

Fishermen seek improvements in catch-share system

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Peter Cabral, right, captain of the Terra Nova, and crewman Dustin Curley make repairs to the vessel yesterday in Provincetown Harbor.

Cape Cod Times/Merrily Lunsford

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PROVINCETOWN — Aboard the Terra Nova, Peter Cabral struggled yesterday with the repairs to the brake on the fishing boat's big black winch.

But at least he was dealing with something that elbow grease and sweat would resolve.

What has been much harder to deal with are regulations that have put him, and much of the Provincetown fleet, out of the groundfishing business.

"I sold my (federal groundfish) permit. When they cut back by 52 percent (on scallop fishing days) in March, I sold my (federal) scallop permit," said Cabral, who has rigged his boat to dredge for sea clams in state waters instead.

It hasn't been just the Provincetown fleet that has suffered under regulations that slashed the number of fishing days to 40 or less for most fishermen in order to rebuild stocks of cod, haddock and flounder.

As regulations became increasingly hard to live by, the New England Fishery Management Council passed an amendment to its groundfish management plan in June, allowing fishermen to form groups known as sectors. Each fisherman in a sector was allotted a share of the annual groundfish quota, based on his or her recent fishing history.

The sector would manage the total quota represented by all the shares of its combined membership by making rules that would ensure they didn't go over their quota amount, including providing their own monitoring — and even enforcement.

In return, they were freed from many of the more hated management measures. By knowing the amount they are entitled to catch each year, fishermen don't have to compete to catch fish before the quota runs out.

In theory, they cooperate with each other, with scientists and managers to manage fish in a sustainable way, avoiding wasteful discarding of unwanted fish, as well as overfishing, while being able to get the best price for what they do catch.

That's in a perfect world, said some members of a panel assembled yesterday by the Pew Environment Group to publicize their study of existing catch share programs that grant a portion of the quota to fishermen.

In a telephone press briefing, Linda Behnken, executive director of the Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association, said it was critical to consider how a fishery should look from the beginning.

In the Alaskan halibut and sablefish longline fishery she works in, Behnken said, fishermen decided early on that they wanted a mix of different sized vessels, and they wanted owner-operators, not corporations, to get shares of the quota.

They also wanted to guard against consolidation of the shares into a small group of monied fishermen, who would buy up shares from others.

And they wanted to make sure that fishing communities were not losing all their quota shares to out-of-town

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buyers.

Many of those protections were not included in the amendment that the New England council passed in June, but will be handled in subsequent additions, said Paul Parker, who helped spearhead the drive for New England's first two sector allocations, both based in Chatham.

Parker has helped create the Cape Cod Fisheries Trust, which buys up quota shares and rents them out to Cape fishermen to make sure local ports remain active fishing villages even as the price of shares climbs and some get sold out of town.

Share allocation has been a concern in some Pacific fisheries, where "absentee owners" have leased out their shares at high cost to others, said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations.

He said that, once part of a quota is allocated, it becomes a property right with value.

Behnken said the Alaskan halibut and sablefish program has been positive, that communities retained their quota and their fleet remained a mix of small and large vessels.

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