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SOURCE: Portland (ME) Press Herald

AUDIENCE: 84,226 [provided by Nielsen//NetRatings]

DATE: 03-19-2007

HEADLINE: Fred Viola of South Portland unloads the fishing boat Elizabeth's hold Wednesday at the Portland Fish Pier. The New England Fishery Management Council is looking at three competing strategies to protect fish stocks.

Source Website

Staff photo by John Ewing The Drake, top, a Portland-based boat, unloads at the Portland Fish Pier on Wednesday. Current fishing regulations are complicated, limiting days at sea and amounts of fish that can be caught, along with restrictions on gear that may be used. PORT CLYDE – Glen Libby gestured towards a hazy clump of land near the horizon, about three miles offshore, identifying it as Burnt Island. When he began fishing three decades ago, he could catch 6,000 pounds of groundfish near the island and be home in time for supper. Today, he said, he doesn't bother fishing there, because there are no fish to be found. "You now have to steam for 100 miles and fish for three days to catch what I used to catch in a day," he said. As Maine's coastal fishing fleet struggles to survive this era of scarce fish and ever-tightening regulations, fishermen such as Libby are pushing for new ways to deal with the same old dilemma -- how to create a fair and effective system for restoring depleted fish stocks, while keep fishing communities intact. The push is coming as the New England Fishery Management Council works to revise its management plan for groundfish. The council is considering three competing strategies and is expected, during the next several months, to decide which strategy it wants to develop further. There is growing consensus that the current 13-year-old system -- which relies on suppressing fishing effort -- hasn't worked well for the fishermen or the fish, said John Williamson, a former council member who now works for the Ocean Conservancy. The system has failed to stop overfishing of depleted stocks such as cod and yellowtail flounder, he said, and the policy has proven to be so blunt that it hinders fishermen from catching abundant stocks, such as haddock. Moreover, Congress is demanding -- in its recent rewrite of the nation's fisheries law -- that overfishing be stopped at a quicker pace than the New England council stipulated. That means future fishing limits are going to be even more severe for the region's fleet, said Vito Giacalone, a former Gloucester fishermen who is chairman of governmental affairs for the Northeast Seafood Coalition, a group that represents 160 fishing vessels. He said regulators must find a more sophisticated way to manage the fishery. "We are using a hammer," he said. "The tools are not selective enough." New England fishery managers could decide to fine-tune the current method, or they could create an entirely new system. The three proposals under consideration would:

* Revise the current days-at-sea system so that fishermen's days-at-sea allocations are based on what species they catch. Fishermen who target healthier stocks would get more days at sea.

* Create a currencylike unit called "points" that fishermen can spend on fish, with healthy stocks costing fewer points than troubled ones. This proposal would treat the Gulf of Maine like a grocery store. Fishermen would use their points to catch any species, in any amount, until they run out of points.

* Give local fishermen unprecedented control over how fisheries are managed in nearby coastal waters, but also set hard annual catch limits for each species in an area. At its June meeting in Portland, the council is expected to pick one or two plans to develop further in preparation for the season that begins May 1, 2009. Each approach has own constituency, and each has advantages and problems. The stakes are high because anticipated cuts in days-at-sea allocations will put many coastal fishermen out of business, said Erik Anderson, president of the New Hampshire Commercial Fisherman's Association, which represents more than 50 small boats. "Most of these boats are not going to make it," he said. Groundfish in New England -- the nation's oldest fishery -- have been notoriously difficult to manage because they have been fished heavily for centuries, there are 19 different species in the mix, and many tradition-bound fishermen have fiercely

