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Fisheries Rule Overhaul

By BDN Staff
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Commercial fisheries regulators, meeting in Portland this week, have an opportunity to update rules to protect both fish stocks and fishermen.

This is a chance to move away from the failed system of restricting fishing by limiting how often fishermen can go to sea in favor of a management plan that lets fishermen decide when and how much to catch.

For years, regulators have reduced how often fishermen can fish in the hopes that groundfish, such as cod and haddock, will become more plentiful. Although fishermen are now limited to as few as 20 days of fishing per year in some areas off New England, few fish species have recovered.

A new management approach is clearly needed. Regulators and fishermen have been working for more than a year on new rules that would manage ocean catches using a sector system. Simply put, the waters off New England would be divided into 17 sectors. Each sector would be allocated a portion of the total allowable catch, or quota, for each fish species. Fishermen within each sector would decide how to divide the catch. Once a quota is reached, fishing for that species will stop, giving fishermen an incentive to spread their fishing days over time rather than rushing to catch as much fish as quickly as possible. Similar systems have been in use elsewhere in the country for years and are being tried on a limited basis in New England.

The Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association was issued a sector three years ago, the first Atlantic coast group to try the new system. "The sector model gives fishermen on Martha's Vineyard an opportunity to preserve the resource and maintain their own viable business," Tom Dempsey, an analyst with the association told the Vineyard Gazette. "Under the current system that is getting harder and harder."

The question for the New England Fisheries Management Council this week is how to design and manage the sector system and, as important, what to do with fishermen who don't join a sector. There is a proposal to allow such fishermen to continue working under the current days-at-sea rules. The continued decline of fish stocks despite increasingly stringent limits on fishing time shows that such a dual approach will fail.

Members of the New England Council must not lose focus on the goals of a sector system — to preserve fish stocks while returning fishermen to a more stable and predictable schedule — as they determine what that system will look like.

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