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NOAA Announces Proposed Northeast Groundfish Management Measures

NOAA today announced details of proposed measures developed by the New England Fishery Management Council intended to end overfishing and continue the rebuilding of Northeast groundfish. There will be a 30-day public comment period on the measures. The new rules, if approved, would be effective May 1.

The proposed measures would enable all limited access groundfish permit holders to create groups or "sectors" that would get a share of the year's allowable catch, based on the historic landings of their members. They would also develop their own rules for allocating that catch among the sector members. Those not in a sector would continue to be able to fish a set number of days per year in a common pool.

These sectors would be an integral part of a catch share program for Northeast groundfish.

"Catch share programs like the groundfish sectors proposed here have been shown to promote more profitable and stable fisheries, as well as healthy marine ecosystems," said James Balsiger, acting NOAA assistant administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "Sector management can help us achieve these goals for Northeast groundfish."

Expanded annual catch limits for each sector and for those not participating in the catch shares program are intended to end overfishing and ensure enough fish are left in the ocean to promote the rebuilding of depleted stocks. Measures proposed to discourage over-harvesting by either commercial or recreational fisheries include automatic reductions in the next year's allowable catch, fewer days-at-sea, or changes to size limits, seasons, and bag limits. Expanded reporting requirements and monitoring systems are being proposed for the commercial fishery to make sure annual catch limits are not exceeded.

For commercial fishing vessels not participating in catch shares, many of the rules currently in effect, like limits on the number of days of fishing and seasonal and area closures, would continue under the proposed rule. However, to end overfishing and promote rebuilding, days-at-sea would be reduced by 32 percent over 2009 levels. Also under consideration are modified trip limits on cod and yellowtail flounder in some areas, and a prohibition on landing of the stocks in the worst shape--windowpane flounder, ocean pout, wolffish, and southern New England/Mid-Atlantic winter flounder.

"We are working closely with the fishing industry to ensure that the necessary support systems for both the expanded catch share program and for vessels that will still be fishing under the days-at-sea program will be in place," said Patricia Kurkul, northeast regional administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "This is critical so we can track catches accurately, which is key to both sector and common pool management."

A number of other measures are being proposed to afford greater protection to fish stocks most in need, including:

- Rebuilding programs for witch flounder, Georges Bank winter flounder, pollock, northern windowpane flounder, and Atlantic wolffish, which were recently determined to be overfished;

- An increase in the minimum fish size for Atlantic halibut from 36 inches to 41 inches to increase opportunities for halibut to spawn prior to capture, thereby increasing the likelihood that stock rebuilding will stay on track;
- Gear restricted areas to protect the depleted southernmost winter flounder and yellowtail flounder stocks by requiring vessels to use selective gear that minimizes catch of these species; and
- Longer closed season, adding two weeks in April, for the recreational fishery to reduce mortality on spawning Gulf of Maine cod.

There are also measures proposed to provide greater opportunities for harvesting healthy stocks, such as haddock. A reduction in the minimum legal size for haddock is proposed, which would allow more of these fish to be kept and landed. Gear that selectively catches haddock, but excludes most pollock and winter flounder is also being considered. Also, a commercial vessel would be allowed to simultaneously hold both a limited access scallop and a limited access multispecies permit. This would enable a vessel to be more efficient and profitable by being able to fish in both fisheries on one vessel during the same fishing year.

To view a copy of the rule as it was submitted to the Federal Register, please visit our Web site at <http://www.nero.noaa.gov/nero/hotnews/mulamend16pr/>. Public comments on the proposed measures will be accepted after the rule files in the Federal Register, which is expected shortly.

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