

PANELISTS: FISHERMEN NEED GREATER LOCAL CONTROL

By Nancy Griffin

If New England fish stocks are to return to levels that support commercial fishermen, regulations will have to change so that management and stewardship are more local.

That's the theme of "Fishing for the Future," a documentary produced jointly by the Island Institute, Compass Light Productions and the Mainewatch Institute. An abbreviated version of the film was shown Aug. 16 at the Strand Theater in Rockland, followed by a discussion with a panel of experts.

The film documents the decline and near-collapse of the fabled Grand Banks and Georges Bank groundfish stocks.

These stocks sustained fishermen from Europe, Newfoundland, the Maritime provinces of Canada and the New England states for hundreds of year. As the stocks have declined in recent years, however, New England fishermen have faced increasingly stringent regulations, causing economic hardships that have decimated the fleet.

State Sen. Dennis Damon, Senate chair of the Maine Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources, who moderated the event, started the discussion with his fishing experiences that began at age five.

Damon said his father's fishing methods left him with a feeling of "responsibility to preserve the fish for the next generation." He believes we have "lost access by our management philosophies and principles and the way we do things."

The film includes interviews with people such as Ted Ames, Stonington fisherman and 2005 MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant" recipient; Robin Alden, former Marine Resources Commissioner and founder of the Penobscot East Resource Center in Stonington, and fisherman Mike Spear of Yarmouth.

"In the '50s, they were staying the sea was inexhaustible," says Spear in the film. "I don't think we

knew the systems then," adds Ames.

Also in the film, former NMFS regional administrator Andy Rosenberg says the federal council system, as exemplified by the New England Fishery Management Council, is cooperative management. He also says fisheries management had many successes but admits "New England groundfish was a dismal failure."

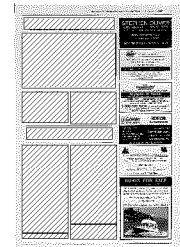
The audience laughed, obviously in agreement, when Alden, a proponent of local and cooperative management, credited with creating Maine's lobster zone council system, followed him in the film saying it's not cooperative and it's not working.

Panelists included Alden, Chuck Cook of the Nature Conservancy's Sustainable Fisheries Group in Ojai, CA; Eric Brazer Jr., Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association of North Chatham, MA; Kevin St. Martin, assistant professor of geography at Rutgers University, Piscataway, NJ and two Maine fishermen: Glen Libby, chair of the Midcoast Fishermen's Association and president of the Port Clyde Draggermen's Co-op in Port Clyde and Craig Pendleton, coordinating director of the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance in Saco.

"The difference between when I started and now is that we now have the capacity to catch the last fish," said Damon, introducing the panel. Citing advanced technology and more sophisticated gear, he said his fisherman father would be shocked if he was alive.

Alden pointed out that limiting technology is one way to ensure stocks but there was little interest by the council to impose such restrictions. "It's not the American way," she said.

Several panelists agreed that one-size-fits-all regulations made in Washington, DC, can't work everywhere. "Fishermen have always had to push back or figure away around the rules," said Alden. "The only future for fishing communities is by us stepping up to the plate and making difficult decisions and en-



forcing them on each other.”

Cook said he believes regulators must provide incentives and rewards to the fishermen. “We’re trying to move in that direction on the West Coast” where

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there is overcapacity in the fleet and several groundfish stocks are depleted, he said. “I fear we’re moving to individual transferable quotas (ITQs). That will consolidate the fisheries out of the area to Washington and Oregon.”

Brazer said his group, representing around 30 Cape Cod fishermen, has negotiated an unusual catch allowance from the government as a “novel and highly adaptable” trial system of self-management and stewardship.

“We’ve endured layer upon layer of inefficient and inappropriate regulations,” said Brazer. “We hope to shape better management” for fishermen and give them “a stronger voice in the system that put them out of business.”

Libby said the Port Clyde fishermen are trying to “brand” their fresh fish locally to create demand and enhance the value of their catch. “There’s more to it than just the government. We have to consider the market side of it, too, or it’s an incomplete picture. If we’re successful at marketing our own fish, it could change everything.”

When big boats began fishing New England’s traditional grounds, Pendleton said, “Our job was to catch as many fish as possible. In the ‘80s, no one told us those fish hadn’t spawned yet.” NAMA also wants more local regulation that stresses conservation.

Several of the approximately 60 au-

dience members questioned the effect of fishing trawlers and scallop boats that drag large nets or metal dredges across the ocean floor. Panelists involved in the groundfishery said they are working to

improve the gear, perhaps by returning to earlier methods that created less damage to the bottom or creating "ocean zoning" to restrict certain fishing areas to particular gear types. ▼



Experts in various aspects of the fishing industry took part in an Aug. 16 forum in Rockland. The panel was moderated by state Sen. Dennis Damon, left, chair of the joint legislative committee on Marine Resources. From left: Robin Alden, Chuck Cook, Eric Brazer Jr., Kevin Martin, Glen Libby and Craig Pendleton. (Nancy Griffin photo)