

Proponents defend 'catch share' system

'Capitalistic bubble' blamed as fleet still shrinking

By **Michael McCord**

news@seacoastonline.com

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Earlier this week, a long awaited economic study on trends in the New England commercial fishing industry was released and it included the first look at the new "catch share" management system initiated in May 2010.

The report by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center revealed the complex and often indecipherable variables that face fishermen seeking to make a living and regulators who by law are charged with protecting and rebuilding groundfish stocks.

The 97-page report showed the continued decline of the New England fishing fleet with 17 percent fewer active vessels in 2010 than in 2007, 10 percent fewer vessel affiliations (groups of vessels connected by common owners), 48 percent fewer groundfish trips, and fewer crew positions, days, and trips. On the other hand, the remaining vessels and vessel affiliations have increased their share of gross nominal revenues with 20 percent of active groundfish vessels securing 80 percent of those revenues, up from 68 percent in 2007.

While the "catch share" system is under attack politically and by a number of New England fishermen, especially smaller operators (see Seacoast Sunday, Oct. 16), proponents of the system believe it can succeed in the long run and that fishermen are beginning to make the system work to their benefit.

Michael Leary of Hampton Falls, who fishes out of Gloucester, Mass., was once a member of the defunct Portsmouth Fisherman's Cooperative. "When the fleet started to shrink, it became cost-prohibitive," said Leary, a boat owner since 1986, about the demise of the Portsmouth cooperative.

Leary was a member of the New England Fisheries Management Council from 2004 to 2010 and he voted in support of "catch share." David Goethel, a longtime Hampton fisherman, was the lone dissenter in the 14-1 council vote to establish "catch share" in New England. Goethel is concerned that "catch share" could lead to a further erosion of the shrinking New Hampshire fishing fleet. "Catch share" assigns permit holders to allocations in a particular sector and replaced the "days at sea" system that limited the amount of time and catch of fishermen. Goethel opposed the plan because he believed the allocation formula was deeply flawed and that the cost of monitoring, which would eventually be paid for by fishermen, would be too expensive for a majority of single-boat owners.

"We're dangerously close to losing it. Forty percent of the New Hampshire fleet will not be able to fish," Goethel said.

The criticisms resonated with policy makers who have come under political fire over "catch share." Jane Lubchenco, the NOAA administrator in charge of groundfish management, said Tuesday that NOAA would pay for the monitoring costs in 2012.

Leary said it was important to give the "catch share" management system time. He believes shrinkage of the fleet was inevitable given how a majority of the groundfish stocks are still being overfished and he has even sold two boats and bought another to accommodate the new economic reality.

"Yes, there are a lot of guys complaining, but you have a lot who are starting to make it work," Leary said. "Unlike the old system, they can decide when they want to work."

He said under the old "days at sea" system, fishermen were more regulated about when they could fish and were forced to dump excess catch.

"It was getting to the point where we might see 16 to 18 days and we needed an alternative," he said.

Goethel concedes that to be a member of the New England Fisheries Management Council is "to be hated most of the time because all we do is say 'no, no, no.'" But he supports a proposed fisheries bill sponsored by Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H., and Sen. Scott Brown, R-Mass. The lawmakers say the Saving Fishing Jobs Act of 2011 is

in response to the heightened concerns by fishermen in their respective states that the federal "catch share" programs "are needlessly devastating New England's fishing community."

If passed, the bill's many provisions would terminate new and existing "catch share" programs that result in a 15-percent-or-more reduction in the total number of fishermen in the program, and develop a new management plan within one year.

Leary dismissed the bill "as typical election-year politics." He said the jobs focus of the bill ignores the necessary consolidation of the fleet, the efficiencies that fishermen are practicing to make their operations profitable and sustainable, and the fact that qualified crew members aren't easy to find in his experience.

"From December to May, I couldn't find one qualified crew that could pass a drug test," he said.

Richard Allen, a former fisherman out of Rhode Island who now works as a fishery consultant, said like many fishermen he had been opposed to the growing number of regulations that hampered his industry.

"We've had a bitter fight over the size of lobster catches as long as I can remember," said Allen, who began fishing mostly lobster and some groundfish in 1969 after serving in military. "I remember state troopers coming as security to our council meetings," he said of the time when the first quota limits were being implemented. At one time, he initiated a study to show "that we didn't need all these things (regulations)."

Allen, who served as a member of the fisheries council in the 1980s and 1990s, said he became a strong conservationist by the early 1990s and a proponent of "catch share" as a necessary corrective to balance the reality of declining fish stocks with making a sustainable commercial system for fishermen. His conservationist priority hasn't made him a friend to many fishermen who distrust both the environmental lobby and federal regulators, but he says the science is clear.

"For 15 years I really studied the issue," Allen said. The problem was one of typical capitalistic bubble with "too much overcapitalization and growth in the fleet" chasing a diminishing resource of fish stocks that couldn't replenish themselves fast enough.

"With the overcapitalization of the industry and with no incentive for individual fishermen to leave fish in the water because they would be caught by someone else, we were in a 'tragedy of the commons' situation," said Allen, who works on fishery conservation projects around the world and for organizations such as the Environmental Defense Fund.

The "tragedy of the commons" is a social and economic overharvesting dilemma in which many individuals acting independently in their own economic self-interest will eventually deplete a limited resource despite everyone agreeing that it's in no one's interest for this to happen.

"What we've seen since the mid-1990s has been a continuing contraction of boats and crew positions," he said. "Of course, you are going to lose crew positions. We didn't have enough fish to sustain the massive structure in the industry."

Allen said that despite initial resistance from fishermen, "catch share" has been the wave of the future for the past three to four decades.

"We know this is new to New England and it is an emotional issue," he said, adding there are numerous examples around the world of fishermen, scientists and regulators working together to create and fine-tune a sustainable system.

He cited the process for red snapper fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico. There was a decade-long education effort and a three-year allocation formula study before it was implemented in 2008. In the end, it was a referendum by the Gulf of Mexico fishermen themselves that gave the system a stamp of long-term legitimacy.

"They voted overwhelming in favor of it and have become the biggest evangelists, saying that it saved their fishery," Allen said. "It's an amazing contrast to New England."