

Summary of the Northeast Fisheries Summit

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The Northeast Fisheries Summit, hereafter referred to as the Summit, was held at the New Bedford Whaling Museum in New Bedford, Massachusetts on Monday, March 8, 2010. The meeting was co-sponsored by the City of New Bedford, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, and the Massachusetts Marine Fisheries Institute (MFI). The Summit was intended to restore a foundation of trust between NOAA and the fishing industry through dialogue focused on the shared objectives of sustainable fish stocks and the economic viability of fishing communities. The principles of equity, fairness, conservation, preservation of jobs, income, fishing communities and families, minimization of waste, and flexibility in management can only be realized through a collaborative approach to management.

Three panels facilitated discussion. The issues selected were (1) catch shares and sectors, (2) scallops and scallop bycatch, and (3) amending the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA).

Sectors

The looming implementation of sectors was a topic of concern for many industry participants. Sector management was brought to the table as a solution, motivated by the widespread concern regarding the performance of the current management regime. The question, however, remains: will sectors perform better than days-at-sea (DAS), and what metrics will be used to measure this performance?

The foremost issues associated with the current fishery management system were highlighted at the Summit; (1) a lack of responsiveness to the stakeholder concerns, (2) excessive waste, (3) lack of transparency, (4) overfishing, and (5) poor communication among management entities.

The potential success or failure of sectors was debated at the Summit, in conjunction with the magnitude of anticipated effects and the potential mitigation measures. While the details are debated, it is clear that the transition from DAS to sectors is a major federal action; it will affect the livelihoods, economies, and welfare of our coastal communities.

Scheduled to go into effect May 1, 2010, sectors require industry and agency alike to make big changes in the way they operate. Management of the multispecies fishery is no small task. Because of the multispecies nature of the fishery, a suite of interactions complicate management, specifically achieving optimal yield for each stock. The Multispecies Fishery Management Plan encompasses twenty commercially important groundfish stocks. Currently managed with limitations on the number of days fished (days-at-sea; DAS), closed areas, trip limits, minimum fish sizes, and gear restrictions, the multispecies fishery is of significant socioeconomic importance to many coastal communities in New England.

Amendment 16 will implement a new management strategy for the multispecies fishery: catch shares, more specifically, sectors. Each sector, based on the history of participating members, will be allocated quota for each stock, with the exception of wolfish, southern New England / Mid-Atlantic winter flounder, Atlantic halibut, pout, and windowpane flounder.

Amendment 16 left many questions to be answered regarding the implementation of sectors. Some participants felt that the open ended nature of Amendment 16 has provided much needed flexibility to managers and sector participants. However, a more widely expressed viewpoint was that too many loose ends remained for the May 1 implementation to be successful.

One of the significant issues cited was the presence of ‘choke species’. Stocks for which sectors have been allocated relatively low quota are coined ‘choke species’ because once the allocation has been met the sector must shut down. The catch share system allows for the transfer of quota between sectors; therefore, sectors that have reached a particular limit may purchase additional quota from another sector or permit bank to continue fishing. This attribute of sectors is cited as a positive, the problem however is that the fleet quota of some ‘choke species’ may be so low that no one will have enough to share and that the majority of the fleet will be shut down prematurely with significant quota of other species remaining. The nature of this problem is more so related to the new MSA requirements, but is further exasperated by the implementation of a new management strategy.

Many of the issues cited at the Summit involve the potential impacts of the transition, particularly those impacts on communities—the effects on coastal infrastructure, fishing families, and the socioeconomic fabric of communities. Many anticipate that the implementation of sectors will be followed by a significant consolidation of the fleet. The magnitude of these effects should be analyzed and mitigation measures, such as buyback programs, should be instituted. Many participants felt that in order to successfully implement sectors, or facilitate any management change, additional time and analysis is necessary.

