

WHERE IS THE GROUND FISH MITIGATION?**The National Marine Fisheries Service Unacceptable Response to the New England Groundfish Disaster**

The New England groundfish fishing year began on May 1. Fishermen are struggling with the lowest annual catch limits (ACLs) on record. These low catch levels will be in place for the next two fishing years and most likely beyond. **The National Marine Fisheries Service has failed to live up to promises made to mitigate the economic impact of these severe reductions.**

In July 2012, the New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) Executive Committee met with the National Marine Fisheries Service Acting Assistant Administrator Sam Rauch, and Regional Administrator John Bullard to **“brainstorm the future of groundfish in 2013 and beyond, especially mitigation alternatives for low ACLs.”** In August Rauch and New England Fishery Management Council Chairman Rip Cunningham issued a joint statement pledging that **“preserving the groundfish industry is of the utmost importance to us and we’ll put forward our unwavering support”** and announcing plans **“to work closely with the industry to explore every possible option”** to mitigate the economic challenges the industry will face in 2013 and beyond.

On September 13, 2012, the Acting Secretary of Commerce declared the New England groundfish fishery a disaster, **“despite fishermen’s adherence to strict catch limits”**. By definition, a fishery disaster declaration cannot be triggered by overfishing.

The NEFMC, to their credit, followed with a short list of potential mitigation measures.

1. Access to some portions of areas closed to fishing for decades for the purpose of targeting healthy stocks like haddock, pollock and redfish. Access areas were carefully chosen to avoid spawning concentrations of fish and sensitive habitat. This recommendation was approved by a vote of 13/3/0 by the NEFMC including a favorable vote by the Regional Administrator.
2. Exemption from minimum mesh requirements to allow the industry to efficiently target the healthy stock of redfish. Cooperative research, funded by the NMFS, and conducted by members of Associated Fisheries of Maine and others in collaboration with the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries and the Maine Department of Marine Resources provided the NEFMC with the scientific information necessary to make this decision. This recommendation was approved by a unanimous vote of the NEFMC, including the Regional Administrator.
3. Elimination of the trip limit on monkfish in the monkfish northern fishery management area while fishing on a groundfish day at sea. Monkfish landings have been 50 and 60% of the total allowable landings for several years, and fishermen are experiencing some difficulty with remaining under the trip limit associated with fishing under a groundfish day at sea (300 lbs per day). This recommendation was approved by a vote of 15/1/1 by the NEFMC; the Regional

Administrator voted no to preserve the Secretary's prerogative on requests for emergency action.

4. In April 2013, in response to a motion by the NEFMC Executive Director Tom Nies laid out a compelling case for the NFMS to take emergency action to adjust the Georges Bank haddock and Gulf of Maine haddock ACLs to account for the potential "spillover" of the huge Georges Bank haddock ACL (29,335 mt), especially in light of the extremely low ACL for Gulf of Maine haddock (290 mt). A spillover of 1 % of the Georges Bank haddock has the potential to rapidly consume the Gulf of Maine haddock ACL and close the entire Gulf of Maine to groundfishing.

While no one can be certain that these recommendations would provide relief to the NE groundfish fleet, they at least represent a good faith effort by the NEFMC to do just that.

The NMFS has responded to the NEFMC recommendations in a way that completely eliminates their practical utility and potential mitigation:

- NMFS re-wrote the NEFMC recommendations and has conditioned the approval of access to the closed areas and to the redfish mesh exemption on 100% observer coverage paid for by the industry. It is unfathomable how the NMFS could expect a fishery that has been declared a disaster to shoulder the high cost of observer coverage, especially for access to low value fish like redfish and pollock.
- NMFS re-wrote the NEFMC recommendation on monkfish to eliminate the trip limit while fishing on a monkfish day at sea. This renders the opportunity useless because groundfish vessels currently are not experiencing problems with the trip limit that is associated with fishing on a monkfish day at sea. In a repeated effort to provide relief to the fleet, the NEFMC in April, 2013 voted 13/2/0 to request the NMFS increase (rather than eliminate) the monkfish trip limit while fishing on a groundfish day at sea. More than two months later, the NMFS has not yet responded to the second request by the NEFMC.
- NMFS denied the request by the NEFMC to address the potential problems that would occur if Georges Bank haddock "spillover" into the Gulf of Maine.

The NMFS has issued several press releases portraying themselves as "**committed to mitigating effects on New England fishermen**" and describing their corruption of the NEFMC recommendations for mitigation as their own efforts to "**ease impact of quota cuts on New England groundfish fisheries**". These statements mislead the general reader into thinking that the NMFS is actually taking action to live up to their promises for mitigation. The NFMS is blind to the severe economic hardship of hundreds of small business and dozens of fishing communities in New England.

The National Marine Fisheries Service should immediately implement the recommendations as developed by the New England Fishery Management Council.

Summary of the July 30, 2012 NEFMC Executive Committee meeting

August 2, 2012, “Statement from Samuel Rauch, NOAA Fisheries, and C.M. “Rip” Cunningham Jr., New England Fishery Management Council, about 2013 Groundfish Fishing Year”

http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2012/20120913_negroundfish.html

December 20, 2012 meeting of the NEFMC

January 31, 2012 meeting of the NEFMC

November 14, 2012 meeting of the NEFFMC

April 24, 2013 meeting of the NEFMC

April 25, 2013 meeting of the NEFMC

http://www.nero.noaa.gov/mediacenter/2013/04/2013_groundfish_measures.html

<http://www.nero.noaa.gov/mediacenter/2013/07/GFClosedAreasReopening.html>