



NMFS weighs emergency action to lift northern monkfish trip limits

GLOUCESTER, MA – Groundfish fishermen will be able to land significantly more monkfish during the 2013 fishing year if the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) takes emergency action to “suspend” existing monkfish possession limits in the Northern Fishery Management Area, which covers the Gulf of Maine and northern Georges Bank.

The monkfish resource is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring, yet landings in the north have fallen far short of catch limits in recent years, reaching only 63% of the target limit in 2011.

According to industry members,



Steven Kennedy/CFN photo

The industry desperately needs any additional revenue that could be derived from this action.

—Jim Odlin

that’s because fishermen are bound by unnecessarily restrictive trip limits, which are forcing the fleet to forego hundreds of thousands of dollars in potential income.

Given that Gulf of Maine and Georges Bank cod quotas will be cut by 77% and 55% respectively in 2013, many say that relief on the monkfish end is more

important than ever.

“The industry desperately needs any additional revenue that could be derived from this action,” said Jim Odlin of Atlantic Trawlers Fishing Inc. in Portland, ME.

Monkfish possession limits are extremely complicated and vary by permit category and fishing area. The proposed suspension would apply only to vessels that are issued both a federal limited-access Northeast multispecies permit *and* a limited-access monkfish Category C or D permit. Furthermore, vessels released from trip limit requirements would need to continue using groundfish days-at-sea to catch monkfish, as is currently required.

The New England Fishery Management Council’s groundfish advisory panel (AP) first brought up the idea of emergency action back in October as a means of easing the pain of the groundfish quota cuts, which include a 71% reduction in Gulf of Maine haddock and a 62% reduction in Georges Bank yellowtail flounder (see CFN March 2013 for details).

In mid-November, the council debated the AP’s recommendation and overwhelmingly voted to ask NMFS to eliminate monkfish trip limits for groundfish sector boats in the north.

NMFS took the request one step further and, on Feb. 25, published a proposed rule to use its emergency action authority to suspend monkfish possession limits in the north not just for sector vessels but also for common pool vessels that meet the permitting requirements.

The agency said it was not proposing to suspend possession limits for Category A and B monkfish permits in the north because those boats don’t hold groundfish permits and, therefore, would not be economically impacted by upcoming groundfish quota reductions.

Furthermore, NMFS



Steven Kennedy/CFN photo

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—Laura Ramsden

said monkfish possession limits would remain in place in the southern area.

NMFS accepted public comments on the proposal through March 12 and said it anticipates having a final rule in place by May 1, the start of the 2013 fishing year.

The emergency action – assuming it’s approved – would remain in effect for 180 days and, in all likelihood, would be extended for an additional 185 days to cover the entire 2013 fishing year, which ends on April 30, 2014.

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Critical revenue

Monkfish is a critical component of the day's catch for many people. If the entire 2013 northern quota of 12.9 million pounds is landed at \$1.22 per pound in live weight equivalents, monkfish landings alone would produce \$15.7 million in revenue for northern area fishermen.

NMFS typically issues over 2,000 federal monkfish permits, but in 2011, only 586 went to Category C and D boats. Of those, 189 fished exclusively in the northern area and a small handful made trips in both the north and the south.

So, based on recent fishing patterns, NMFS is projecting that 175 to 200 vessels will use Category C and D monkfish permits in the north during 2013. Monkfish and groundfish comingle, so most of these boats will be groundfish fishing, too, largely under sector rules.

NMFS further calculated that the proposed action – suspending monkfish possession limits in the north for C and D

boats – could net as much as \$742,000 in additional revenue for the affected fleet.

Laura Ramsden, a member of the New England council and co-owner of Foley Fish in New Bedford, urged NMFS to implement the emergency action.

“Lifting these trip limits will help augment income for groundfish fishermen beleaguered by recent quota cuts and will promote a consistent year-round monkfish supply, making it a more viable option for our customers,” she said.

While the proposed action overall was strongly supported by almost everyone in the northern monkfish management area, the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council expressed some concern in a March 5 letter to NMFS Regional Administrator John Bullard.

While recognizing that the action was intended to “mitigate the looming economic hardships” of the impending groundfish quota reductions, council Executive Director Chris Moore said removal of the monkfish possession limits might promote “significant directed effort

in the monkfish fishery in the northern management area with potentially adverse consequences that warrant additional consideration.”

Moore said a “preponderance of genetic evidence supports a single monkfish stock,” so any overfishing on the northern stock “would also negatively affect the southern portion of the stock as well.”

Furthermore, eliminating trip limits “may attract additional gear or increased soak times within the gillnet component of the fishery, which could result in additional protected resources impacts,” Moore said.

NMFS, however, said the proposed action posed little risk to the monkfish stock given its current status and that the agency would retain the authority to reinstate possession limits for Category C and D boats in the north “at any time” during the emergency action if available data indicated that the quota in the north would be exceeded.

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