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Scallopers ramp up efforts to avoid yellowtail

by Janice M. Plante

NEW BEDFORD, MA – Determined to prevent a repeat of last year's problems in Closed Area II, scallopers are signing up to voluntarily participate in a "yellowtail flounder bycatch avoidance system" for this year's Nantucket Lightship Access Area fishery.

The system, which was developed at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth School for Marine Science and Technology (SMAST), relies on two-way communication. Scallopers fishing in the Lightship area will provide real-time yellowtail catch data through daily e-mail reports to SMAST. And, SMAST, in turn, will tabulate the information and e-mail the location of yellowtail hotspots back to the fleet.

"It's a simple concept," said Cate O'Keefe, program manager of SMAST's Marine Fisheries Field Research Group.

Simple, maybe, but potentially crucial to the success of the Nantucket Lightship fishery, where scalloping activity will be shut down once the fleet reaches its 2010 yellowtail flounder allocation for the area of 47 metric tons (mt), which is equivalent to only 103,617 pounds.

Last summer, despite efforts by SMAST to widely broadcast the location of yellowtail concentrations in Closed Area II, scallopers quickly harvested their yellowtail allocation of 158.5 mt, and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) shut down the area just 15 days into the fishery.

Under the 2010 rotational access-area schedule, the Nantucket Lightship area will open up to scalloping this summer, assuming Framework 21 to the federal scallop plan is approved.

However, with only 47 mt of yellowtail available, the fishery in the Lightship area, like the one in Closed Area II last year, has the potential to be short-lived.

SMAST estimates that fishermen

will only be able to catch one pound of yellowtail per 58 pounds of scallop meats in order for all limited-access vessels to be able to take their one allocated trip into the Lightship. This translates into approximately one yellowtail per seven baskets of in-shell scallops.

Well aware of the economic consequences of an early closure, O'Keefe

With only 47 mt of yellowtail available, scallopers will be able to catch one pound of yellowtail per 58 pounds of scallop meats in the Nantucket Lightship area.

—SMAST

said SMAST wanted to try a different approach this year for broadcasting yellowtail hotspots, one involving a more interactive format with scallopers who are actually out on the fishing grounds.

For starters, scallopers should have already received in the mail a color-coded chart of the Nantucket Lightship area showing general locations of scallop and yellowtail concentrations (see graphic page 26A).

The chart was created by SMAST using yellowtail and scallop data collected during the Virginia Institute of Marine Science's (VIMS) 2009 dredge survey, which was conducted in cooperation with industry. At the moment, the VIMS data represent the best information available showing yellowtail abundance in the Nantucket Lightship area.

SMAST will update the chart in early June using results from the industry-funded 2010 scallop video survey. The video survey got underway in late April and is scheduled to run through June, with one additional trip in August in the Gulf of Maine. Participating vessels include the Endeavor, Karen Nicole, Huntress, Guidance, Arcturus, Courageous, Diligence, and Liberty.

The video segment most critical for the yellowtail bycatch avoidance system is the May 18-25 leg aboard the Huntress, which was assigned to the Nantucket Lightship area.

Cell by cell

In addition to the scallop-to-yellowtail-ratio chart, industry members in the same mailing received a second diagram – one that carves up the Nantucket Lightship area into grids or "cells" that are labeled with letters of the alphabet.

The diagram was accompanied by a table in which scallopers can record the number of tows made per cell and the total pounds of yellowtail caught in each cell (see graphic at right).

The package went out to industry with a May 10 cover letter from SMAST's Kevin Stokesbury, chair of the university's Department of Fisheries Oceanography.

Stokesbury explained that fishermen would need to e-mail each day's yellowtail/cell summary to SMAST via Boatrac, which means participating scallopers will have to fill out a "Boatrac E-mail Authorization Worksheet." The worksheet was attached to the letter.

Said Stokesbury, "Avoiding yellowtail flounder is key to continued access to closed areas."

He also said that industry can suffer a significant loss in harvestable biomass because "scallop left on the seafloor due to early area closures are mature and have high natural mortality."

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Scallopers

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Fishermen, however, have limited options for dealing with the situation.

"The only two ways to avoid yellowtail bycatch are gear modifications and improved information on the location of scallops and yellowtail," Stokesbury said. "We're working with the industry to try to accomplish this."

Fleet buy-in

At press time, SMAST still wasn't sure how many scallopers would participate in the program, but it was clear that interest was high.

According to O'Keefe, who has been working to develop the system with Stokesbury, Greg DeCelles, Dan Georgianna, and Steve Cadrin, SMAST first floated the idea of running a yellowtail bycatch avoidance system during an April 26 meeting of its Fishermen's Steering Committee, and the two-dozen or so industry members in the room seemed eager to participate.

O'Keefe said SMAST made a few changes to the initial system set-up based on industry feedback from that meeting, and all parties agreed that scallopers only would need to report yellowtail bycatch – not scallop catches – on a daily basis in order to preserve privacy about each vessel's fishing strategies.