A variety of opinions on sectors were expressed at the Summit. Some participants encouraged support of the new system and the flexibility it promises. Others who support the concept felt that too many questions remained for successful implementation in May and that additional time is required to develop the system. However, a majority of participants felt that sectors, or any management strategy for that matter, would be unsuccessful due to significantly reduced quota of some species and the inflexibility of the current management system. This topic was further pursued through a discussion of the MSA and the ways in which it may be improved.

Scallops

The effectiveness of closed areas on Georges Bank depends on the objectives you measure them against. Closed Area I, II, and the Nantucket Lightship Area cover roughly 30% of Georges Bank. Originally implemented to protect the spawning grounds of groundfish species such as haddock, cod, and yellowtail, these closures have had a significant impact on the scallop industry. A positive externality of the closures was significant increases in scallop biomass. The gains in biomass are primarily due to the increased size of the protected scallops, but the numbers have also increased.

Allowing scallops to mature and spawn within the closures has many benefits, both to the fishery and the sustainability of the stock. However, as scallops age the shell deteriorates, making them more susceptible to disease. If these dense aggregations of mature scallops are not harvested, millions of dollars in revenue may be lost due to mass mortalities. Summit participants discussed the utility of a rotational management system that would allow access to aggregations of mature scallops while protecting younger scallops, allowing them to mature and spawn. Rotational access to closed areas could be likened to the management of forests. Once trees have matured to the point that harvest is optimal, the area is opened and cleared. Young seedlings unable to grow previously would have the opportunity to mature under the protection of a closure while different areas were opened for harvest. While there was no consensus on the use of this approach to manage scallops, there did appear to be significant interest in the reevaluation of the closed areas and the associated objectives.

Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA)

The MSA is the principal law governing the management of U.S. fisheries. The MSA was established in 1976 when the United States withdrew from the International Commission of the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries (ICNAF), declaring exclusive rights to manage fisheries within 200 miles of shore. Ten

National Standards are presented in the MSA. These standards represent the overarching objectives of managers and encompass goals such as sustainability, economic viability, equity, safety, and the use of best available science.

The common perception is that the current MSA lacks flexibility; however, there are flexibilities in the MSA that have not been exercised.

In order to achieve the goals expressed in the National Standards, many Summit participants felt that the law must be amended, specifically a change to the rebuilding requirements. Currently the law requires that overfished stocks must be rebuilt in a period no greater than ten years—with the exception of stocks for which it is biologically infeasible, stocks that are subject to an international agreement, and stocks in which rebuilding has been affected by other environmental variables. While there is flexibility built into rebuilding requirements, this flexibility is not utilized by managers. The majority of Summit participants felt that removing the arbitrary 10-year time frame was imperative. It is important to note that the 10-year limit has no biological significance; and while it is important to set goals for managers, it seems that there are more practical methods to achieve this. One option would be to base each rebuilding plan on a cost-benefit analysis of the biological, social, and economic implications of rebuilding, weighing the costs of accelerated rebuilding against the gains. In general, the Summit recommended the introduction of increased flexibility to rebuilding requirements.

A Note on ‘The Best Available Science’

National Standard 2 states that “*conservation and management measures shall be based upon the best scientific information available*” (16 U.S.C. §1851, 98-623(2)). A theme, common to all three discussions, was the necessity of quality science. Many meeting participants voiced concerns regarding the frequency and accuracy of stock assessments—the results of which have significant socioeconomic and conservation implications. Without confidence in the science industry, members and managers alike cannot have assurance that any management strategy—sectors or DAS—will succeed. An increased focus on the quality of science utilized in management decisions was emphasized by many participants. Increased opportunities for cooperative research would provide valuable insight while enhancing the relationship between government, scientists, and industry alike.

A copy of the complete report of the Northeast Fisheries Summit can be found at SavingSeafood.com (<http://www.savingseafood.org/state-and-local/northeast-fisheries-summit-final-report-2.html>). An updated version of the report can be provided upon request.