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Groundfish course leads Pendleton to move on

SACO, ME – June 21, 2007 turned out to be a fateful day in Craig Pendleton's life. That was when the New England Fishery Management Council voted to stop developing an area management alternative as part of groundfish Amendment 16.

The council simultaneously voted to keep working on area management and other new strategies in Amendment 17, but that did little to pacify area management supporters. They knew the vote was an enormous setback.

"We had spent two weeks strategizing going into that meeting," said Pendleton, coordinating director of the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance (NAMA) and a co-chair of the Area Management Coalition.

"We had a positive flow. Then, in 15 minutes, we were outmaneuvered. All of the work we had done over the past eight months was gone," he said.

Not only was it a setback for area management, but it also was the turning point for Pendleton himself.

"I lost my desire to do fishery management, and I lost my desire to go fishing," he said.

Pendleton decided to put his boat up for sale – the 45' Ocean Spray, which he acquired in October 2006 as a swap for the 54' Susan & Caitlyn, the well-known Gulf of Maine vessel he had owned beforehand for 17 years.

Then, on Sept. 27, he announced to NAMA's board of trustees that he was resigning from his post after more than 10 years at the helm.

New ideas

A number of factors led up to these life-changing decisions, but Amendment 16, said Pendleton, was "the final stake in my heart."

When the New England council went to industry over a year ago and asked for new ideas to possibly change the direction of groundfish management, NAMA, which had proposed area management for Amendment 13 through the Gulf of Maine Inshore Fisheries Conservation and Stewardship Plan, saw it as the next opportunity for a real directional shift away from days-at-sea.

"I really bought it this time," said Pendleton. "I felt like the time was ripe for change. I was convinced the council honestly wanted new ideas."

NAMA joined hands with numerous small communities and organizations to form the Area Management Coalition, and the coalition worked countless hours to formulate a better, broader, and more detailed area management plan.

Reaching agreement wasn't always easy, and there were what Pendleton called "trust problems" that surfaced among some factions of the coalition. However, everyone essentially worked in



concert toward the same goal.

Maybe the biggest problem, said Pendleton, was that the Maine Department of Marine Resources never really rallied around the proposal, which the Area Management Coalition viewed as an enormous disappointment.

Still, he said, “We just felt really good about our chances.”

Time limitation

Meanwhile, another new idea came to the top of the Amendment 16 pile – the “point system,” developed and promoted by the Northeast Seafood Coalition.

NAMA and the Area Management Coalition embraced this proposal as well.

“The point system could fit within the area management plan,” said Pendleton. “We complimented the people with other alternatives.”

But the council expressed concern that none of the new proposals – area management, the point system, or anything related to individual fishing quotas – could be properly developed in time to meet the May 1, 2009 implementation target for Amendment 16.

The council’s June 21 vote to set Amendment 16 priorities in essence put area management on the back burner once again (see CFN August 2007 for details).

Wrong direction

The Amendment 16 vote clinched Pendleton’s decision to move on. He admits to being discouraged.

“The fisheries management path we’ve been going down the last five years really bothers me,” Pendleton said. “It keeps putting groups in positions to take aggressive stances. It clearly has turned into a turf battle about who is going to be left standing.”

The days-at-sea leasing program was “very deceitful,” he added.

“They said it was going to help save the little boats. We knew that wasn’t true. No one was going to be able to capitalize on leasing except the people who already had capital. The inshore people were dying,” he said.

Noting the significant shift in the composition of the fleet and the increasing loss of small boats and owner/operators, Pendleton expressed anger that things had turned out this way.

“What we have now is a purely economic model of rewarding the people who caught the most fish and leased days,” he said. “It doesn’t make sense to me. When you have a limited resource and you’re trying to rebuild, why would you turn around and reward the people who caught the most?”

Pendleton said he understands there are problems behind latent effort, but he doesn’t think managers pay enough attention to the other side of equation.

“We have some people who went lobstering and gave us 100% groundfish conservation,” he said. “And we kicked them out of the fishery. I just never felt good about it. Why don’t these people get rewarded for not catching cod?”

Sectors, one concern

Finally, Pendleton said he knew it was only a matter of time before the majority of fishermen would end up joining sectors, and this was another reason he knew the time had come for him to move on.

“I don’t fundamentally believe in sectors if they’re formed using catch history alone, so I was having a hard time fighting for them,” he said.

On a personal level, Pendleton admitted to one lingering concern:

After all these years of working with NAMA and dumping his “heart and soul” into these things, could he, himself, have done more?

The question eats at him sometimes, but then reality sets in. Pendleton said he knows deep down that one person or one organization can’t “change the world,” and NAMA has a lot – a whole lot, he said – to be proud of.

What’s next

At 47 years old, Pendleton is not exactly sure what he wants to do next.

“I kind of need to take a break,” he said. “I don’t want to rush into anything and make a bad decision.”

Although he already has an associate’s degree from the University of Rhode Island’s Commercial Fishing and Marine Technology program, he’s thinking about going back to school, possibly at the University of Southern Maine, to obtain a bachelor’s degree.

He’s also attracted to the work and purpose behind credit unions and has spent the past 14 years on the board of directors of the PeoplesChoice Credit Union in Biddeford, ME, which serves all of York country. He is currently the board’s chairman.

“I really enjoy that world. The credit union motto of ‘people helping people’ really fits with my personality and beliefs,” he said. “I like the long-term, strategic thinking kind of stuff.”

And he may even take time to write a book.

Dec. 7 will mark his last day with NAMA, and then he’ll see where life leads him from there.

“I have memories that are really good,” Pendleton said.

Memories of fishing, memories of NAMA’s accomplishments, and memories of the dedicated and genuine people he’s worked with over the years all around the country and especially in New England.

These are the memories he wants to preserve – before the bad overshadows them.

Janice M. Plante

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