

New England Fishery Management Council

SUMMARY

Monkfish Amendment 6 Scoping Hearing

Cornell Extension, Riverhead, NY

January 31, 2011

Hearing Chair: Terry Stockwell

Staff: Phil Haring

Attendance: approx. 50

The first individual began by saying that he has the feeling that not a lot of good things happened with New England's catch share program. He said it was difficult to comment on monkfish catch shares since there are not a lot of specifics presented. He said, "we know the devil we got with DAS" and that fishermen's houses, boats and business plans are based on knowing how the DAS program is working. He said DAS works for the monkfish fishery, but it could be improved by allowing vessels to land some overages of the trip limit. (Staff informed him of the Amendment 5 proposal that would accomplish that.) He also said that the cost of catch shares programs to vessels is huge, taking into account the cost of enforcement, observers and quota purchases.

The next commenter fishes mainly out of Gloucester. He said that he went from landing 300,000 pounds a year to a quota of 26,000 pounds. He has had to sell one boat and lay off all his employees as a consequence of catch shares. The small boat operators, and the Long Island fleet, he said, will get crushed by the costs of catch shares. He advised against sectors, specifically, because groups of fishermen don't work well together. Some will get nothing, and a few will get a lot. Such a system puts some people in charge of others' livelihoods. Later, this individual said that if the Councils continue with catch shares development, the initial allocation should be based on 1996-2006 history.

The next commenter read and submitted written comments. He protested against changing the current system, and asked why the Councils are considering changing it if it is working. He said the resource is in better shape than anytime in the past 25 years due to DAS. He also expressed concern about NMFS' landings data, and feels it should not be used as the basis for allocating.

The next person echoed the comment about data inaccuracies, and noted that in groundfish, people with good fishing history ended up with low allocations. He is against ITQ's and feels that DAS has worked to rebuild the stocks.

Another individual also opposed ITQ's because of the costs to vessel. He said that with fuel prices rising, the added costs of observers and other program costs would make it difficult to survive as a business. He also pointed out that the monkfish fishery is not closely linked to groundfish in this region, as it is in the north, and that DAS is working for fishermen in this area.

The next commenter read and submitted written comments. He is opposed to sectors, and said if the Councils proceed with catch shares, only vessel owners should be allowed to own quota. He also agreed with the comments of the earlier fishermen from Gloucester.

The next fisherman to comment owns a dragger. He is not convinced that catch shares are the way to go, but said the current plan isn't working for him either. He said the trip limits are too low for a dragger to be profitable fishing offshore, and current trip limits make monkfish a bycatch fishery for him. He feels that draggers are not on a level playing field with gillnetters. If the Councils do proceed with an allocation, it should be based on 1996-2006 history, which includes a period when the offshore trawl fishery was successful. He also asked about choke species such as skates under an ITQ system. He thinks there should be an ITQ in place for skates before a monkfish ITQ program. He is in a groundfish sector, and said the costs are real and huge, and that they come right out of the bottom line. In a later comment, he also said the northern and southern quotas should be kept separate.

The previous comments sparked some responses from gillnetters. Two people said that the large offshore catches in the past caused the decline in the stocks. One said that the trip limits only make monkfish an incidental catch for the larger draggers, and that the gillnetters can be profitable under them.

The next individual said that the question of fleet diversity must be considered. She observed that in New England, many of the small, family operated boats have gone out of business under the sector program.

Another fisherman said he did not support sectors, and is not overly in favor of ITQ's either. He supports the current management system, and said it is responsible for bringing back the stocks. He feels that NMFS is trying to sell the industry on catch shares, and that the northern fishery is stuck with a program many dislike.

The next commenter said he is a crew member. He has seen DAS work over the past 10 years. He opposes sectors, but feels ITQ's might work. However, he would not like to see a new management program come along and put people out of business.

The next commenter, who is from New Bedford, and provided comments at that hearing, feels that the scoping process and document is "a pig in a poke", and that the decisions have already been made in Washington. She believes that the government is using sectors as a way to avoid a referendum, although in reality, it is akin to an ITQ. She said that catch shares will need to have enhanced monitoring, and that fishermen will have to pay for it. She observed that while catch shares have been used in other areas as a way to control fishing effort and rebuild overfished stocks, that does not apply to monkfish, which is not overfished, and overfishing not occurring. She is also concerned that NGOS (naming, Pew, Environmental Defense Fund, and the Nature Conservancy) will compete against fishermen for the purchase of quota, and that fishermen can't compete against "that kind of money". She said that when a system is put in place where money buys quota, big money will own it all. She predicts that under a catch share system, fishermen will become like tenant farmers. She said that on the West coast, the catcher boats' quota is all owned by the Japanese, and that fishermen there don't know what it means to own a fishing business.

A fish dealer was the next to comment. He agreed with previous commenters who said that the landings is inaccurate. He said that NMFS' budget continues to climb while fish revenues have declined. He is a supporter of the cooperative monkfish survey and feels that the government doesn't want to continue it because it will eliminate the uncertainty in science which is the basis for pushing for catch shares. He thinks DAS is working for monkfish, and, like others, questions why the Councils want to change it completely, rather than making incremental changes as needed. He said that sector management is economic reallocation rather than fishery management. He is concerned that all of the top officials at NMFS are from EDF and their allies. He questions how NMFS can make fine scale decisions about catch shares when there is so much uncertainty in the science. He stated that the NMFS subsidy to sectors is huge, and wondered how long it will last. He then submitted written comments on behalf of the Monkfish Defense Fund.

The last commenter requested no further development of any catch share program, including sectors, until the Councils hold a referendum. She noted that even those who might stand to succeed under catch shares are opposed to such programs.

The hearing started about 1:40 pm, and ended at 3:00.