

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

Your comments are invited

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 continue the rebuilding programs adopted by Amendment 13 and to allow for a sustainable fishery maximizing economic benefits. When finalized, the rules will become part of an amendment to the Council's Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan. In addition, the Council will prepare a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) as described in the National Environmental Policy Act to accompany the proposed amendment.

This document is to inform you of the Council's intent to gather information necessary for the preparation of the SEIS 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 some alternatives are analyzed by the Council staff, a Draft SEIS will 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 SEIS, 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 Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan was first adopted in 1985. The current regulatory scheme began to take shape in 1994 with the adoption of Amendment 5. This amendment created limited entry permits and limited the number of days fishermen could fish. Subsequent amendments and framework adjustments further reduced days-at-sea and modified other effort controls (closed areas, trip limits, gear restrictions, etc.).

Changes to the Magnuson-Stevens Act in 1996 established requirements for formal rebuilding programs. These were implemented in the multispecies fishery by Amendment 13 in 2004. Amendment 13 revised target biomass levels and fishing mortality limits, and adopted rebuilding strategies designed to reach the biomass levels in the case of stocks that were overfished. The amendment reduced the number of days-at-sea allocated to each permit, limited the use of some days-at-sea to programs that target healthy stocks, and adopted measures to

protect essential fish habitat. Four framework actions followed to refine Amendment 13 measures. The most recent action, Framework 42, is designed to reduce fishing mortality on seven stocks where it exceeded Amendment 13 targets.

This action may also include measures if necessary to manage Atlantic wolffish and cusk. These species will be assessed in 2007.

Why are additional measures being considered?

Amendment 13 calls for a review of multispecies rebuilding progress and, if necessary, adjustments to regulations at the beginning of the 2009 fishing year. For several stocks, Amendment 13 calls for further reductions in fishing mortality beginning in 2009. Assessments are planned in 2008 to evaluate stock status and rebuilding targets. This action is being initiated so that the Council can react quickly to the results of those assessments in order to continue stock rebuilding and achieve optimum yield from the fishery.

What issues may be addressed in this amendment?

This amendment is being initiated to continue the rebuilding programs adopted by Amendment 13. The Council may consider adjustments to the current effort control system (that is, days-at-sea, closed areas, gear requirements, trip limits, recreational measures, etc.). The Council may also consider alternative management systems, such as a “hard” total allowable catch (TAC) system, area management, individual quotas, or fishery sectors. Because of the limited time available to prepare the amendment, the Council is not likely to consider alternative management systems that are proposed after the scoping period.

The following issues and concerns have already been addressed and will be analyzed and discussed in the SEIS:

- impacts of the plan on multispecies and other resources, including bycatch
- impacts of the measures on multispecies fishermen and their communities
- impacts on other fisheries where groundfish may be caught as a bycatch or mixed trawl component
- impacts on essential fish habitat

What is the amendment process?

The Council will hold scoping meetings (see schedule below) 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 supplemental environmental impact statement (DSEIS). The Council’s Groundfish Oversight Committee, Groundfish Advisory Panel, and Recreational Advisory Panel will develop those alternatives. Once the DSEIS is prepared, the Council will hold public hearings, tentatively scheduled for June/July 2008. After receiving public comment and updated assessment information, 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 September 2008 and new regulations will be implemented May 1, 2009.

Because of the compressed timeline, the DSEIS will be taken to public hearing prior to the completion of updated groundfish assessments in August 2008. As a result, the Council intends to draft the DSEIS so that it assesses the impacts of a range of measures that will address possible assessment results.

***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 that will continue the rebuilding programs adopted by Amendment 13. Your comments early in this process will help us address your concerns more thoroughly. In addition, because of the limited time available to complete the amendment, the Council may not consider alternative management systems that are proposed after the scoping period.

***How do I
comment?***

The Council is scheduling public scoping meetings for this amendment (see location and dates of meetings below). You may attend any of these scoping meetings to provide oral comments, or you may submit comments by email to comments@nefmc.org. Written comments will also be accepted through 5:00 p.m., EST on December 29, 2006. Comments should be submitted to:

Paul Howard, Executive Director
New England Fishery Management Council
50 Water Street, Mill #2
Newburyport, MA 01950
Phone: (978) 465-0492; Fax (978) 465-3116

Please not on your correspondence: "Multispecies Amendment."
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 the above address and phone number.

***Scoping
Meeting
Schedule***

Monday, November 27, 2006, 5 p.m., Holiday Inn, 215 High Street, Ellsworth, ME 04605. Telephone: 207/667-9341.

Tuesday, November 28, 2006, 5 p.m., Eastland Park Hotel, 157 High Street, Portland, ME 04101. Telephone: 207/775-5411.

Continued

Wednesday, November 29, 2006, 5 p.m., Urban Forestry Center, 45 Elwyn Road, Portsmouth, NH 03801. Telephone: 603/431-6774.

Thursday, November 30, 2006, 5 p.m., MA DMF Annisquam River Station, 30 Emerson Ave., Gloucester, MA 01930. Telephone: 978/282-0308.

Tuesday, December 5, 2006, 5 p.m., Best Western East End, 1830 Route 25, Riverhead, NY 11901. Telephone: 631/369-2200.

Wednesday, December 6, 2006, 5 p.m., Holiday Inn, 3009 Tower Hill Road, South Kingstown, RI 02674. Telephone: 401/789-1051.

Thursday, December 7, 2006, 5 p.m., Holiday Inn Express, 110 Middle Street, Fairhaven, MA 02719. Telephone: 508/997-1281.

Tuesday, December 12, 2006, 7 p.m., Skyline Hotel, 725 10th Ave. New York, NY 10019. Telephone: 212/586-3400.
