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## Fishery reform vote expected

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Seahound fishing boat captain Peter Taylor of Chatham next to his boat in Wychmere Harbor, Harwich Port Monday. Taylor says fish stocks have come back since the early 1990's and bemoans new regulations.

Dewitt photo 4/29/02

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By **Doug Fraser**  
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June 24, 2009

Today, at a meeting in Portland, Maine, the New England Fisheries Management Council will likely embark on a historic rewriting of the way our region's traditional fish stocks will be managed.

Although it has a clunky moniker — "sector allocation" — its guiding principle is simple: Give groups of fishermen a percentage of the annual fish quota and let them manage it for themselves.

It's an approach to New England fishery management with strong Cape roots. Although 15 sectors representing fishermen from Maine to Rhode Island have asked for approval under the new plan, two are already in place on the Cape.

The Georges Bank Cod Hook Sector was approved in 2005 and the Fixed Gear Sector in 2007. Both were conceived by the Chatham-based Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association. John Pappalardo, a fishery analyst at the association, currently serves as chairman of the New England council.

The traditional management style, used since the regional councils were formed by Congress in 1976, has been to cut back on fishing effort. By decreasing the efficiency of nets and other gear to catch fish, and limiting the daily catch and number of fishing days, it was hoped that landings would decline and more fish stocks would survive to reproduce, rebuilding the population to healthy levels.

But fishermen continue to catch unsustainable amounts of fish, even after the number of fishing days dropped to less than 50 a year, and the daily catch limit on many species sank to the point where fishermen felt lucky if they broke even. Plus, massive amounts of fish, mostly dead, were being discarded when fishermen exceeded their limits.

After 14 years of increasingly harsh regulations, fishery managers decided to change the way they were doing business.

Versions of sector allocation are in use elsewhere — most notably on the West Coast and in Alaska — but the success of the Cape experience helped convince managers it could work here, too.

In the Cape's fixed-gear and hook sectors, member fishermen are no longer held to 1,000 pounds of cod per day, as other fishermen are. Instead, they are only obligated to catch no more than their annual quota.

If Chatham fisherman John Our, for instance, catches 2,000 pounds of cod in his nets in one day, he doesn't have to throw half of it back.

"A fisherman can't control how much he catches. When you catch fish, you catch fish," Our said. "Fishermen don't want to throw things away. They want to sell it."

For Chatham fisherman Peter Taylor, joining the hook sector saved his business.

Taylor estimated that fuel and bait for each trip cost \$3,000. Cod can fetch anywhere from \$1 to \$2 a pound. "It

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costs so much to go out hook fishing. You can't go out and target 1,000 pounds of cod," he said.

But that freedom comes with new responsibilities. Sector members face losing their right to fish for some violations and must agree to strict monitoring to convince federal agencies that they are not discarding a lot of fish and are not catching more than their quota.

Our, for instance, has cameras on his boat that switch on automatically when his nets are being hauled. They record what is caught and what is thrown back. In addition, sector members are tracked by satellite and must report their catches to the sector manager within 24 hours of landing.

"I really didn't think I'd like it in the beginning, but I don't mind," he said. "I don't see how they can allow us to fish without monitoring it."

The New England council, comprising fishermen, environmentalists, fishing industry representatives, and state and federal fishery officials, is expected to decide today whether to approve the sector approach or continue with the current practice of limiting catches and fishing days.

The Cape hook association wants the council to incorporate the same level of accountability into the new sectors and require non-sector fishermen to be bound by the same monitoring to end the wasteful discarding of fish at sea. The association also is asking for rules to keep individuals or corporations from acquiring large shares of the quota.

If the sector plan is approved, fishermen would have until Sept. 1 to join one of the 17 sectors. Anyone who doesn't sign up has to comply with the current regulatory system. Taylor and Our expressed their concern that if too many people opt not to join a sector, overfishing would continue to plague fish stock recovery.

"A lot of people are on the fence (whether to join a sector)," Taylor said.


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