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Feini Yin
North American Marine Alliance
feini@namanet.org
908-745-9768 (text or call)



Fishermen travel to D.C., urge decision makers to address catch share policy and consolidation of fishing rights

Commercial fishermen from across the United States have banded together to express concern over predatory leasing and consolidation of fishing quota in the hands of private equity firms and corporations — consequences, they say, of catch share policies that treat fishing rights like stocks on Wall Street.

A coalition of fishermen from New England, the South Atlantic, the Gulf of Mexico, and Alaska are traveling to the nation’s capital from February 6 to 9. They aim to call attention to the federal government’s inadequate management of [catch share](#), or limited access, fisheries, which privatize the rights to fish.

This visit comes on the heels of a 2022 [investigation](#) from ProPublica and New Bedford Light, which revealed that Bregal Partners, a private equity firm owned by a billionaire Dutch family, controls the majority of fishing rights in New England for [groundfish](#), a group of 13 species including cod, haddock, and several species of flounder.

“Anyone could have seen this coming. Bregal’s dominance over New England’s fishing industry is an outcome of catch share policy that fishermen have warned of for decades,” said Jason Jarvis, a commercial fisherman in Rhode Island who’s also an appointed member of the Rhode Island Marine Fisheries Council. “Enabled by lax antitrust regulations, the scourge of consolidation goes well beyond New England. It’s pushing independent, local fishermen out of livelihoods across the country.”

Jarvis’s concerns were echoed in a [public comment](#) delivered last week by Larry Marino, a representative of Louisiana’s Attorney General Office. Speaking at a meeting of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, Marino spoke of the need to reform catch share programs, also known as individual fishing quota or IFQ programs. He also noted that big shareholders, particularly in the Gulf’s red snapper fishery, have been known to [exercise control](#) over the allocation of fishing rights, through intimidation and abuse of power.

“The existing allocation is flawed, as it enables this kind of economic duress,” Marino said. He further asked the council, “What do you want this fishery to look like? I don’t think that you think that this fishery should look like a private monopoly, where fishermen are merely sharecroppers for a privileged few.”

The group traveling to D.C., including more than a dozen fishermen, will be presenting a preliminary proposal to amend catch share or limited access privilege programs through the [Magnuson-Stevens Act](#), the federal law governing marine fisheries, which is [overdue](#) for an update. Calling themselves the Catch Share Reform Coalition, the fishermen will be seeking champions on the Hill who are willing to workshop solutions together from the ground up.

Central to the coalition’s proposal are provisions to ensure that the fishing rights, or quotas, granted in catch share programs go first and foremost to commercial fishermen who can prove “significant participation” in a given fishery. Significant participation may be defined as deriving a minimum amount of sales or portion of one’s income from commercial fishing, or as spending a certain number of days at sea.

Currently, catch share quotas can be bought, traded, leased, and sold to the highest bidder in open markets. This feature, coalition members say, has opened fisheries up to speculation and invited wealthy investors to amass large amounts of fishing rights.

It has bred “armchair fishermen,” shareholders who act like predatory landlords by renting out fishing rights, at prohibitively expensive rates, to those who are actually doing the dangerous work of harvesting fish, said Alexis Kwachka, a commercial fisherman from Alaska who’s also involved in the [Alaska Marine Conservation Council](#).

“If you want to be a fisherman, pull on some boots, put on rain gear, and go catch some fish. If you want to be an investor, go to Wall Street,” Kwachka said. “Nobody should be able to sit on a beach and extract profits from a resource they don’t even participate in.”

The fishermen coalition is also calling for greater transparency in catch share ownership and leasing data. Casey Streeter, a Florida fisherman who helped start the [Florida Commercial Watermen’s Conservation](#), cited a 2021 [report](#) from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, which identified the need to make quota share and allocation data “more transparent, comprehensive, and widely available.”

“There are so many shell companies selling and moving around quota, no one knows who really owns what. We deserve to know who’s financing our fish,” Streeter said.