opposed strict regulatory measures, such as annual catch limits, that fishermen in other parts of the country have embraced. **COMPLEX REGULATIONS** The current system is a complicated one. It limits the amount of days fishermen can be at sea, restricts the gear they can use and limits how much fish they can catch in a trip or a day. Regulators also temporarily put large swaths of the ocean off-limits to fishing. In recent years, regulators have been shortening those days-at-sea allowances, and some fishermen are limited to fewer than 30 fishing days a year. While many fishermen have left the business, others have been able to survive — and even thrive — by buying more days-at-sea permits. This allows them to fish for longer periods and operate more efficiently. Those fishermen worry that making big changes in management plans now would be unfair because their businesses have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars so they could keep fishing under current rules. Chris and Amanda Odlin of Scarborough, for example, own an 82-foot dragger that's big enough to fish on Georges Bank and have permits that allow them 126 days at sea. The couple obtained the allowance by buying two fishing boats and consolidating the permits onto one boat. The Odlins have spent \$520,000 to get the permits and boats, and the permits alone would be worth about \$800,000 if they were to be sold to others, said Amanda Odlin, who manages the financial aspects of the business so her husband can focus on catching fish. "The days-at-sea permits are business assets that I'm trying to protect until retirement," she said. She said the current system appears to be working, and she is urging regulators to give it more time before switching to something new. **LACK OF INCENTIVES** Any regulation that protects fish by reducing fishermen's effort, such as limiting fishing days, has an inherent problem: It makes fishing an inefficient business, said Jackie Odell, executive director of the Northeast Seafood Coalition. Another drawback, she said, is that the regulations allow fishermen to comply with some of the rules by throwing dead or dying fish back into the water. Moreover, fishermen in the days-at-sea system are trying to catch as much fish as they can, as quickly as possible, Odell said. If they find fish stocks that regulators are trying to rebuild, they'll fish anyway rather than take the time to look for healthy stocks, she said. "There is no incentive to do the right thing," Odell said. Under the points system that Odell's group has developed, fishermen no longer would be allowed to discard fish. Rather, they would land all the fish they catch, and each pound would be given a biological point value. Fishermen could spend a lot of their points catching troubled species, such as cod, and their fishing season would come to an end quickly; or they could target healthy stocks and catch a lot more fish. She said current fishermen wouldn't lose out, because points would be allocated to fishermen based on their current days-at-sea allocation, vessel size and catch history. **'AREA MANAGEMENT'** Meanwhile, a group of coastal Maine fishermen, including some in Port Clyde, has developed a completely different approach. They call the proposal "area management," and it would bring to groundfish the conservation methods that Maine lobstermen have used successfully for decades. Coastal New England, up to about 40 miles out to sea, would be divided into zones. All fishermen would be able to fish in those zones, but coastal fishermen who work in those areas routinely would have a strong voice in setting the fishing rules there. Those fishermen would agree to follow annual catch limits set by scientists, a common practice in Alaska. It has never been used to manage groundfish in Maine. Strict annual limits would help fishermen win back the public trust, said **Craig Pendleton**, a Saco fisherman who heads **Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance**, a nonprofit organization open to all marine-resource users. "If stocks still fail, whose fault would that be?" he said. "It shifts the burden to where it belongs — the scientists." Libby, the Port Clyde fisherman, said the points system could be incorporated into the area management plan. The bottom line, he said, is that local fishermen are best qualified to manage coastal fisheries because they understand the resource better than anybody else and have a vested interest in protecting the resource for the long term. "We want to get the fish back," he said. "We want to see things turn around and be healthy again." Staff Writer Tom Bell can be contacted at 791-6369 or at tbell@pressherald.com

Reader comments

Chris of Harpswell, ME

Mar 19, 2007 1:02 PM

By comparison let's look at the fisheries situation in Alaska where "sustainability" is widely accepted as the number one fisheries objective. This is from a recent draft report to the state of Alaska on their fisheries management:

"Alaska has developed a foundation for its seafood industry that has eluded most other regimes, namely a system of biological management that places the long-term health of the resource above all other priorities. Not only has this emphasis resulted in what are, for the most part, healthy stocks and sustainable harvest practices, it has fostered an industry-wide culture and awareness of sustainability as a precondition for economic utilization."

For example after rationalization was implemented for the halibut fishery in Alaska a study found many of the halibut fishermen who most opposed rationalization became it's biggest advocates. They had faced the same situation Maine fishermen face today, with limited "open" days etc., and some said they had secretly worried there would be no halibut fishery for their children. Now most of these halibut fishermen understood that because "sustainability" came first, the industry was protected in the long-term. In fact the halibut fishery has come back extremely strongly and the Alaska ground fish industry wants rationalization too.

Now the major threat to the Alaska fisheries is members of Congress like Senator Snowe who blocked renewal of the Magnusson-Stevens Act because it included rationalization. Senator Stevens managed to salvage most of the bill. However Alaska's fishery is worried about Senator Steven's eventual retirement and the threat to the industry posed by members of Congress like Senator Snowe and Rep. Tom Allen, who blocked rationalization on the House side.

spome of Harpswell, ME

Mar 19, 2007 8:47 AM

Aquaculture!

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Mar 19, 2007 8:41 AM

Aquaculture!

Mo of Chicago, ME

Mar 19, 2007 7:15 AM

when the us allows massive fish-processing boats only 200 miles off our coast... our us fishermen get squeezed, the ground stock will never recover, not because of our own boats, but because we have senators who don't look out for our own maniacs..

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