

Consolidation: Now, what to do about it

They say the definition of insanity is repeating the same mistake over and over again and expecting different results. So imagine our frustration as we watch groundfish management actions forcing the consolidation of the fishing fleet and tipping the industry toward large- and/or industrial-scale operations.

Have we learned nothing from the agriculture, banking, financial institutions, and housing debacles? Do we have to repeat the same mistakes on the water?

This is not a stab at large-scale boats. The issue is protecting fleet diversity – meaning boats of *all* sizes, gear types, and geographic locations – because we have learned that diversity is key to achieving environmental, economic, and social goals.

The laissez-faire consolidation of the groundfish industry that has happened under the current groundfish management program is shrinking the fleet in one direction, towards the large-scale. This approach fails to recognize that fleet diversity matters to coastal community infrastructure, jobs, food access and security, and cultural identity.

It also matters to the environment, which is another reason to take the issue of fleet diversity so seriously. In New England, not only are small- and mid-scale fishermen the cornerstones of the fishing industry, they are critical

Guest Column

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recreational fishery on small bluefin; and

- Imbalances and gaps in the size composition of bluefin populations in certain areas, such as the absence of medium-sized fish in the US fishery.

These concerns accelerated development of the International Convention for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, which was signed in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in May 1966, ratified by the US on April 24, 1967, and entered into force by presidential proclamation in October 1969. This convention gave rise to ICCAT, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas.

In the October CFN, we'll look at the first ESA listing proposals for bluefin, the influence of the sportfishing lobby on US negotiating strategies at ICCAT, and the terrible decision by the National Marine Fisheries Service in 1981 to politicize ICCAT science, which led to the arbitrary management dividing line at 45°W longitude and the imposition of unilateral conservation regimes on the western Atlantic for the next 25 years.

Rich Ruais

Rich Ruais, executive director of the American Bluefin Tuna Association, has been working with the bluefin tuna industry since 1991.

to ensuring that the scale of fishing operations here is diverse enough not to undermine the health of the marine ecosystem.

GUEST COLUMN by



**Brett Tolley,
Doug Maxfield,
and Brian Pearce**

Early impact numbers

Consolidation has taken a huge toll in just one year. A recently released National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) interim report on the 2010 groundfish fishing year documents that just three entities in Massachusetts control 36% of Georges Bank winter flounder.

Additionally, the 2010 interim report found that:

- The groundfish fleet lost 458 crew positions;
- Boats greater than 50' saw increased landings of 8.4% and increased revenue of 21.5%; and
- Boats less than 50' saw landings decrease by 51.7% and revenue decline by 34.2%.

Clearly, small- and mid-scale groundfish fishermen are suffering from a disproportionate consolidation squeeze.

Family farmers faced these same issues a few decades ago and were left with two options – scale up or sell out.

For many family fishermen, including crewmen, scaling up is not possible because access to fishing rights is now unaffordable and bank loans to invest in permits are nonexistent.

That leaves selling out or leasing out as the option of last resort.

Participate in scoping

Recognizing some of these issues, the New England Fishery Management Council voted in June to proceed with a groundfish plan amendment to address fleet diversity and excessive consolidation in the groundfish fleet (see CFN August 2011).

Despite strong opposition from a few, a growing grassroots movement of community-based fishermen and local food advocates came forth to support the process.

At its August meeting, the council's groundfish committee approved a scoping document for the new amendment, which it will present to the full council in September for final approval.

The draft scoping document states that one of the problems the amendment must address is that the current sector management system leads to consolidation and a lack of diversity in the groundfish fishery.

We know this. We also know that managers had very specific goals and objectives in Amendment 16 that they failed to achieve, including protecting fleet diversity and preventing excessive consolidation.

We now have a groundfish fishery that is becoming unaffordable for independent fishermen. We have unaddressed inherent inequities in the initial allocations. We have consolidation hurting communities and driving the distribution of quota in one direction – towards the large-scale. And, in some areas, particularly Stellwagen Bank, this flies in the face of many hard years of fishermen's sacrifice to rebuild local stocks.

Possible fixes

The fleet diversity amendment is the most logical platform for addressing

these issues.

At this stage of the game, we don't have all the solutions, but that's OK. We don't have to. We can offer ideas based on what we know works in other fisheries and on what farmers have had to do to fix the industrialization that occurred on land.

For example, we know that owner-operator incentives, quota set-aside programs, policies that foster affordability, including affordable monitoring costs, and accumulation limits are all ideas that work.

Right now, these are all just ideas. But the scoping process will allow fishing communities to weigh in, narrow down the issues, and offer solutions for fisheries managers to consider.

We're calling on folks who believe that "Who Fishes Matters" to heed the advice of New England's family fishermen and hold fishery managers accountable to their own standards, goals, and objectives.

Advancing the fleet diversity amendment gives us the opportunity to level the playing field, prevent a homogenous fleet that isn't sensitive to the scales of the marine environment, and secure a future for small- and mid-scale family fishermen.

Brett Tolley
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