The fishermen will meet with offices of Congress members serving on the subcommittees governing fisheries under the [Senate Commerce](#) and [House Natural Resources](#) Committees. They also plan to meet with the Department of Commerce, which oversees the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), as well as legislators in key fisheries regions, including Senator [Ed Markey](#) of Massachusetts, Representative Rob Wittman of Virginia, and Representatives Garret Graves and Steve Scalise of Louisiana.

Building solidarity and connections to privatization issues across the food system, the Catch Share Reform Coalition will take several joint meetings with members of the [National Family Farm Coalition](#), who represent family farmers and ranchers, and representatives of [Don't Cage Our Oceans](#), a campaign aimed at stopping the development of offshore fish farms in the U.S.

As fishermen and legislators work together to figure out safeguards for existing catch share systems, the coalition is calling for an immediate moratorium to block the development of any new catch share programs.

“So much damage has already played out. Catch share programs, and the consolidation they enable, amount to land grabs on the water,” said Tim Barrett, a commercial fisherman from Massachusetts and president of Northeast Fishery [Sector 10](#).

For more than 15 years, Barrett attended meetings of the New England Fishery Management Council, cautioning regulators that catch share policy would allow a multinational corporation to become dominant in owning fisheries access. It turned out his prophecy came true with Bregal Partners.

“This situation could have been prevented if decision makers had taken the input of independent fishermen more seriously from the beginning. Now’s the time for Congress to listen, and not make the same mistake twice,” he said.

“Privatization schemes will always favor the wealthiest players,” said Barrett. “It’s time to trade in fisheries futures, and invest in the futures of our fishing communities instead.”

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About North American Marine Alliance:

For additional quotes and information, and to arrange interviews, contact:
Feini Yin, feini@namanet.org, 908-745-9768 (text/call)

North American Marine Alliance is a fishermen-led organization building a broad movement toward healthy fisheries and fishing communities. NAMA builds deep and trusting relationships with community based fisherman, crew, fishworkers and allies to create effective policy and market strategies that work at the intersection of marine conservation and social, economic, environmental, and food justice.

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More about catch shares:

There are currently 17 catch share [programs](#) in the United States, regulating some major fisheries like red snapper in the Gulf, pollock in Alaska, and scallops in New England. Catch share fisheries are also known as limited access fisheries because they limit entry to a fishery. The Magnuson-Stevens Act describes catch share systems as [limited access privilege programs](#) (LAPP).

Limiting access goes against the longstanding tradition of treating U.S. fisheries as a public resource or commons, open to any fisherman with a commercial fishing permit. There remain many open access fisheries that are successfully managed through other strategies, such as days at sea, seasonal or annual caps on fishing, and restrictions on boat size and gear. New England lobster is an example of a strong fishery managed under a public commons approach.

Catch share programs first began to take root in U.S. fisheries in the 1990s, promoted most heavily by the Environmental Defense Fund and the Walton Family Foundation, of Walmart fame, as a market-based strategy to manage overfishing. Under catch share systems, regulators set a total allowable catch for a given species in a region, then carve that catch into shares, or quotas, that are assigned as private property to fishermen or corporate entities.

Capping the total allowable catch can be a useful tool to address overfishing, but when it's coupled with turning the right to fish into a private, tradable commodity, the strategy begets harmful social, economic, and ecological consequences. The reality is that privatizing the right to fish keeps out small- and medium-scale, community-based fishing operations, with the smallest ecological footprints.

Places to learn more:

- Who owns the fish? Video explainer of catch shares via the Center for Investigative Reporting: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sf5GIgDD40M>
- How catch shares enabled a private equity firm owned by a billionaire Dutch family to own a majority of groundfish fishing rights in New England: <https://www.propublica.org/article/fishing-new-bedford-private-equity>
- Op-ed by Ryan Bradley, an independent fisherman in the Gulf: Catch shares enable wealthy landlords to gobble up local fisheries: <https://civileats.com/2022/08/31/op-ed-catch-shares-landlords-private-equity-fisheries-gulf-coast/>
- Untangling Catch Shares with Lee van der Voo: <https://foodprint.org/blog/catch-shares/>