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# Fishermen: Catch limits go too far

By **Doug Fraser**  
dfraser@capecodonline.com  
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Chatham fishermen worry that bureaucratic red tape will keep them from catching the fish they say will allow them to survive another year.

Usually, scientific studies showing fish population declines drive harsher regulations. But this year, new rules due to be implemented in May slash the catch of skates and pollock even though the scientists have information that those populations may actually be more robust than previously believed.

In the case of dogfish, the stock is booming and has even been declared "rebuilt" by one major regulatory body, but strict quotas remain in place because of a decade-old numbers dispute between the federal fisheries service and the regional fishery management councils.

"If we can't find a way to get higher skate and dogfish quota, and to get more pollock ... we'll see fishing businesses go under in 2010," said Thomas Dempsey, a policy analyst with the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association.

With an estimated 25- to 50-percent drop expected this coming fishing year in what can be landed in cod, haddock, flounders and other groundfish, fishermen were relying more on these other fish to take up the slack, Dempsey said.

Dogfish, a small coastal shark, are marketed in Europe and Asia for fish and chips and other products. Ten years ago, the New England and Mid-Atlantic fishery management councils, which jointly draw up plans for dogfish, disagreed with the National Marine Fisheries Service over the size of a fully rebuilt stock. NMFS set a target that many feel is unrealistic and believe would result in a stock of more than a million metric tons of dogfish. The stock has grown from 158,000 metric tons in 1968 to 558,000 metric tons in 2009.

Last year, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, which oversees fishing in state waters along the East Coast, declared dogfish to be rebuilt and upped the quota from 12 million pounds to 15 million pounds this year. While an improvement, it's a long way from the 50 million pounds caught in 1996.

NMFS, which manages dogfish in federal waters, did increase its quota from 3 million pounds to 12 million last year, but kept the daily limit per boat low, at 3,000 pounds. Officials at the federal agency believe the population is only a little over half way back to sustainable levels.

Dempsey said NMFS has set an unrealistic goal. Dogfish, he said, are eating up other species and impeding efforts to rebuild stocks of cod and other fish. The Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association wants NMFS to allow independent scientists to review the federal agency's rebuilding target and consider the impact of that level of dogfish on other species.

"(The quota) should be about 40 to 50 million pounds to bring dogs down so other (fish stocks) can rebuild," Chatham fisherman John Our said.

Our is also concerned that fishery managers have cut pollock catches by 65 percent for the coming fishing year.

Last year, Chatham boats that caught pollock averaged around 100,000 pounds apiece. Our said his own quota for this year was cut to just 18 percent of what he caught last year. Worse, he said pollock are abundant and hard to avoid because they swim with cod and other species.

But the science that determined the drastic pollock catch reduction is under review, and fishermen believe new data will show a large pollock stock. Scientists are meeting in Woods Hole this week to evaluate pollock numbers and possibly move to a better, more accurate way of assessing that population.

### What Cape fishermen want

- Dogfish: An independent scientific review of the population size the National Marine Fisheries Service believes constitutes a healthy stock, which is roughly double what is in the ocean right now. Even at their current population size, sharks are holding back the recovery of other species such as cod, they claim.
- Skates: NMFS to consider new scientific data showing a higher population of skates than previously believed. Fishermen want NMFS to replace current daily catch limits of 1,900 pounds per boat with the previous 10,000-pound limit.
- Pollock: A fast-track NMFS evaluation of scientific data from research vessels in U.S. and Canadian waters that fishermen believe will show there are more pollock and will mitigate the 65-percent cut in harvest levels for the coming year.

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"It's too early to draw any conclusions," said Thomas Nies, a fisheries analyst with the New England council who is participating in this week's pollock summit. Even if a re-examination of the data did give a brighter picture, any new quota regulations would likely not be put in place this year, Nies said.

A similar situation exists for skates, flattened, winged fish closely related to sharks. Skate wings are sold to ethnic markets and fancy restaurants in New York, and their bodies are sold as lobster bait. Along with New Bedford, and Port Judith, R.I., Chatham is considered one of the top skate catching ports. New regulations have cut the daily allowable catch per boat from 10,000 pounds to just 1,900.

But those new rules were based on data that is three years old. When new scientific surveys showed that the skate population could actually be much higher, the New England council, which formulated the more stringent plan, wrote NMFS suggesting a postponement. But any remedy could take six months or longer, according to Chris Kellogg, deputy director of the New England council.

The Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association estimates that some local vessels could suffer a 50-percent drop in revenues from the new skate restrictions alone.

"We anticipate going down (to Washington, D.C.,) in March to push these three issues as fixable problems that will mean the difference in fishing businesses being viable in 2010," Dempsey said of adjusting the restrictions on dogfish, pollock and skate.

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