

NEW ENGLAND FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL SEEKS YOUR COMMENTS ON CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT OF THE MULTISPECIES FISHERY

The New England Fishery Management Council (Council) proposes to draft regulations to manage and conserve the multispecies fishery under the authority of Section 302 of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. These rules are intended to reduce the likelihood that groundfish permit holders will control excessive shares of the resource and that over-consolidation will occur within the fleet. When finalized, the rules will become part of an amendment to the Council's Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan. In addition, the Council may prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) as described in the National Environmental Policy Act to accompany the proposed amendment.

Your comments are invited

The Council identified two objectives for this amendment:

1. to consider the establishment of individual accumulation caps for the groundfish fishery;
2. to consider issues associated with fleet diversity in the multispecies fishery.

This document is to inform you of the Council's intent to gather information necessary for the preparation of the EIS and ask for your suggestions and information on the range of issues that should be addressed.

What is the process?

The publication of this document and an announcement in the Federal Register of our intent to consider new measures for the multispecies fishery is the first part of the formal amendment process. After information is gathered and the potential effects of a proposed action and alternatives are analyzed by the Council staff, a Draft EIS may be published and sent out for public review and comment. At that point you will have a more complete specific proposal and analyses on which to comment. Following a review of comments on the Draft EIS, the Council will specify the measures it will submit to the National Marine Fisheries Service as the plan amendment.

***Why is the
Council
proposing to
take action?***

What actions have already been taken?

The NE multispecies fishery targets cod, haddock, white hake, pollock, Acadian redfish, yellowtail flounder, winter flounder, witch flounder, American plaice, windowpane flounder, Atlantic halibut, ocean pout, and Atlantic wolffish. These species are managed as 20 individual stocks. The Council has managed these species as a unit under the NE Multispecies FMP since 1985. Many of these stocks are overfished and/or overfishing is occurring. As a result, strict regulations have been adopted to control catch and promote stock rebuilding. Management measures include limited and open-access permit categories, limits on fishing time through days-at-sea (DAS) allocations, gear requirements, closed areas, retention limits, and sector allocation. These measures have been adopted through a series of amendments and adjustments to the original FMP. The most recent amendment (Amendment 16, implemented on May 1, 2010) expands the use of sectors to manage the fishery. Sectors are voluntary, self-selected groups of fishermen that are allocated a portion of the available catch. Amendment 16 also implements Annual Catch Limits (ACLs); exceeding these limits triggers additional management actions called Accountability Measures (AMs).

Why are additional measures being considered?

Amendment 16 to the NE Multispecies FMP expanded the use of sector management for stocks managed by the FMP, and also implemented ACLs and AMs for the fishery. In the most recent specification process (Framework Adjustment 44 to the Northeast Multispecies FMP), catch limits for many multispecies stocks were set at very low levels, and these restrictions are anticipated to remain for the near future. There is concern that the low catch limits, in conjunction with expanded sector management, will lead to excessive consolidation and lack of diversity in the groundfish fleet.

Because of concerns related to maintaining the historical makeup of the fleet, as well as an interest in keeping active and thriving fishing ports throughout New England, the Council is considering measures that will impose limits on the amount of allocations that individuals or groups of individuals may control. The Council may also create other incentives for maintaining diversity and fishery infrastructure.

What issues may be addressed in this amendment?

The Council may consider several types of management, including, but not limited to:

- No action; no additional measures would be adopted.
- Establishing individual accumulation caps, or sector accumulation caps, on a stock-specific or fishery-wide level.
- Establishing usage caps for vessels fishing on a multispecies permit.
- Other measures to promote diversity within the fleet such as new entrant set-asides, owner-onboard requirements, and community quotas.

This action will consider measures that require changes to the multispecies plan. Measures will probably be adopted in a future action.

What is the amendment process?

The Council will hold a scoping period to provide the public an opportunity to identify issues and alternatives. After gathering information during this scoping period, the Council will select a range of alternatives to be considered and analyzed in a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS). The Council's Groundfish Oversight Committee and Groundfish Advisory Panel will develop those alternatives. Once the DEIS is prepared, the Council will hold public hearings, tentatively scheduled for 2011. After receiving public comment, the Council will choose a proposed action to submit to the Secretary of Commerce for implementation. If no delays are encountered, the Council expects to select the proposed action in mid-2011 and new regulations will be implemented in 2012.

Why should I comment?

This is the first and best opportunity for members of the public to raise issues and concerns for the Council to consider during development of this amendment. The Council needs your input both to identify management issues and develop alternatives. Your comments early in this process will help us address your concerns more thoroughly.

What should my comments address?

Management measures proposed by the Council must comply with all applicable laws. In particular, they must meet the ten National Standards for fishery management plans specified in the Magnuson-Stevens Act. The Council is particularly seeking comment on:

- Matters related to the development of accumulation limits and fleet diversity.
 - Additional reporting and record keeping requirements that may be necessary.
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The Council may be scheduling public scoping meetings for this amendment. You may also attend any of the Groundfish Advisory Panel, Groundfish Committee, or Council meetings to provide oral comments, or you may submit comments by email to XXXXXXXX. Written comments will also be accepted through 5:00 p.m. EST on XXXXX, 2011. Comments should be submitted to:

{Insert NMFS Address }

***How do I
comment?***

Please note on your correspondence: “{Fill In}.” Comments may be sent by email, mail, or fax.

If you wish to be on the mailing list for future meetings of the Groundfish Committee, please contact the Council office at:

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