

**Groundfish Regulators Consider Radical Departure from Days-at-Sea System****Groundfish Regulators Consider Radical Departure from Days-at-Sea System** [← Back](#)*June 24, 2009 Reported By: Tom Porter*

In March 2010, the New England groundfishing industry is expected to move in a radical new direction. Commercial fishermen in the northeast are expected to have the option of moving from their current regulatory system based on "days-at-sea" to a new quota-based system, known as "sector management." Fishermen would be regulated by the number of fish they catch instead.



Before that can happen though, a number of big wrinkles have to be ironed out. A major step in preparing for sector management is underway at the moment in Portland, where a two-day meeting of the New England Fishery Management Council got underway this morning.

"Groundfish has been managed under days-at-sea since 1995 and if this action moves forward, and we're in the process of doing that now, it'll be managed through what is essentially a quota-managed program, meaning that fishermen will get allocated a certain number of pounds of every fish species," says Council spokeswoman Pat Fiorelli.

Sectors will allow fishermen to form community-based harvesting cooperatives, in which they'll work together to set rules for how they fish while staying within a scientifically-based limit.

For mid-coast Maine fisherman Gary Libby, the change can't come soon enough. He was one of several hundred commercial fishermen gathered at Portland's Holiday Inn to witness the council's deliberations and make their own voices heard.

"I hope we can form sectors so we can start working on catch shares through our community sector we're going to have in Port Clyde, which is going to give us a lot more freedom to go out and select where we fish and how we fish, instead of being mandated to be working under a time clock where we have to race out and race in," Libby says.

Libby says the contrast between the amount of fish in the sea now, and back in the late 70s when he started fishing, is startling.

"Well, I fished a lot closer to shore and caught a lot more fish than I do now. I'd catch as many fish in a day as I can in a week now."

The days-at-sea system was introduced in an effort to preserve dwindling fish stocks by imposing time limits on fishermen.

Peter Baker from the Pew Environmental Group - a major advocate of the sector-based system - says days-at-sea has been an abject failure.

"We've gone from about 1,400 active fishermen in 1995 to about 600 a day or less, so there's less than half as many fishermen," Baker says. "The state of Maine has seen whole-scale losses of fishing communities, where all of Downeast is completely out of the groundfish fishery and 13 of the 19 stocks are either over-fished or have overfishing occurring. Some of our prime stock, like the George's Bank cod stock is only at 10 percent of what scientists think it should be at."

A major problem with days-at-sea, says Pat Fiorelli of the New England Fishery Management Council, is that fishermen are only allowed to catch a certain quantity of fish per day. "The daily limit was also accompanied by a poundage limit. So if there was, for example, a 300-pound limit a day, the fisherman could catch 300 pounds in one day, and would have to wait until the next to catch an additional 300 pounds, and so forth, until their days ran out."

"Right now on George's Bank there's a thousand pound daily trip limit, so anything more than that we'd have to throw away; long-line fishermen can't make a limit on a thousand pounds a day," says Peter Taylor, who's been fishing for cod, flounder and haddock in New England waters since 1972.

He's also President of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association. Five years ago Taylor and his colleagues obtained special permission to manage their own cod-fishing, using the new model of sector management.

"It has allowed me actually to stay in business," Taylor says. "I'd have been out of business five years ago without sector management," he says.

The Cape Cod model is trumpeted by many as an example of what's wrong with old system and what's right about the new plan.

Not all fishermen, though, are in favor of sector management.

"It is baloney," says Bill Doughty, who's been a commercial fisherman since 1964. He's originally from Maine but now operates two boats out of Gloucester, Massachusetts. "Can't be regulated," he says. "You can regulate days-at-sea. It's been a system we've had, it's the only system that works in the world."

The move to sector management would not be a compulsory one, says Peter Baker, from the Pew Environmental Group.

Those like Bill Doughty who want to remain under days-at-sea would be free to do so, as part of a so-called "common pool."

A major hurdle to be cleared during this meeting, though, is how these programs will be monitored. The federal government, says Baker, has allocated \$34 million over the last two years to try and address that issue.

"Ultimately, what you need is a monitoring program that looks at how much fish is coming out of the water, not how much time fishermen are trying to catch fish," Baker says. "And once we make that shift to where we're actually in real time, or as close to real time as possible, figuring out what's being caught, then we can start managing to annual limits instead of just trying to manage people's behavior."

The Council meeting is due to wrap up Thursday afternoon -- although, says Baker, given the current rate of progress, that could go on well into the evening.

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