



Photo courtesy of Peter Ralston

Balancing act

Are catch shares the answer to New England's fishery woes?

By Lisa Duchene

A few years ago, fishermen in Port Clyde, Maine, got fed up catching and killing juvenile cod and flounder along with the adult fish that appeared in their nets. They tweaked their gear to steer away from the smaller fish and leave them in the water to grow for the future.

"There are ways you can build these nets that will make them really selective," says Glen Libby, a Port Clyde fisherman, owner of three groundfish boats, president of the Midcoast Fishermen's Cooperative and a member of the New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC).

Gear innovation will likely be among the many changes in New England as the groundfish fishery moves next month to catch-share management. Smarter, more-selective

fishing could help rebuild fish stocks and sustain fishermen, who face another 50 percent drop in fishing effort.

Libby predicts catch shares will shift the fishery's focus from a race for volume to a commitment to value.

Catch-share management means individual fishermen or companies own a share of the total quota, set annually by scientists and managers at a level estimated to allow a healthy stock. When the quota is reached, fishing stops for the season.

Scientists, conservationists and federal fishery administrators are advocating the approach because the economic incentive is to conserve stocks, rather than overexploit.

The thinking is that open access to a fishery sets up a race to harvest, leading to a

"tragedy of the commons." In a catch-share system, harvesters own a piece of the pie. Their payoff for conservation practices is when their slice grows along with the whole pie. More consistent supply to the market is another promised benefit.

That's the theory. But, says David Coombs, executive VP of Steve Connolly Seafood in Boston, "At this point, it's all speculation."

Coombs and many others hope the approach will rebuild New England's still-ailing groundfish stocks, numbering 20 and including 13 species — among them, cod, haddock, pollock and many flounders.

Some stocks are rebuilding — Gulf of Maine and Georges Bank haddock stocks are rebuilt and Gulf of Maine cod is at a 30-year high — while many others like Georges Bank cod, still struggle.

"We've made considerable progress in moving forward

New England fishing communities are focusing on conserving fish stocks.

from the 1990s, but we haven't done enough," says Tom Nies, the groundfish-plan coordinator for the NEFMC.

For most stocks, the target catch rate is around 20 percent of spawning stock biomass, versus the current rates of around 40 percent, he says.

In the new system, each species has a quota, and there is no limit on days. New England fishermen are divided into 17 sectors, each with a quota for each of the groundfish species. That quota is further divided among the sector's fishermen.

Two major changes will force fishermen to be as selective as possible, says Libby.

As soon as the sector hits its quota on any species, the entire sector is shut down until it can either trade with another sector for more quota or until the next season. Pollock quotas are so low, fishermen fear they will quickly reach the quota and be shut down for the season.

Rodney Avila, who owns two 75-foot draggers out of New Bedford, Mass., and is a member of the NEFMC, says, "Maybe we'll be lucky enough to avoid the pollock. We're going to try. But if we catch it by accident, we're shut down for the whole year."

Previously, fishermen could toss back anything without penalty. Under catch shares, they have incentives to catch only what they can sell. Observers will estimate a bycatch rate and that will count against the various quotas. The stage is now set for improvement.

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