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SCITUATE LETTER: Outside interests could control fishery

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Scituate — To the Editor:

I welcome the opportunity to clarify an important issue in a recent article regarding the New England Fishery Management Council's recent decision to move the region's groundfish fishery to a system based on quotas and sectors ("Fishing Rules Could Change," July 2, 2009).

Presently, the only two sectors in existence (the Georges Bank cod hook and fixed-gear sectors) must operate under a cap on the amount of Georges Bank codfish quota they can catch. That is, each sector may only harvest up to 20 percent of the total amount of Georges Bank codfish available to all fishermen in New England. In 2003, the

council agreed upon this cap to, among other reasons, ensure that one sector didn't acquire excessive control over the fishery.

Unfortunately, the most recent council action (Amendment 16) has undone this safeguard by "eliminate(ing) the 20 percent cap on (TAC) shares that was established in Amendment 13." In 2010, up to 19 sectors, representing over half of the active groundfish fleet in New England, will have no limit on the amount of quota they can purchase. In effect, the council has now approved a system that invites the very consequence that Frank Mirarchi cited in the article, where one outside interest with deep pockets could acquire control over an inordinate amount of the fishery.

One entity, which may not have any interest in the biological or social vision of our fishery, can now purchase enough quota or permits to control the entire groundfish fishery from Maine to Connecticut. While this may be an extreme scenario, it's not unrealistic; in fact, we've seen it happen in other quota fisheries throughout the world. Back home, this will likely have dire impacts on the small-boat, family-operated businesses in ports throughout New England, including Marshfield, Scituate, Sandwich, Chatham and Provincetown.

An appropriate ownership cap would incorporate the health of the fish stocks, the number of fishermen involved, and the strength of the market. It would allow individual businesses and community sectors to achieve solvency, but would prevent excessive consolidation and the concentration of rights into the hands of a few.

Without serious consideration of an appropriate ownership cap, Amendment 16 may, despite the promise that sectors hold, facilitate the extinction of New England's traditional small-boat fishing communities.

Eric Brazer Jr.

Manager, Georges Bank cod hook and fixed-gear sectors

Policy analyst, Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association

Chatham



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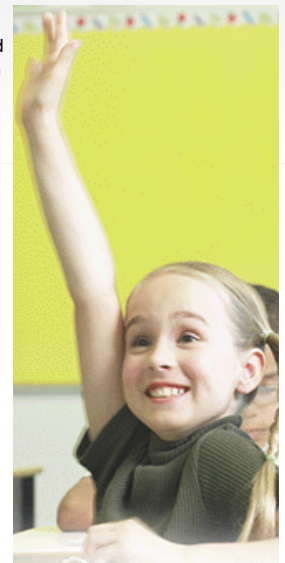
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