

RE: FLEET DIVERSITY

Dear Council,

I am not a commercial groundfisherman, but I am deeply connected to the fishing community of Chatham, MA, and have concerns for my community and other small coastal fishing communities like it that rely on fleet diversity for economic vitality. I urge the council not to postpone discussion to address groundfish goals and objectives related to fleet diversity, consolidation, and community protections.

As a board of directors member of the Women of Fishing Families (non-profit organization in Chatham that supports fishing families through scholarships and emergency assistance, and education/community resources) over the past 6 years, it has become increasingly evident in my communications with fishing families that your decisions greatly affect the economic conditions of their livelihoods on the Cape. NEFMC decisions affect the overall health of our communities, employment rates in our communities, our food prices, the corporate structures and entities that are trusted with the ocean's health, and employment. For these reasons alone, it is imperative that the Council keep the fleet diversity conversation in the forefront of their decision-making process.

Your decisions also greatly affect the livelihoods of shore-side supporters in the fishing community. My family owns and operates one of the last remaining private commercial fishing docks in the state of Massachusetts, which is in Stage Harbor, Chatham. Over the past several years, we have experienced a significant decline in landing activity. Historically, all ports in our town have been host to a bevy a fish landing activity, from local Cape fishing vessels and folks around New England and beyond. In June 2010, the Council voted on a goal and objective to "Maintain a balance in the geographic distribution of landings to protect fishing communities and the infrastructure they provide." Postponing the discussion on fleet diversity will only further this epidemic in our community, and others like it, and contribute to factions in fishing communities which are already in crisis.

We need all the protection and advocacy we can get in order to, as stated in an objective in the June 2010 Council vote, "Maintain a diverse groundfish fishery, including gear types, vessels sizes, geographic locations, and levels of participation...and Prohibit any person from acquiring excessive access to the resource, in order to prevent extraction of disproportionate economic rents from other permit holders." If the Council decides to postpone the discussion on fleet diversity, it will become increasingly difficult (more so than it already is) for independent fishermen to sustain a way of life, and contribute meaningfully to their community's economic health.

A management program that cannot meet its own goals and objectives must be addressed. Specifically, the Council can address meeting its goals by initiating "policies that increase the ability and opportunities for owner-operators to succeed in the fishery, which will help prevent excessive consolidation and lead to a more diverse fleet," a possible route proposed by a group of concerned fishermen from many coastal communities in New England.

Thank you for considering these comments in your decision-making process as a Council. It is my right and my choice to lend voice in support of my community.

Thank you,

Shannon Eldredge
Stage Harbor, Chatham