ISSUE BRIEF:

Failure to Address Habitat Closures Could Cost the Scallop Fishery more than $75-80 million

Tues. Sept. 25, 2012

On September 13, The New England Fishery Management Council's (NEFMC) Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) approved projections made by the Council's Scallop Plan Development Team to set the annual catch limit (ACL) for scallops in fishing year 2013 at 21,000 metric tons.

While this value is less than the previous year's 27,000 metric ton ACL, the basis for this reduction is founded in a series of scientific survey data including that conducted via cooperative research with =industry "research set aside" funds. This array of information sources – distinguishes the scallop fishery from many other Atlantic fisheries.

Three independent surveys were conducted in order to assess scallop biomass: a drop camera survey conducted by the School for Marine Science and Technology at the University of Massachusetts; another from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Northeast Fisheries Science Center, which combined dredge survey data with a HabCam survey also conducted by the Science Center; and dredge survey data from a Virginia Institute of Marine Science study. These surveys examined parts or all of the same stock, but relied on different methodologies. Nonetheless, they produced nearly comparable findings.

Scallop abundance has remained at historically high levels the past three years, but many within the species are currently juvenile, necessitating the lower catch limit until the many new "recruits" in the mid-Atlantic are able to grow.

Although industry members understand how the 21,000 metric ton limit was derived, there is widespread concern that current regulations may prevent the scallop fishery from landing the full 21,000 metric tons allocated to it by the NEFMC.

- Unless things change, the scallop industry will only be able to catch 17,000 metric tons of the 21,000 metric tons allotted to them by the SSC because 30% of the scallop's exploitable biomass is locked up in "Essential Fish Habitat" (EFH) closures, whose merit is a matter of dispute.

- The Council originally established closures nearly 15 years ago as a means to reduce fishing mortality on groundfish. In the intervening years, habitat-related closures were overlaid on these groundfish mortality closures. But research conducted by the Council, in relation to the EFH Omnibus Amendment 2, which was established to review and revise EFH provisions, found that some of these closures are not optimally located for purposes of habitat protection.

- Unless access to these areas is granted, the scallop industry will be unable to harvest 4,000 metric tons, or $75 million dollars worth of scallops, that could otherwise be harvested in a sustainable and responsible manner.

    - As a point of comparison, to make clear the magnitude of the value of these potential landings to the Atlantic coast economy, the value of landings for the entire Northeast multispecies groundfish industry in 2010 was approximately $90 million.

- An amendment to reassess these habitat areas is in its eighth year of consideration. It is essential that the Council take final action on this long-delayed amendment at its February meeting, as well as adjusting the ground-related element of these closures.