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Fisheries council faces major decision

By **STU TOLLEY**
June 23, 2009

After years of hard work, a monumental vote next week could finally put fish and fishermen on a path toward a brighter future.

Cape Cod is currently home to an innovative fishing system that allows groups of fishermen to manage their annual catch cooperatively as part of a "Sector." On Wednesday, the governing body for New England's fisheries will weigh whether to expand that system to a majority of the region's fleet fishing for cod, haddock, flounder and other groundfish stocks, in recognition of the tremendous success of the Cape Cod-based Georges Bank sectors.

The decision of the New England Fisheries Management Council has the potential to turn around the region's failing fisheries, increasing profits for fishermen and local fishing communities, and rebuilding New England's once abundant groundfish stocks. But there's also a significant risk that the success of the new system could be undermined if the council doesn't approve a fair and equitable system that holds all fishermen accountable for their catch.

Sectors have provided the independent fishermen of Cape Cod, working as part of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, a chance to transition to a more profitable and sustainable fishery. In exchange for exemption from ineffective restrictions on fishing opportunities, local fishermen fish under strictly enforced annual catch limits while voluntarily accepting additional catch monitoring and accountability for the fish they take from the ocean.

The problem ahead is that not all fishermen will join a Sector under the new rules. Those who do not could have the opportunity to continue with destructive fishing practices, undermining the new system. The pending amendment won't have a chance to be successful unless all groundfish vessels are held to conservative catch limits and adhere to rigorous monitoring and reporting standards.

Without a comprehensive catch-monitoring program, it's impossible to track the fishery as it approaches annual catch limits and, therefore, nearly impossible to end overfishing. A successful monitoring system must accurately quantify the number of fish that are landed as well as the number discarded (thrown overboard at sea).

Such fishing limits and reporting requirements should apply to the entire fishery regardless of whether fishermen choose to join a Sector. Otherwise, our fish stocks and the entire fishery will be jeopardized. We hope that when the council decides on the new management system in Portland, Maine, all of the council members will support a progressive management plan that can finally rebuild fish stocks and protect fishermen at the same time.

Stu Tolley is a member of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association and president of the Georges Bank Fixed Gear Sector.

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