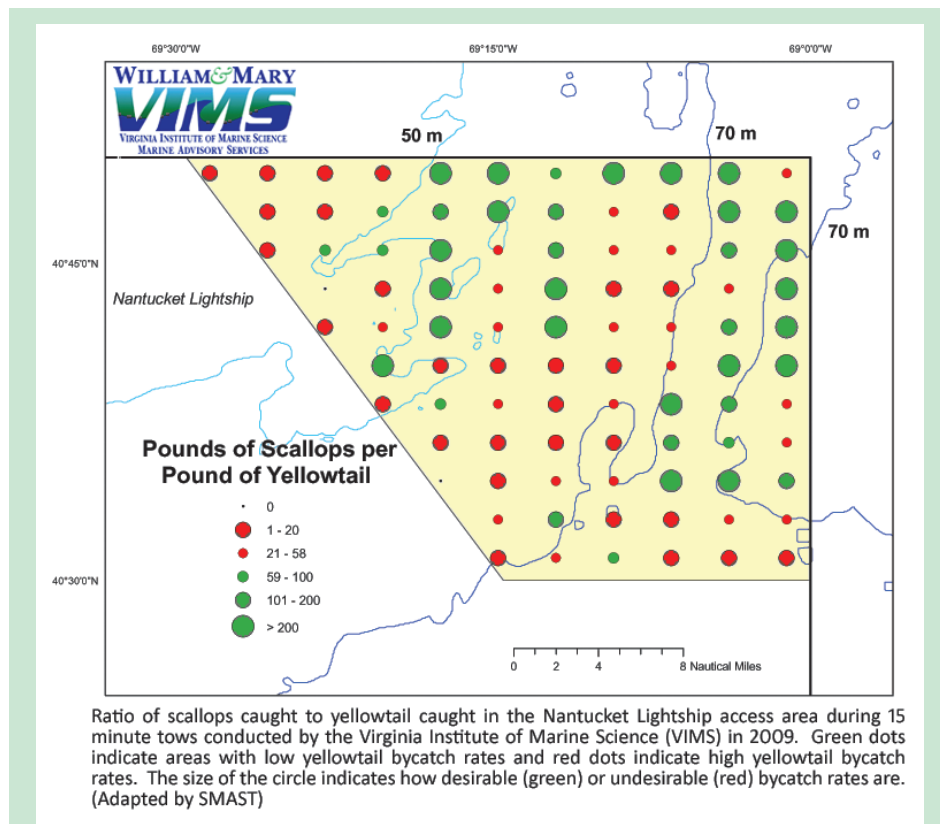
Second, the collective group wanted *all* scallopers to receive daily e-mail updates about yellowtail hotspots, not just those who volunteered to participate in the program.

So it will be important for nonparticipants, too, to fill out a Boatracs authorization form since e-mail messages with yellowtail updates will be sent via Boatracs.

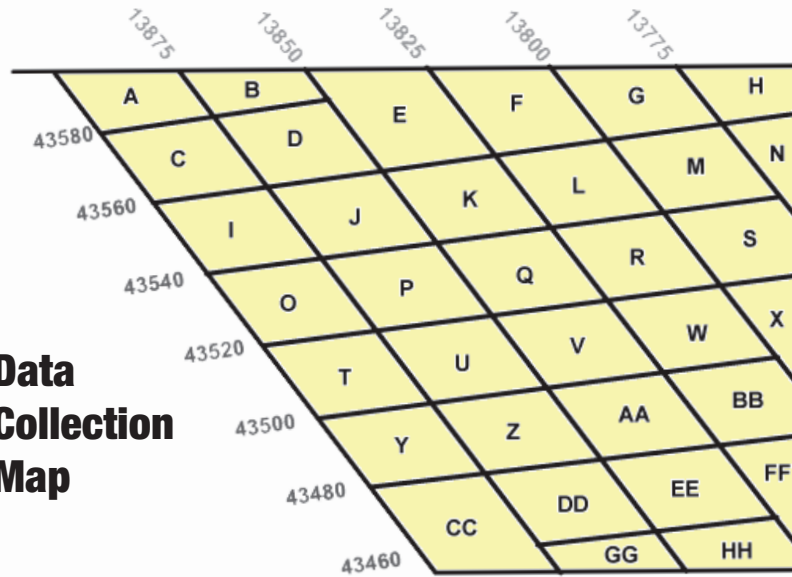
Starting date?

While groundfish closed areas typically open up as scallop access areas on June 15, the exact date of the opening of the Nantucket Lightship Scallop Access Area this year hinged on Framework 21, which was developed by the New England Fishery Management Council (see CFN January 2010 and March 2010 for details).

NMFS published a proposed rule for Framework 21 in the *Federal Register* on April 27 with a comment period that closed May 12. If NMFS approves the framework, the agency said it hoped to have a final rule published by late June or



Data Collection Map



SMAST-Industry Nantucket Lightship Yellowtail Bycatch Avoidance

CELL	# TOWS IN CELL	YELLOWTAIL LBS IN CELL

early July.

For more information about the yellowtail bycatch avoidance system, contact Cate O'Keefe by phone at (508)

910-6340 or by e-mail at <cokeefe@umassd.edu>. Kevin Stokesbury may be reached by phone at (508) 910-6373 or by e-mail at <kstokesbury@umassd.edu>. ■