishery Management Council will hold informational sessions this summer and fall to try to answer these and other questions about sectors for members of the fishing industry. I encourage those in the industry to attend these forums and learn as much as possible about the proposed system. The way for any new system to work is for there to be strong involvement at every level by those in the industry. Please watch for upcoming informational sessions run by NOAA's Northeast Regional Office. I also welcome your comments. Please send them to me at [public.concerns.groundfish@noaa.gov](mailto:public.concerns.groundfish@noaa.gov).

Dr. Jim Balsiger is the acting national administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service, based in Silver Spring, Md.

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