

As the falling rain Trickles among the stones Memories come bubbling out. It's as if the rain Had pierced my temples. - Claribel Alegria

VINEYARD GAZETTE ONLINE

Archived Edition June 23, 2009 Article

70° F, Partly Sunny on Martha's Vineyard

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Archived Edition: Tuesday, June 23, 2009

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Island Fishermen Plead Case for Sectors

By MARK ALAN LOVEWELL

With the future of the groundfish industry at stake, five Islanders plan to attend a three-day summit in Portland, Me., this week where a new management system that aims to rebuild stocks and make fishing profitable again will be considered.

The meeting of the New England Fishery Management Council opens today and runs through Thursday. The council is expected to vote on establishing a new sector system for catching groundfish, including cod, haddock and the many flounders that were once abundant in New England waters.

If the sector system is adopted, the Vineyard is expected to be a key player with its own sector, one of 17 in New England.

Essentially a system of harvesting cooperatives, the sector system allows fishermen with groundfish permits voluntarily to form a group and make their own rules for catching fish. Fishery regulators assign quotas to the sectors for each fish stock that is harvested, and there are severe penalties for exceeding the quota.

The sector system would replace the current system which places limits on days at sea and numbers of trips for fishermen. The concept of the old system was to allow depleted fish stocks to rebuild, but there is now mounting evidence that it has not been effective. Meanwhile, New England fishermen, especially small fishermen, have watched their profits drop and their days at sea dwindle.

So change is in the offing. Amendment 16 of the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan calls for a shift in managing the valuable stocks of cod and other groundfish through shared access to the resource.

"We are hoping that they will include in Amendment 16 a provision that recognizes community fisheries associations, so that communities like here on Martha's Vineyard will be able to have access rights to the fishery," explained Tom Osmers, the West Tisbury shellfish constable and former commercial fisherman, who is singlehandedly responsible for the Vineyard sector being included in the plan. Mr. Osmers leaves this morning for the meeting in Portland.

Tom Dempsey, a policy analyst for the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, based in Chatham, said the sector system represents new hope for the deeply troubled groundfish industry. His association was the first Atlantic coast group to be issued a sector, three years ago.

"The sector is a fishing community. It doesn't need to be geographic. Some will be operating in different ports," Mr. Dempsey said. But the key to the system, he said, is that fishermen will regulate themselves. "Following certain regulatory bounds, the fishermen will have to work out how they plan on harvesting those fish and bring them to market," said Mr. Dempsey. He continued:

"Days at sea is an inefficient use of fishing effort. It creates inefficiencies in everyone's fishing operation. It isn't about regulating the number of fish that are pulled out of the ocean, it is about reducing effort by putting fishermen out of business. Trip limits cause problems too."

He said under the current system a fishing boat can go out and haul a huge amount of fish, and because it is more than the daily catch limit, the fisherman has to throw back what he doesn't want, which is usually dead by then. Discards are considered



VINEYARD GAZETTE

Island of Martha's Vineyard, seven miles off southeast coast of Massachusetts.

Winter population: 15,882 in summer, 73,035.

Twenty miles from city of New Bedford, 80 miles from Boston and 150 miles from New York.

Devoted to the interest of the six towns on the Island of Martha's Vineyard, viz:

Edgartown, Oak Bluffs, Tisbury, West Tisbury, Chilmark, and Aquinnah.

These, with Gosnold, constitute Dukes County.

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one of the biggest wastes of the resource.

"The sector system creates ways where there are rewards for those who are conservative in their harvesting. It leaves fish for future years," Mr. Dempsey said.

His association has two sectors, and in three years the fishermen have not exceeded their allocation. The association has 30 active vessels, all relatively small boats whose trips are usually for one or two days. "Their allocations have allowed them to reduce their discards and target the healthy haddock," Mr. Dempsey said. He also said:

"The sector model gives fishermen on Martha's Vineyard an opportunity to preserve the resource and maintain their own viable business. Under the current system that is getting harder and harder."

Mr. Osmer took the first step to create the Martha's Vineyard sector, one of 17 to be voted on this week. The pioneering West Tisbury fisherman met the deadline back in 2007, although only a handful of Island commercial fishermen qualified.

He said when he began fishing on the Vineyard years ago there were well over 50 commercial fishermen who could land cod. "We [the Vineyard] were once the ninth largest port for landings in all of New England. Now we are down to zippo," Mr. Osmer said.

Permit holders on the Vineyard have dropped to five. "We want to make sure the Vineyard stays alive," Mr. Osmer said.

The proposed Vineyard sector is now backed by a partnership with the Penobscot East Resource Center.

"This is a partnership with Down-east Maine. They are are joining our sector," said Warren Doty, a Chilmark selectman and a longtime advocate for the Vineyard commercial fishing industry. Mr. Doty and Mr. Osmer this spring helped form and now lead a new Island commercial and recreational fishing organization to advocate for Island fishermen. Named the Martha's Vineyard/Dukes County Fishermen's Association, it operates under the wing of the county. "Having a partnership with the Penobscot East Resource Center will be mutually beneficial, as between us we can trade quota back and forth and work together," Mr. Doty said.

The founders of the Maine resource center are executive director Robin Alden and her husband, Ted Ames, hatchery director. Ms. Alden is the founder and former publisher of the Maine-based Commercial Fisheries News. She and her husband have spent their careers advocating for small community-based fishing ports.

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New England groundfish stocks remain in serious trouble. Cod are at historic low levels. Haddock is showing a tentative recovery. Yellowtail and other types of flounder are in worse shape than managers had predicted.

The New England Fishery Management Council is made up of industry, fisheries experts and federal and state managers. If the council votes this week to adopt the sector system, it will not go into effect until 2010.

Other Islanders who will attend the council meeting include Buddy Vanderhoop, an Aquinnah charter fishing captain, Steve Norberg, a commercial draggerman from Edgartown, and Indaia Whitcombe, an Aquinnah bay scalloper and handline fluke fisherman.

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