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# Pew report promotes new fishery management tool

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PORT CLYDE (May 8): Local fishermen are working on a new method to control overharvesting of groundfish species.

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The current draft of Amendment 16 to the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan, dated April 15, is an 871-page document. Required by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act in order to ensure replenishment of groundfish stocks, Amendment 16 will be voted on at the upcoming meeting of the New England Fishery Management Council, scheduled to take place June 23 through 25 at the Holiday Inn By the Bay in Portland.

In anticipation of this decision, the Pew Environment Group issued a report on Wednesday titled "One Last Chance: The Economic Case for a New Approach to Fisheries Management in New England." The report advocates for sector management, a relatively new model of fisheries management being considered as part of Amendment 16.

"Effort controls fail because they do not directly control the quantity of fish that is caught and do not promote stewardship," the report states in its description of the current days-at-sea method of regulating the groundfish fishery that has been in place since 1994. "Instead, these controls make catching fish more difficult and expensive in the hope that this will reduce catch to a desired level. Despite the best of these attempts, resilient fishermen repeatedly find new and more effective ways to catch fish, even while complying with ever more restrictive rules and regulations."

The days-at-sea method limits fishermen to a specific number of fishing days per year. The day clock begins when a boat leaves the dock, and many in the industry have expressed concerns that this puts pressure on fishermen to be less discriminating in their catch methods.

"It's time for things to change," Glen Libby, chairman of the Midcoast Fishermen's Association in Port Clyde, said in the Pew report. "Days-at-sea have led to discarding and waste and put too many fishermen out of business. Sectors are the last chance for our industry in New England."

Sector management restricts groups of fishermen to a specific amount of any given species. Under the proposed rule these regional groups, called sectors, would have the power to determine how the catch is allocated in terms of scheduling.

Bob St. Pierre has been a gillnet fisherman for 25 years and is a member of Georges Bank Fixed Gear, one of two existing sectors that is now in its third year of operation. "It's certainly been a learning curve," St. Pierre said during a teleconference on Wednesday. "We started with about 15 boats. We felt that there were too many discards in the fishery."

He said that the group believed the days-at-sea method was failing and that fishermen should be held accountable

for their fishery.

"It's nice to be able to leave the dock and target codfish at the time of year when they're more profitable," St. Pierre said of the increased flexibility offered to fishermen under sector management. "When you were fishing under a days-at-sea system you felt obligated to fish every day you had assigned to your vessel. Under a sector system, I know exactly what I'm allowed to catch. I can catch those fish when the price is high. It leads to my nets being in the water a lot less."

He said moving away from days-at-sea would allow fishermen to take the time to steam to more lucrative grounds rather than fish out a location where the fish are fewer.

Fishermen organizing into sectors would be responsible for paying for the increased monitoring the system requires. According to St. Pierre, the discard rate is 1 or 2 percent with the new regulation method. He said increased observer coverage is important to prove to the industry that sectors are a clean fishery.

Peter Baker, manager of the New England Fisheries Campaign for the Pew Environment Group, said the new system would only work if standards were applied fairly to both sector groups and fishermen using the days-at-sea controls. "One of the keys to making sectors work is that everyone needs to be under an annual catch limit and everyone needs to cease when the limit is caught," Baker said.

Dr. Robert J. Johnston is the director of the George Perkins Marsh Institute and a professor in the Department of Economics of Clark University. He authored the Pew report, along with Jon G. Sutinen, professor emeritus of environmental and natural resource economics at the University of Rhode Island.

"Essentially what we're doing as regulators [is] an attempt to micromanage everything a fisherman does," Johnston said. "We fail because we don't control the quantity of fishing; instead we make it more difficult and more expensive in hopes it will control quantity."

"When we happen to be successful, it is by making fishing harder and less safe," Johnston said.

He said that only two other major fisheries — one in Scotland and one in the Faro Islands — use days-at-sea. "In both cases we see what we're seeing in New England," he said of the challenges created by using time-based restrictions to rebuild marine resources.

"Sector allocation gives a specific group of fishermen the privilege to fish for a certain type or types of fish — longer open seasons, increased profits and safety," he said. "Typically what happens is that each sector would receive an allocation of a certain type of fish per year. Then you can choose when and how you're going to catch them. Right now you've got days-at-sea limits and trip limits — the latter restricting fishermen to a certain harvest of each fish species per trip. Sectors are given an annual limit per species instead."

Johnston said NEFMC has predicted that fishermen could reduce effort by as much as 60 percent and catch the same amount of fish. "Less time at sea and less gear means greater revenue," he said.

He also predicted an increase of up to 70 percent in profit to be made in Maine's two proposed sectors.

Those sectors are the Sustainable Harvest Sector based out of Cundy's Harbor and Portland with 70 permit holders currently enrolled out of ports as far-flung as Newport, R.I.; and the Port Clyde Community Groundfish Sector, currently representing more than 20 fishing boats, about half of which are from Port Clyde, according to Jen Litteral of the Island Institute. The final deadline for sectors to submit their roster lists to the National Marine Fisheries Service is Sept. 1.

"The challenge for NEFMC," Johnston said, "is to come up with regulations that make sectors a viable choice."

NEFMC Public Affairs Officer Patricia Fiorello said Thursday that her agency has been working on sector

management since 2004. "The majority of the council is supportive of the concept of sectors and recognizes the flexibility that it will bring to the industry," she said.

"Sectors won't give you more fish," she said, "but they will allow people greater flexibility within the quotas they're allowed within the sector."

"Sectors won't be subject to many of the constraints that days-at-sea are subject to," Fiorello said, adding that sector fishermen would be able to fish in the seasonal closed areas because their quota restrictions would replace the calendar-based restrictions in place for days-at-sea in those areas. Because they would pay for monitoring at the dock, she said, they would not be required to participate in the Coast Guard's monitoring program at sea. Both Libby and St. Pierre said that on-board monitors are planned as participation in the sectors grows.

Speaking of the Midcoast Fishermen's Association's experiments with more sustainable gear, Libby said, "Days-at-sea is a real disincentive to trying new things. I'm sure it's going to be difficult to get used to [sectors]. We're going to try to make the transition as smooth as possible."

The new nets designed by Libby's group have reduced the number of undersized fish that are caught.

Currently two groups, the Georges Bank Cod Hook Gear Sector and the Georges Bank Fixed Gear Sector (Gillnets) operate under the new system. Fiorello said 17 proposals have been presented to NEFMC, including one from the Port Clyde Fisherman's Association. She said these proposals will be considered if the sector management plan in Amendment 16 is approved at the end of June. Registration will take place after that decision and sector members will be required to make a time commitment — perhaps for one or two years — at the time of application.

If Amendment 16 is enacted, the choice between participating in sectors or staying with the days-at-sea restrictions will rest with individual fishermen.

"The overall goal is to get the fish back to the shore here in Maine for now and into the future," said Libby.

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